

Gendered Concerns in Coastal Disasters: An Analysis of Women's Political Subordination and Prospects for Empowerment

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Abstract

Coastal areas are currently deemed highly vulnerable to a host of disasters, more so in the context of global environmental change. However, studies show that gender issues are often ignored during disasters despite the fact that women have different needs and capabilities than men at these times. Women's vulnerability during and after disasters is attributed to their political, economic and cultural conditions, underscoring multiple responsibilities and widely perceived inferior status vis-à-vis men. The main arguments in this paper are supported by the results of interdisciplinary, mixed methods research on women's standpoints or experiences of gender bias, following the 2006 M/T Solar I oil spill in the coasts off Guimaras Island in the Philippines. It was observed that women's political subordination was evident because their role in fishing was very minimally recognised. Women were often uninformed and rarely represented in decision-making following the oil spill disaster. This under-representation exacerbated the coastal women's disadvantaged conditions as institutional interventions seldom addressed their needs and concerns.

Introduction

Natural and man-made disasters have increased in recent years, particularly at the start of the new millennium. Disasters are usually classified into natural disasters and man-made or technological disasters. The former allude to environmental events that are not directly man-made, and the latter are primarily caused by hardware failure and human error, such as the case of oil spills. Generally, disasters and their aftermath cause a double burden among those considered to be the weaker, dependent and subordinate groups in communities, because they are likely to suffer more from both the direct and indirect ramifications of the said events (Acar and Ege 2001; Morrow 1999; Enarson and Morrow 1998). During disasters, women are usually the ones who are less informed, less prepared and less protected. Women's disadvantaged positions emanating from

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societal gender norms contributes to their vulnerability, more so when a disaster's consequences are compounded by economic, social, political, and family relationships (Morrow 1999).

This paper focuses on certain challenges faced by women in disaster contexts, drawing from available literature and data from interdisciplinary, mixed methods research conducted on community women's experiences of gender bias following a catastrophic oil spill in the coasts off Guimaras Island in the Philippines. Since scholarly work on societal gender dynamics point to political subordination as one of the gender discriminations women experience, the main objective of this paper is to present research evidence on the extent to which coastal community women's articulated needs were ignored and how women were underrepresented in decision-making processes following the oil spill disaster. This paper thus highlights women's political subordination in disaster response and management practices, as well as generates lessons for use in gender-sensitive coastal disaster planning and management.

The interdisciplinary study (Badayos-Jover et al. 2014; Defiesta and Badayos-Jover 2014) that served as data source for this paper was informed by feminist standpoint theory (Harding 2004) and made use of qualitative and quantitative methods that specifically looked into each manifestation of gender bias, namely, stereotyping, political subordination, economic marginalisation, multiple burden and violence against women (VAW). The research instruments used in the study were divided into sub-sections corresponding to each gender bias, in order to provide evidence on women's experiences of exclusion and subordination in disaster contexts. The study locale was the town of Nueva Valencia in the island province of Guimaras, Philippines, where the majority of oil spill affected households were located. A series of focus group interviews were held among women living in eight oil spill affected *barangays* (villages) of Nueva Valencia. Key informant interviews were likewise carried out with representative *barangay*/village leaders, government agency personnel and other local elected or political officials. Finally, an interview survey was conducted with 175 randomly selected mothers, young women or adolescents and elderly women, who live in La Paz and Tando, the two *barangays* in Nueva Valencia that were identified as most affected by the oil spill.

Results and Discussion

Various news reports account that around midnight, on August 11, 2006, the tanker M/T Solar I sank during a storm, about 20.5 km off the southern coast of Guimaras in the Philippines. The oil tanker was carrying more than two million litres of bunker fuel when it sank. The M/T Solar I oil spill, considered by far to be the largest in Philippine history, adversely affected marine sanctuaries and mangrove reserves in three out of five municipalities or towns of Guimaras and had a direct devastating effect on the coastal and fishing communities.

After the M/T Solar I Oil Spill disaster numerous community meetings were held covering concerns such as distribution of relief goods, compensation, alternative livelihood, cash-for-work schemes, coastal clean-up, health hazards and others. Most of the women respondents attended one to ten of these community meetings, with a few who claimed to have attended 16 to 28 meetings. The majority (75%) of the women respondents likewise claimed that women gave or

expressed their opinions during the meetings. However, when asked whether they think women's opinions were seriously taken into consideration, most of the responses were either "*Don't know*" (21%) or turn idealistic (48%), with phrases like "*Women's opinions are also important*" or "*Women are also respected*". Interestingly, there were some respondents who said, "*only the opinions of those who are close to the elected barangay captain (village head) were considered*" or "*only the opinions of men*" were considered, since men's fishing livelihoods were most affected by the oil spill. More importantly, only 15% of the women respondents shared that there were consultations held specifically targeting women. The majority (70%) of the respondents said there were no such consultations for women while the remaining 15% said they "didn't know" or simply did not provide an answer.

