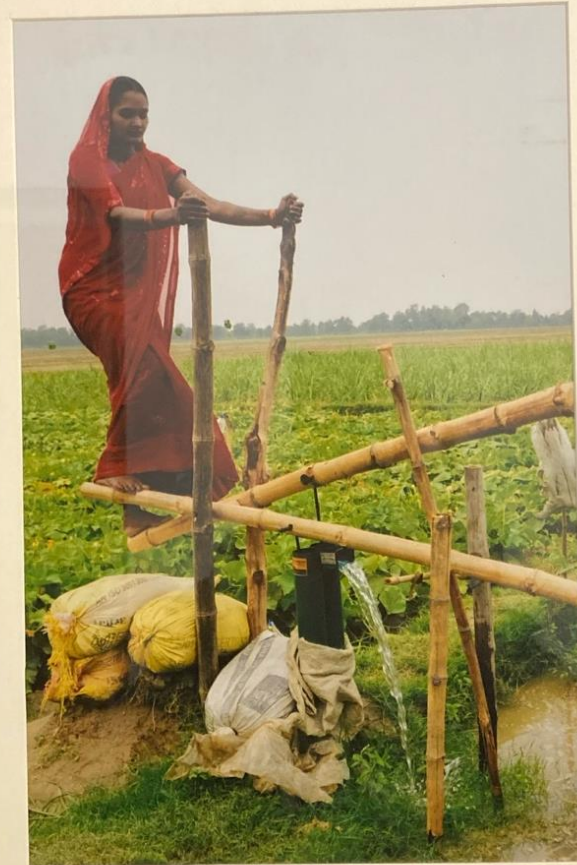


# Investigating Women's Inclusion and Participation in Community- Based Disaster Risk Reduction Projects in Nepal

Caragh Puttick



# Acknowledgements

- ▶ I would firstly like to thank the Durham University Expeditions Fund for giving me the life-changing opportunity to travel to Nepal to conduct this research. Without this, I would not have been able to go, and I believe it has shaped the trajectory of my future.
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# Brief literary and conceptual overview

- Disasters are indicative of social phenomena
- Disasters and response in Nepal
- Disasters are gendered
- Women in decision making spaces
- Intersectionality
- Feminist Political Ecology



# Methodology

- I spent a month in Nepal (7<sup>th</sup> August – 7<sup>th</sup> September)
- I interviewed various people from the Nepali Society for Earthquake Technology (NSET), Nepal Unites, the Centre for Disaster Management Studies (CDMS), Dan Church Aid, the International Development Enterprise (IDE), Action Aid, the Disaster Preparedness Network, the NGO Federation of Nepal, Practical Action, TEWA, CARE Nepal, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, Save the Children and the Association of International NGOs (AIN).
- Participants included both men and women, local NGO employees, International NGO corporations, staff members, managers, women who were part of the CBDRR projects, and people of all age groups.
- I also attended the Nepal Humanitarian Conference which was held in Kathmandu to mark World Humanitarian Day, focusing on disaster risk reduction with the theme “Strengthening Global Solidarity and Empowering Local Communities.” Delegates from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Fiji, India and other countries were all brought together and I had the wonderful opportunity to talk to them about how my research would translate onto other countries.
- Overall, I attended 2 conferences, conducted 17 interviews and held 3 female only focus groups (3-6 people). These tended to last anywhere between 45 minutes to an hour and a half.
- In the end, I was unable to go out of the Kathmandu valley as a couple of the projects I had planned to go and look at were unreachable due to monsoon rains and landslides. Nevertheless, I was able to talk to some women involved in the projects who were in Kathmandu.
- A note on interviewing in Nepal





