



Gender, place and mental health recovery in disasters: Addressing issues of equality and difference



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ABSTRACT

UK and wider EU governments follow gender neutral policies in their disaster planning and management based upon a misconception that the gender gap has been eliminated. Findings from our quantitative and qualitative research, carried out as a part of an EU Project, 'MICRODIS', in two flood affected locations in England (Tewkesbury floods of 2007, and Morpeth floods of 2008), challenges this notion, revealing that disasters can have paradoxically equal and yet differentiated gendered impacts. Our findings highlight some of the more subtle ways that disasters differentially impacted women and men. It shows that although the degree of mental health recovery of affected men and women was mostly equal, they mobilised different recovery strategies, mostly consistent with their traditional gendered norms and socially constructed roles. Women's recovery strategies were mainly aligned with emotional notions of care, while men's were with notions of control. These findings also show that gendered identities, home-neighbourhood place attachment, and mental wellbeing are related in complex ways. Temporary displacement from their home-neighbourhood places after floods were traumatic for both men and women, although there were perceptible differences in this experience. The paper concludes that gender difference in disasters is ubiquitous globally, and thus analyses must include a gender and diversity analysis and ask more probing gender questions, even in apparently gender equal societies, in order to uncover sometimes hidden impacts.

1. Introduction

The gendered nature of disaster mortalities has been highlighted through a number of country case studies (including for example [70,99,75]), however, Neumayer and Plümper [92] made the first systematic quantitative assessment of gendered mortalities across a range of contexts: in developed as well as developing countries. Their analysis shows that the effect of disasters on women's life expectancy, as compared to men's, is more adverse. They further argue that the extent to which women die at a younger age as compared to men is dependent upon the socio-economic status of the women in any given country. They assert that 'in countries with better rights for women, the adverse impact of natural disasters on women's life expectancy relative to men vanishes' (2007, p. 560). A swift conclusion from such analysis would be that in developed countries where gender equality has been institutionalized through legal frameworks for several years, women and men should expect to experience disaster impacts in similar ways. Indeed, policy makers in several economically developed countries make such a tacit assumption based on the understanding that the

gender gap has been eliminated and that there is no need to address gender issues after disasters have occurred [88].

The UNISDR Regional Synthesis Report 2011–2013 [121] on implementing the Hyogo Framework for Action for Europe states that 22% of EU countries engage in gender neutral reporting on disaster recovery and risk reduction strategies. In this regard, United Nations documentation in relation to Europe and disaster response notes that: 'Gender equality has been actively promoted in Europe for decades and European countries often consider gender to be covered in DRR by default, through existing equality laws, education and generally gender-sensitive practices' ([119], p. 13). The basis of this assessment is 'the fact that gender equality is enshrined in the law' in EU countries ([121] p. 43). For example, The UK government report on the Hyogo Framework for Action National Progress Report (2011–13) states that it does not collect or use gender disaggregated data in its decision making processes or that gender does not inform policy and programme conceptualisation in any meaningful way in their disaster response and risk reduction policy [57]. The report argues that this is so because gender is 'not a major issue in the UK as equality law in the UK is

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designed to ensure that discrimination does not exist for age, gender, disability etc. As such, gender is not being used by the UK to affect decision making, nor to inform policy and programme conceptualisation' (pp. 44–45). In other words, gender equality in law is considered enough reason not to engage with gender differentiated strategies, policies and programmes in disaster response and risk reduction.

Our research from two locations in the UK challenges such a tacit and linear assumption made by some EU policymakers including the UK government. Empirical evidence from the UK floods of 2007 in Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire and 2008 in Morpeth, Northumberland show that women and men may experience *equal and yet different* gendered disaster experience. For example, our quantitative and qualitative empirical evidence shows that although women and men have recovered to *mostly equal* levels in their mental health after the flooding, predictors for their mental health recoveries are *different*. Both men and women used different mental health coping and recovery strategies in these contexts. As such, men and women had both *equal and different* post-disaster experiences.

Further, the evidence shows that, embedded gendered relations and roles in a *place* (Tewkesbury and Morpeth locations) are strongly correlated with the coping and recovery strategies of men and women. Our findings indicate that traditional forms of masculinity and femininity were predominantly played out in home-neighbourhood places after these floods in the UK which in turn influenced the recovery practices used by men and women. This leads us to conclude that analysis must be contextual and gender and diversity disaggregated in order to be relevant to policy and practices of disaster response in different places. This finding also has implications for European and UK policy responses in the context of disasters.

Limitation of the study: Although we refer to LGBT studies which question the binary construction of gender as male/female in our literature review wherever relevant, our empirical data from Tewkesbury and Morpeth and its analysis is derived from a binary construction of gender, also a result of decision made across the Europe-Asia MICRODIS project team. See for transgender, genderqueer and LGBT studies which critique binary representations of gender and their effects; Gaillard et al. [52,53], Gorman-Murray [56], Balgos et al. [8], Pincha and Krishna [102]. Further, the small sample size of our study limited our ability to examine the intersections of gender with other social aspects such as age, disability and ethnicity.