Of the few consultations held specifically for community women, a glaring gender stereotype is the fact that most of the respondents (58%) shared that the topics were on activities deemed fit for women, such as gardening and clean up. Meanwhile, 17% of the respondents shared that the meetings held for women covered alternative livelihood concerns. Thirteen per cent of the respondents shared there were meetings held to cover health-related apprehensions while four percent said there were consultations to gather household information. Another four percent of the respondents replied that there were women consultations regarding programs for children and finally, four percent of the respondents shared there was a community meeting held in an attempt to impose a curfew for teenage girls. The topics of the meetings or consultations held for women in the oil spill affected villages highlight stereotypical discriminations against women since most of these were associated with culturally assigned women's reproductive or household maintenance concerns. Disaster situations thus exacerbate the gender divide as access to social and economic resources are re-channelled away from women and towards men (Enarson and Morrow 1998).

Relocation after disasters also increase women's workload and decreases their control over food and income and disrupts support networks on which they depend for practical and psychological support (Pincha 2008). In the aftermath of the M/T Solar I oil spill, some adolescent girls shared that they had to stop schooling to take care of their younger siblings or manage the household in lieu of their mothers who had to look for alternative income sources. Some of the elderly respondents likewise shared that they had to help augment the family income by working again, sometimes far from home. Mothers articulated concerns over nutritional deficiencies due to prolonged intake of the same types of food (mostly canned) distributed during relief operations. Moreover, as is usually the case in post-disaster responses, women's sanitary needs were overlooked since most or all care packages do not include sanitary pads for women's use during their monthly periods. These lapses in addressing women's needs are consequences of the fact that institutional disaster response and recovery efforts often assume that woman's needs are already addressed through general community interventions. Furthermore, the structure and processes of disaster response and mitigation in the Philippines follows a top-down, militaristic tradition. Gender concerns are thus systematically disregarded even though some of these concerns, like violence against women, are classified as crimes under Philippine law.

The M/T Solar I oil spill upset the daily lives of the people in the two most affected villages in Guimaras Island. Hence, some households had to adjust by making important changes and

sacrifices for the sake of family welfare. Table 1 shows the major decisions that affected households had to make following the oil spill.

Table 1. Major household decisions made after the oil spill disaster.

Decisions	Yes	No
To relocate	50	125
To seek other employment / income source	30	145
To stop schooling	5	170
To sell assets	14	161

Source: Household survey.

Table 1 illustrates that the majority of the respondents coming from the most-affected households chose not to make drastic decisions such as relocating; seeking other means of employment, having the children stop schooling or selling assets. However, the households that did decide for one or more of these more disruptive options illustrated how household decision making is reflective of gender norms and expectations. Women are usually not part of crucial decision-making during disasters. Men make the choices on behalf of women and everyone else, in the course of delegating access to facilities and limited resources in a disaster crisis (Weist et al. 1994). This scenario is evident in the aftermath of the M/T Solar I oil spill in Guimaras Island, Philippines, since major decisions were mostly done by males, as presented in figure 1.

