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## Visual representation of gender in flood coverage of Pakistani print media



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## ABSTRACT

This paper studies gender representation in the visual coverage of the 2010 floods in Pakistan. The data were collected from flood visuals published in the most circulated mainstream English newspapers in Pakistan, *Dawn* and *The News*. This study analyses how gender has been framed in the flood visuals. It is argued that visual representation of gender reinforces the gender stereotypes and cultural norms of Pakistani society. The gender-oriented flood coverage in both newspapers frequently seemed to take a reductionist approach while confining the representation of women to gender, and gender-specific roles. Though the gender-sensitive coverage displayed has been typical, showing women as helpless victims of flood, it has aroused sentiments of sympathy among readers and donors, inspiring them to give immediate moral and material help to the affected people. This agenda set by media might be to exploit the politics of sympathy but it has the effect of endorsing gender stereotypes.

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## 1. Introduction

Pakistani society is multicultural and diverse in its composition. It is strongly male-dominated, despite the recent haphazard efforts made by the government, as well as by the non-government sectors, to show Pakistani society as one of gender equality. In Pakistan, in all walks of life, men are generally found to be involved in roles of leadership, whereas women are kept at a secondary level in most spheres of socio-political influence. Women are neither considered to be strong enough to replace men in positions requiring physical strength, nor are they perceived to be capable of making wise decisions. That is why they are traditionally assigned secondary roles outside the home and only offered primary roles in traditional domestic and household scenarios. However, the recent floods have put lives at stake and upset the usual patterns of behaviour; everyone potentially faced misery and had to perform extraordinary tasks for the sake of survival. At a time, when the majority of land areas were almost submerged by floodwaters, thousands were plucked from rooftops while the dead and the vulnerable were left behind; Pakistani media brought the distress of the floods into public view with coverage that left a lasting impression in the minds of people.

The year 2010 is considered to be one of the worst years on record for natural disasters (UN, 2010). According to the report of (CRED),<sup>1</sup> in 2010, 89% of the 207 million people affected by disaster were Asian. Furthermore, the report showed that the estimated damage caused by the floods in Pakistan cost \$9.5 billion (Reuters,

2011; January 24). More than 97% of all natural disaster-related deaths took place in developing countries (Oxfam, 2005).<sup>2</sup>

## 2. The 2010 flood in Pakistan

In July 2010, unexpected and heavy monsoon rains triggered sweeping floods from the north to the south of Pakistan. According to Zamir Akrem, Pakistani ambassador to the UN centre in Geneva, floodwaters covered an area roughly the size of England. A satellite survey showed about 160,000 square kilometres of land to be underwater; this is roughly equal to the areas of Austria, Belgium and Switzerland combined (Gronewold, 2010). In thousands of villages and towns, millions of homes were destroyed and swept away by the devastating floods. The catastrophe was larger than the disasters of the 2004 Indonesia tsunami, the 2005 Pakistan earthquake, and the 2010 Haiti earthquake combined (Telegraph, 2010; 13 August).

The United Nations has rated the flooding in Pakistan as the greatest humanitarian crisis in the recent history. Ban Ki-moon, the UN Secretary General, said that he had never seen a disaster as bad as that of the flooding in Pakistan.<sup>3</sup> According to reports from the National and Provincial Disaster Management Authority of Pakistan, an estimated 20 million<sup>4</sup> people were affected. The death toll was 1985 while 2946 people were injured due to the spread of

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<sup>1</sup> The Belgium-based Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disaster.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/resources/climate\\_change\\_copenhagen/files/Copenhagen%20-%20QandA%20for%20teachers.pdf](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/resources/climate_change_copenhagen/files/Copenhagen%20-%20QandA%20for%20teachers.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> The Nation dated August 16, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.pakistanfloods.pk/daily-updates/situation-report>; retrieved on January 2011.

the flood throughout the country, with countless more missing due to flash floods and landslides. Although the natural disaster has come to an end, its aftermath is even more severe and challenging than the disaster. Major infrastructures such as dams, power stations, roads, bridges, schools, government buildings, agricultural installations, and water reservoirs were severely damaged. The latest assessments estimate that more than 1.89 million homes have been damaged or destroyed in 78 districts of Pakistan (Figs. 1 and 2).