The paper is structured as follows:

It starts with a critical review of literature on relations between gender, place and disasters. It reviews two bodies of literature: one highlighting the *relations* between gender, place and disaster, and another reviewing existing literature, if any, on *micro experiences of gender, place and mental health in disaster*. Our review shows that much of the literature on micro-experience of place and mental health in disaster is gender neutral. Our study which uses gender as an analytical category, contributes to addressing this gap, and makes a new knowledge contribution on this issue. Building upon its empirical evidence, it goes on to develop a conceptual framing that links place, gender and mental health in the context of disasters. This is followed by a section which presents and discusses our empirical findings with regard to floods in Tewkesbury and Morpeth, in the UK.

In the last section, in the light of our conceptual framework and empirical findings, which highlight the importance of gender relations and place in understanding the gendered mental health patterns in disaster, we critically discuss the current disaster response and policy frameworks related to risk reduction within the UK and other countries within the EU. Questioning their gender-neutral policy framework, we argue that the idea of gender neutrality needs to be deconstructed and contend that gender differences are all-pervasive. We thus call for general gender and diversity mainstreaming in disaster policy and practice, and specifically for developed socio-economic country contexts, including the UK.

2. Critical literature review and development of conceptual framework

The link between place and disasters has often been made through the idea of place vulnerability or 'hazards of place' in disaster literature [23,24], suggesting that certain localities, and people living in them, are more vulnerable to disasters. One attributed reason is the proximity of such places to hazards and probable disaster events. Thus, for example, coastal places are more susceptible to tsunamis and cyclones than hinterlands, just as places on fault lines or tectonic plate boundaries are more vulnerable to earthquakes. The other attributed reason is the level of socio-economic development of place as it affects the capacities of the affected countries and people to cope with disasters [128,15,24,62,97]. As early as 1976, O'Keefe et al. had shown that many of the disasters were in the developing countries: thus suggesting that they were a result of social vulnerability rather than effects of natural agents. Hewitt had then further noted that disasters are dependent upon social orders and everyday relations within a habitat [62]. Building upon this, Wisner et al. have argued that 'people's exposure to [disaster] risk differs according to their *class* (which affects their income, how they live and where), whether they are *male* or *female*, what their *ethnicity* is, what *age group* they belong to, whether they are *disabled* or not, their *immigration status*, and so forth' ([128], p. 6; [16]). Vulnerability is thus better understood as embedded in social processes and relations that lead to differential impacts for hazard affected persons [7,78,82,96]. Empirical evidence of gendered impacts of disasters has been further captured through mainly qualitative studies of disasters, supported at times with survey data [9-13,103,44,6,87,20,43,72,34-40,45-47,74,25,4,3,99,50,67-70]. The themes covered by these studies, which were carried out in different country contexts, both developed and developing, include: gendered nature of disaster relief and recovery work, gender and resilience, gendered roles and labour after disasters, violence against women after disasters, gendered socio-economic impacts of disasters, gendered impacts of disability after disasters, and gendered mortalities. The study by Neumayer and Plümper [92] stands out, as it undertakes a systematic quantitative analysis of gendered disaster impacts: (in particular, gendered mortalities) and their relation to disasters in the context of differential socio-economic development.

While the above literature provides a global macro perspective on gender, place and disasters, a different body of literature has provided a micro perspective on the specifics of place. Massey [84,85] contends that space is not just about how things are arranged in a physical location or a place: rather, space and place are related through how social relations, including gender, are socially constructed in those places. Space is constructed from social relations; it is social relations 'stretched out' in a place ([84], p. 2). Thus homes and Neighbourhoods can be conceptualised as places at different spatial scales constructed and shaped by social relations inscribed in these spaces [27]. Massey et al. also argue that places as social environments, are 'activity spaces' ([86], p. 59), where households and communities interact, and develop a sense of belonging to and identity with those spaces. As such, homes are also affective spaces and places shaped by emotional feelings and a sense of belongingness and attachment [48]. Homes are embodied spaces where 'physical location and psychological or emotional feeling are tied rather than separate or distinct' ([19] p. 22). That is, memories, emotions and the physical structure are closely aligned with the idea of home [19]. Black [17] also argues that 'the concept of "home" is not straightforward. It is intimately linked to concepts of identity and memory as much as territory and place. Home can be made, re-made, imagined, remembered or desired; it can refer as much to beliefs, customs or traditions as physical places or buildings. Most important, as a concept it is something that is subject to constant reinterpretation and flux, just as identities are renegotiated' ([17] p. 126). In other words, homes are important material and symbolic sites from where women and men orchestrate their social lives and relations, and reinvent their

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