# Methodological Issues

- Positionality
- Language Barrier/Misinterpretations
- Participant Bias



# Questions

## (1) Examining how various (I)NGOs address women's inclusion in their CBDRR projects

- How many women are involved in your current project?
- What proportion of the Village Development Committee do they make up?
- How would you define women's inclusion in the context of your CBDRR work?
- Do you see women's inclusion in your project as important? Why/why not?
- On a scale of 1-7 (Likert Scale), how much is women's inclusion a priority in your project?
- What motivates your organization to focus on women's inclusion?
- Why/ why do you not include women in your project? What challenges do you face?
- Do you feel you have a say in increasing women's involvement in your projects?
- How do you engage with local communities to encourage women's involvement?
- What strategies/policies are you using to boost female inclusion?
- Are these strategies working? Why/ why not?
- What does successful inclusion of women in CBDRR projects look like to you?
- Why do you think there are often more men on project committees?
- How has the inclusion of women in CBDRR projects changed in the last 20 years?

## (2) Exploring the *nature* of women's voluntary participation in these initiatives.

- What sorts of roles and positions are women typically given in your project? And why are they allocated these roles?
- Do women make decisions on your committees?
- What proportion of the voluntary labor in the projects is completed by women?
- Are women involved in decision-making processes, or primarily in implementation and labor roles?
- Can you give me an example of a time when local knowledge and expertise specific to women was used in one of your projects?
- How have women's voices shaped local agendas and projects?
- What influences your decisions around the timings and locations of CBDRR committee meetings?
- How do you make sure the worries and concerns of women in regard to disaster risk reduction are heard and addressed within projects?
- (To ask the women) ... What are your concerns, and do you feel like they are being heard?
- How do you define 'meaningful' or 'transformative' participation?
- Can you give me an example of a case of transformative participation (define for participant) of women in your projects?
- What are the perceived barriers to transformative, meaningful participation in decision-making spaces that women experience?
- How do you as an NGO negotiate/ overcome these barriers?
- How do women overcome their barriers?
- Would you say that participation in CBDRR projects affects other aspects of women's lives?
- How do women negotiate their multiple identities as volunteers in projects, homemakers and farmers?
- Can you describe the difference between women being "present" in a project and women actively shaping it?
- How do cultural and social norms in Nepal influence women's involvement in DRR efforts?
- What support mechanisms (e.g., training, mentorship) are provided to help women take on leadership roles in CBDRR?
- What motivates women to voluntarily participate in your projects?
- How do power dynamics within households and communities impact women's ability to participate?
- Are there any forms of indirect coercion that influence women's participation in these projects?

# Analysis

- My coding of interviews proffered various themes, patterns and concepts (Charmaz, 1983), which were built on throughout the month. I used a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in which data is treated as potential indicators of concepts rather than pre-existing theories narrating what data was collected, which aided reflexivity. An issue with this was the lack of effective inter-researcher reliability as all the coding was done myself which may have led to subjectivity
- Themes I found:
  - Intersectionality (gender, caste, ethnicity, income, age)
  - Geographical differentiation (Terai vs mountains vs east vs west)
  - Triple role of women
  - Bringing men on board
  - Unique perspectives of women.
  - Women as detail oriented
  - How training improves the lives of women
  - Male out-migration
  - Women's amazing capacities
  - How necessary familial support it
  - Localisation
  - Policy-implementation gap
  - Fast changing nature of Nepal
  - Safety nets and female solidarity/ networks
  - Soft approaches
  - Systemic approaches



# Women's Inclusion

- ▶ Nepal is the first country in the South Asia region to have an act on disaster management
- ▶ In the past few years, the issue of gender has been ingrained in all projects and documentation
- ▶ In 2015, the Constitution of Nepal was created, which grants 33% political representation to women, addressing their historical exclusion in political, economic, and social spheres.
- ▶ Even whilst I was out there conducting my research, Nepal elected its first female prime minister – a huge milestone in their history.
- ▶ Up until 2017, it was Village Development Committees (along with NGOs) who were mainly responsible for disaster risk reduction projects (Oven et al, 2019)
- ▶ But with their replacement by a rural municipality system, women by law came to occupy at least a third of spaces within these groups that were responsible for DRR planning.
- ▶ The true question is whether this move has purely favoured quantity over quality (Rai, 2019, Gender equality in Nepal: at a crossroads of theory and practice).
- ▶ Equal rights may be ensured in a constitution, but we then need proper implementation of those provisions to balance that theoretical and practical gap of gender development.