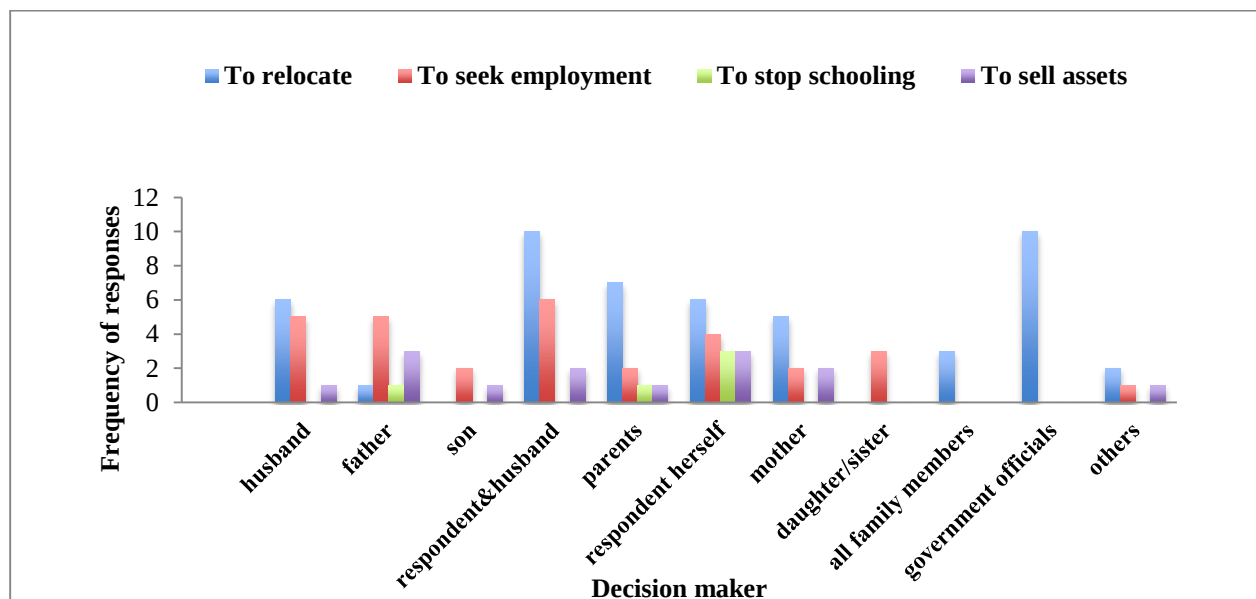


Fig. 1. Bar chart showing who made major household decisions after the oil spill disaster.

Source: Household survey.

The foregoing chart shows that apart from decisions made solely by the women respondents, the other decision points were attributed to males — husbands, fathers and a few sons. The decisions made by Local Government Unit (LGU) officials can also be considered as decisions taken by men, since within the villages included in the study, political or elective officials were mostly men. According to the respondents, only about three to four women held elective posts in the study locales at the time. Even the decisions said to be made by both the respondent and her

husband or by both parents of adolescent respondents may have been subject to gender dynamics between spouses. Male preferences thus usually emerge dominant, given Philippine society's patriarchal family set-up. In the Philippines, men dominate in household decision-making, as well as assume productive or public roles and responsibilities. Consequently, women are considered subordinate in the political sphere, where they have limited time and opportunity to participate in decision-making, from the household level up to public policy concerns (Enarson and Morrow 1998). One clear manifestation of such political subordination occurring in oil spill affected villages was the fact that women were not officially considered as fishers even though women do fishing activities. Only the men were viewed as fishers and were even formally organised into associations prior to the oil spill.

One distinct issue that compounds the stereotyped gender biases generally confronted by women in difficult circumstances is their experience of violence. Women are actual and potential victims of specific kinds of violence that are borne out of the subordinate status in society (Enarson 1999). Due to their low status in society, many women experience all types of abuses in the private and public spheres. During disasters, women become susceptible to domestic violence and other forms of abuses. Disasters disrupt the physical and social environments that shape health and health problems, including violence (WHO 2005). The community displacement after M/T Solar I oil spill paved the way for incidences of sexual harassment and violence against women (VAW). Echoing Pincha's (2008) findings, study respondents expressed concern over heightened alcohol intake of husbands following the oil spill, which in turn led to domestic quarrels, verbal abuse and even instances of wife battering. Meanwhile, adolescent girls shared that they experienced sexual harassment in the relocation sites.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Women's aggravated experiences in times of adversity are oftentimes overlooked, prompting the UN to encourage research on how gender relations operate in households and communities during disasters, as well as the processes and factors that increase vulnerabilities across different social groups (WHO 2005). Disaster situations have been shown to exacerbate or compound women's experiences of gender biases in society and remain largely unaddressed by institutional efforts. This is evident from the situations in the communities affected by the M/T Solar I Oil spill, as well as other disaster situations worldwide. Hence, gender mainstreaming in disaster response and mitigation, as well as community rehabilitation, has become an imperative (Enarson 2008). Consistent empirical evidence on the need for gender awareness and sensitivity during and after disasters is deemed to redound to more impartial and efficient disaster response and mitigation. The challenge then is for institutions to incorporate a "gender lens" when they respond to disasters.

Gender-sensitive disaster mitigation implies that women should be involved in all levels of action in disaster contexts. Consistent training and evaluation within disaster organisations will likewise make their response teams, researchers and community organisers sensitive to women's peculiar vulnerabilities in disasters. This will eventually lead to harnessing women's potentials in disaster situations. After all, it has been established that the aftermath of disasters bring about a lot

of women-headed households (Weist et al. 1994). As the results of the study and foregoing discussions show, there is an obvious need for disaster response and recovery efforts to consider the intersections of vulnerabilities, including those pertaining to gender biases. There is a glaring need for women to be represented in crucial decision-making during disasters. However, the institutionalisation of active women's participation in disaster planning and response processes implies that women in communities be organised. Such organising efforts have to take into consideration the masculinist institutional structures that characterise the societal contexts of women and consequently impedes on women's political empowerment in times of emergencies.

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