### 3. The gender aspects of natural disasters

The effect of natural disasters is not gender-neutral (Nelson et al., 2002). The poor in both developed countries and in developing countries, of which women comprise 70% (UN, 1995), are

predominantly at risk with the least capacity to overcome the uncertainty brought by disaster. Hence, they are affected disproportionately (Drexhage, 2006). Women have been identified as a vulnerable 'population' because of the feminisation of poverty. Natural disaster magnifies existing inequality, reinforcing the disparity between women and men with regard to vulnerability and the capability to cope with natural disasters (Mitchell et al., 2007; UNDP, 2007). For example, the 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh killed 138,000 people, many of whom were women older than 40 years (Bern et al., 1993; Ikeda, 1995). Similarly, male survivors outnumbered female survivors by a ratio of almost 3:1 in the 2004 tsunami (Oxfam, 2005). It is the socially constructed gender-specific vulnerability of females that has been built into everyday socioeconomic patterns that leads to the relatively higher female disaster mortality rates compared to those of men (Mitchell et al., 2007; Neumayer and Plümper, 2007). This suggests that more

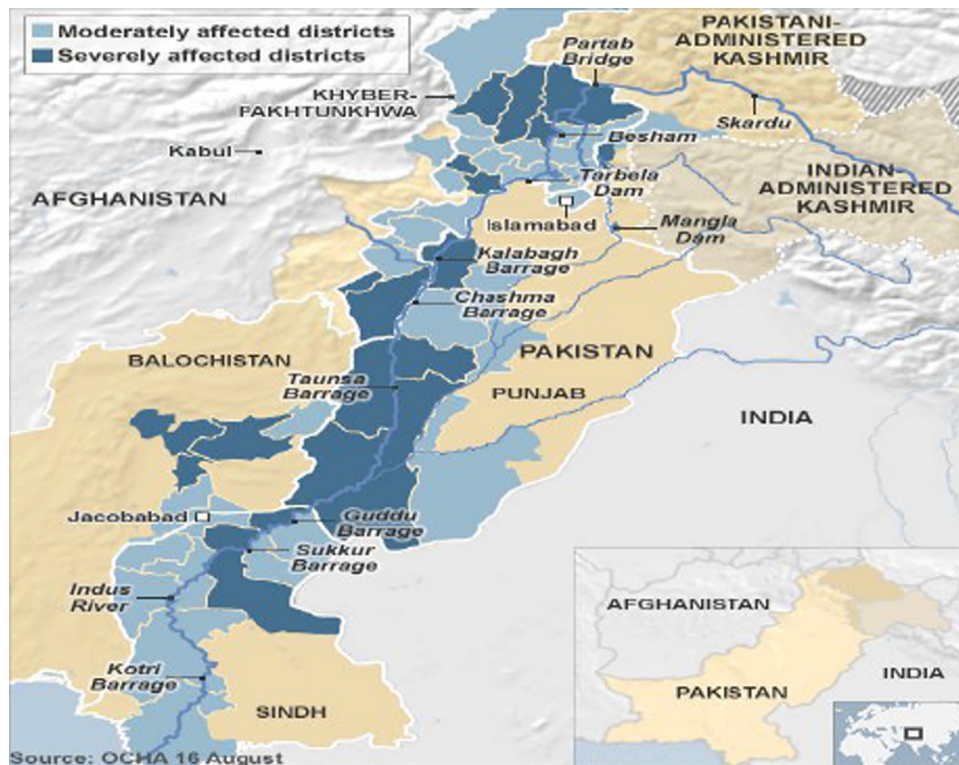


Fig. 1. Map of Pakistan showing flood-affected areas.



Fig. 2. By AFP published in Dawn, August 19, 2010.

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