# Women's Participation

- Going out to Nepal, my research question was namely, 'What is the nature of women's participation in CBDRR projects in Nepal?'
- Using Cornwall's (2003) framework of participation, I wanted to investigate whether when women participate in these projects, they are viewed as agents and citizens, and other aspects of their lives are improved.
- And I mean as the simple answer – yes, sometimes they have meaningful participation which changes their lives and sometimes they don't.
- But through these stories of what women's participation looks like, I was able to experience a shift in my thinking
- I was coming in from the perspective of how CBDRR projects can change and help women's lives, rather than how women and their meaningful participation can change and help the projects. So I want to rephrase my research question as
- How can centring women help us re-imagine community based disaster risk reduction projects?



# Aago aago ma pani paryo

## Even in fire, there fell water

In this presentation, I employ a feminist political ecology lens to argue that by centring women and their participation in Community Based Disaster Risk Reduction projects, we may come to alternative re-imaginings of what CBDRR can look like. This occurs on three counts:

- ▶ Women as water, not logs: overturning narratives of vulnerability
  - ▶ By centring women, we can overturn dominant narratives of vulnerability and victimhood to reimagine the communities in disaster risk reduction as having agency and power.
- ▶ Fire needs fresh water, not stagnant ponds: the original contributions of women for disaster risk reduction
  - ▶ By centring women, we may come to realise the original and vital contributions and perspectives that they bring to DRR projects. In this way we can re-imagine projects, or even build whole new projects, listening to other voices.
- ▶ Water comes in lots of different forms: Remembering intersectionality
  - ▶ By centring women, we come to a fuller understanding and realisation of the ways in which women are not a homogenous category, but instead vary by age, location, caste, ethnicity and personality. We can extrapolate this further to re-imagine disaster risk reduction projects as opportunities to include people from all walks of life.

# Women as water, not logs: overturning narratives of vulnerability

- ▶ Bankoff (2001) contends that vulnerability discourse – especially as used in disaster and development studies - is a Western construct. It is not a neutral, universal analytical tool but is instead shaped by Western historical experience, political interests and cultural assumptions.
- ▶ It positions the Global South as inherently weak/ deficient, as chronically incapable and thus reproduces a neocolonialist way of thinking the world. This discourse does not simply describe, it actively *produces* a way of seeing 'developing' nations.
- ▶ When we characterise these people as weak and passive and vulnerable (Hutcheon and Lashewicz, 2014), we locate the fault within them rather than the way the world treats them (Jacobs, 2019).
- ▶ During my pre-reading and in my fieldwork, I observed this dynamic directly: female participants of CBDRR projects being frequently described as 'victims' and 'recipients'. Used uncritically, this approach has resonances with Fordham's (2004) contention of the overemphasis on women's dependency




In the style of Faulkner (2018), who uses a feminist analytical approach to privilege the voices of her participants, I have composed a poem out of some of the responses I received.

You just can't imagine how powerful they are

I come from Mt Everest  
I come walking four hours  
I come to meet you

I am powerful  
I am a conqueror  
I am the backbone

We have many things on our heads  
We are resilient  
We learn

- 
- Women do indeed encounter many barriers to participation in CBDRR, in the form of their triple role (Oven et al, 2019): reproductive labour, productive labour and community labour, and the fact that they form the backbone of the agrarian workforce (Sugden et al, 2014). As one woman described: “Sometimes the municipalities are calling the meeting at 7am. Males can just wake up and be there. As a woman, we have to complete all household work and then go. So how we can compete?”. Particularly during the rainy season, when agricultural demands peak, attending DRR training and meetings can be extremely difficult. However, I want to argue that an overly voracious emphasis on these barriers may characterise women as mere victims of their circumstances.
  - In conducting my research, what I found was not women who were weak and vulnerable and feeble and passive. Instead, I met some of the strongest, most resilient, tenacious, adaptable, irrepressible women I have ever encountered. One NGO worker I talked to described a scenario in which she saw a woman chasing her husband down the street with a broom, yelling at him for spending too much time drinking with his friends. THESE are the sorts of characters which often make up that 33% of women. They are not sitting at home waiting for a disaster to happen, rather in their own small ways – be that through the women’s solidarity movements I talked to, or getting up at 4am everyday, or walking 5 hours to attend a meeting – they are disproving much that is assumed about their vulnerabilities.
  - TEWA case study: Women’s solidarity (22 groups in 1 year)
    - Started too shy to say their names and now have ideas -> “They were just, you know, inside the house. After these projects when I was involved for the evaluation and they are not only that, you know, they were afraid of talking outside and they have become like leaders and, you know, they are so forthcoming now outside in the society. They have changed their personality. They have changed their thinking. They have changed their attitude. And so, you know, they are involved in so many other activities because of this disaster itself. (Talking to a project evaluator)
  - Additionally, the current social and economic landscape of Nepal is shaped profoundly by male out-migration. Many of the villages where I conducted research were characterised by a demographic pattern locals described as “only women, children, and elders left behind.” They have learnt how to live without their men, and can thus hardly be described as vulnerable.
  - Yes, disasters expose a country’s strengths and weaknesses but what if we saw women as Nepal’s strength? What if DRR projects shifted from a “victim/beneficiary” model to a model grounded in recognition of strength? (Acar & Ege, 2001)
  - Acknowledging nuance
    - They cannot think about what we are thinking now. They cannot think about any kind of risks, they cannot think about social awareness, social movement, they cannot think about upgrading cultural conditions and social conditions. They just think about their priority, they just think about their daily food, they just think about what to do work. I mean it's a luxury to be able to even think about inclusion and most people are just trying to survive day to day aren't they? Yeah, they are trying to survive their life, so that would be more better if you can go there.



## Fire needs fresh water, not stagnant ponds: the original contributions of women for disaster risk reduction

- ▶ Previous risk communication research concludes that males and females don't hear, believe or personalise disaster warnings in the same ways (Fothergill, 1996). I argue here that women can introduce real, good, important and original contributions and ideas for CBDRR projects. Not only are women generally more likely to receive risk communication due to their social networks (Turner et al, 1979) but the technological and managerial skills that women foster and use in the house every day of their lives can also be used in disaster management (Noel, 1990)
- ▶ As risks are growing and funds are shrinking (See US AID cuts), its of utmost importance to tap into these sources of knowledge. We need to work with all the system actors, not in siloes.
- ▶ Whilst hearing might take double the time and slow processes down, overlooking women means CBDRR loses wisdom, ownership and sustainability and therefore "development gains are siloed"
  - ▶ "So if we invest in women, if we provide opportunity to women, they can also benefit to larger community, not only the women, the larger community. "
  - ▶ "If the women are there, the service providing is better than others. Corruption is less than men. I don't say 0%, but the corruption is lower than the men"
- ▶ Not only this, but without hearing contributions of women in DRR, lives are lost
- ▶ Who should be hearing this?
  - ▶ "Without engaging men, we are not going to be successful. We need to convince men. Once men they convince, it's easy to convince others."
  - ▶ Need to create other allies in society
  - ▶ Women also need to know what the law says: awareness raising is key



My research found that women can bring important contributions to CBDRR projects in a number of ways:

- **Social networks**
  - “She has seen the community. She knows who is who. And she knows how to tweak. She knows the contacts. Who to attack when. Attack in the sense, okay, give it to me, otherwise I can do this. Ability to negotiate also strengthens.”
- **Skill sets**
  - Women’s skills often under-utilised in disaster management
  - Pick up skills (e.g. masonry) and language very fast
  - “That’s the management skill we need to learn from them. Within the 24 hours, they manage several meetings”
  - “I was surprised to see the women, how they know, how they were talking their own households, what kind of risks they have within, what is our households’ risks like a flood or landslide, how they are mitigating, how they are preparing.”
- **Detail-oriented ness**
  - They are aware of localised, everyday problems
  - “If you go and ask if there is a father and mother, then the men and women in the household, if you ask the husband or male of that family about what’s your preparedness within your family, he will talk blah blah blah, very big, big thing. But if you go and ask the women, they will give you practical things. Like more about food and kids. Kids, everything.”
  - “Let’s say, for example, having some cabin works or river training or something like that. But when you go to the women groups, they have a different answer in terms of how they protect their livelihoods they have, how they protect the family, the food. For taking the food. And even sometimes in case of when they have to stay in displaced camps, they have different needs. They need some safe spaces around, breastfeeding, safe spaces around, separate toilets for women.”
  - “Women can see small household needs
  - “Main member, they ask electricity on the house, whereas female member asks torchlights so that they could take while they go outside during the night time to have toilets and others. So that difference.”
  - Enriching thought process
- **Generational wisdom**
  - “Being educated is easy, being wise is hard”
  - Presumption that projects and INGOs are coming into villages and teaching people everything, when they already actually have a very good knowledge base
  - “In that preparedness, women are better than the men. Like not only now, even her grandmother, my mother type of age also, like before the monsoon in the community, they knew okay from like after May 15, monsoon may be effect earlier or after May 15 or early June there would be monsoon, there would be rain. Then we cannot like make dry our rice. We have to prepare the rice. Then they were making dry in the sun in the months of April, February, March, April, mostly March, April. Then keeping the dry rice, making the dry.”
  - but earlier days it was in the monsoon season it was very difficult to get the fresh vegetable. Then they used to make dry vegetable. They used to dry it to prepare like cucumber, mushroom type of different and then keeping for this monsoon. That’s the preparedness. Then earlier days no gas, no heater. They used to fire wood. They used to make like chop this fire wood and making like a big stockpile. They are keeping for the 4-5 months and using that. That’s the preparedness

# Water comes in lots of different forms: Remembering intersectionality

- ▶ It is only through centring women in CBDRR projects, that you quickly realise that not all women are the same – they vary depending on age, caste, ethnicity, geographical location, family make-up, personality type and life experience
- ▶ Poor women in poor countries face extreme obstacles to receiving equitable relief help, which are often compounded by bias based on religion and caste
- ▶ For example:
  - ▶ “In Terai, even the deputy mayor was coming to the office with her husband, then she was just listening, and husband was talking on her behalf”
  - ▶ “And it’s also the personal character. Some of the women are persons, not only men, like, okay, I’m this level, that means I know everything”
  - ▶ “You can’t generalize the whole of Nepalese women in one basket and then say, okay, yes or no”
  - ▶ “One, if you go in one community, maybe that community trusts their own people more than the strangers. And another, if you go, they will listen more to the strangers than their own people. So you have to be connected. Context analysis is very important”
  - ▶ “In the hills, women’s voices are very strong but what may suit for Kathmandu, may not suit for Far West”
  - ▶ “And from that community we could not invite them to participate in our training because in that community if somebody goes to participate in our training, they would be like kind of member for the jokes”
- ▶ Women’s participation CANNOT be a catch-all phrase

To attempt to reduce women’s experiences to the universal and understandable (Bohler-Muller, 2012) would be an egregious disservice to women and other marginalised groups



## How do we re-imagine CBDRR projects in light of intersectionality?

- ▶ Bringing in a female voice doesn't magically fix CBDRR projects
- ▶ A Dalit man may be more marginalised than many women
- ▶ Context analysis is thus of immense importance



Thank you!

