



# The forgotten casualties redux: Women, children, and disaster risk



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## ABSTRACT

Twenty years ago this journal published an article examining the disproportionate burden of global environmental changes on women and children, highlighting the inequalities in capabilities and opportunities for coping with risks. This retrospective re-examines selected global social and environmental transformations that have increased gendered vulnerability illustrating that over the past two decades, inequalities persist and in some instances have worsened. The social transformations underway—especially widening wealth gaps, large-scale population movements, gendered violence—exacerbate the environmental burdens on women and children even more. Changes in food security, water availability, and air quality continue to produce adverse effects on women and children reducing their ability to cope with everyday risk let alone respond and recover from disasters. Women and children continue to bear the brunt of adverse impacts of disasters and environmental change however we don't know the magnitude or geographic extent of the burden because there is no legacy of data reliability to consistently document these injustices. What gets measured gets done, but in the case of women and children they are often the undocumented victims further reproducing the notion of the forgotten casualties.

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## 1. Introduction

The confluence of three major international meetings in 2015 on sustainable development, climate change and disaster risk explicitly addressed gender and children as part of the negotiations. Gender equality is in the forefront of the climate change agreement, the sustainable development goals and the Sendai Framework for disaster risk reduction. The Sendai Framework is a global agreement for reducing disaster risk exposure and vulnerability including efforts to reduce gender inequalities, which magnify vulnerability and contribute to the differential impacts on women, men, boys, and girls.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) furthered the broad set of priorities on gender inequalities originally initiated in Agenda 21. Meeting the specific targets for gender inequality did not materialize because of the narrowness of the indicators used. For example, success in meeting MDG 3 promoting gender equality and empowering women was based on three indicators: ratio of girls to boys enrolled in formal schooling; percentage of women in non-agricultural wage employment; and the percentage of seats held by women in national parliaments. The narrowness in indicators of the MDGs are directly related to the availability of

data for monitoring and assessing progress. As a self-assessment on progress toward the MDGs noted, “What gets measured gets done” (United Nations, 2015a:10).

At the UN Sustainable Development Summit in 2015, more than 190 nations committed to 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) again with measurable targets. Among them is gender equality (SDG 5). While specific indicators are in development, many lack consistent sources of data at either global or national levels.

Twenty years ago, Cutter (1995) examined the “socio-spatial impacts of environmental change and the differential adjustments to such changes by women and children (p.181).” In light of the coalescing agendas and significance of the three major international negotiations in 2015 a re-examination of the forgotten casualties seems warranted. Two salient concerns endure: the extent to which women and children continue to bear disproportionate burdens of disaster risk; and the lack of significant progress in documenting these differential impacts with reliable and consistent data.

## 2. Global social changes affecting women and children

Large-scale social changes affect women and children and increase their vulnerability to disaster risk. Three examples illustrate how disaster coping is reduced.

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### 2.1. Income inequality

One of the most pervasive and continuing global social changes is the widening gender income inequality and increasing the feminization of poverty within and between nations. Despite the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the MDGs, equal economic rights for women are not yet a reality globally. The gender gap in labor force participation persists, with 50% of women of working age participating in paid work compared to 77% of men (United Nations, 2015b); a ratio largely unchanged since 1995. Women continue to be primary care-givers and involved in unpaid household and child-rearing; work with little or no access to monetary income regardless of national development levels. Women in many parts of the world continue to be economically dependent on husbands, often lacking any independent financial security.

Women are more likely to be under-employed relative to men having low-paying hourly wage jobs. Such jobs, primarily in the services sector, often lack social protections and benefits. The money that is earned often goes to support child care—with no net improvement in economic stability. For those women who do work full-time, the gender pay gap still exists (World Economic Forum, 2015) with women earning 70–90% of the pay of men in the same position with the same level of experience (United Nations, 2015b). The gender disadvantages in basic living conditions and livelihoods are amplified during and after disasters and humanitarian crises (Fordham and Meyreles, 2014).

### 2.2. Gendered violence

Gendered violence occurs in all countries regardless of development levels. In conflict-zones, especially where low-level fighting is entrenched (e.g. Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, Syria,) civilians bear the brunt of sexual violence, especially women and girls although the numbers are difficult to ascertain (United Nations, 2016). Wartime rape is not specific to certain regions or types of conflicts and its perpetrators range from state military to rebel forces to even civilians (Cohen et al., 2013). The legacy of wartime rape (survivors and the children conceived by rape) manifests itself long after the conflict with the stigma, economic and social marginalization of rape survivors, and of course the unwanted and oft-aborted or abandoned children conceived by rape (Carpenter, 2010).

Non-conflict violence against women occurs in all countries and ranges from physical attacks to sexual assaults to spousal abuse. Nearly one in three women globally experience sexual or physical violence, most from a domestic partner (UN Women, 2015). Post-disaster stress increases violence against women and children (David and Enarson, 2012) as families cope with the realities of recovery. Other types of gender violence (e.g., cultural practices like female genital mutilations) or economic trafficking in women and girls (for sexual exploitation and forced labor) also increase vulnerability (UNODC, 2014). Reproductive violence in the form of child marriage and child-bearing before age 15 affects more than 250 million girls (UNICEF, 2014a, 2014b), mostly in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. More common in rural areas, child marriages retard female education, reproductive choices, and maternal health as postpubescent girls are likely to have more pregnancies, receive less medical care during pregnancy, and contract sexually-transmitted diseases. Gender based violence either from conflict or non-conflict origins reduces the ability of women and children to adapt to or recover from natural hazards.

### 2.3. Large-scale population movements

Armed conflict creates population movements as locals seek refuge outside of the war torn cities and regions. Such migrations occur within countries (internally displaced people or IDPs) but also extend beyond territorial borders producing refugees (migrants seeking refuge outside their home country, who are afforded international rights and protections). The number of internally displaced persons has almost doubled in the past twenty-five years, while the average number of refugees has declined slightly. In 2014, for example, the UN High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) estimated the number of refugees and internally displaced persons was roughly 59.5 million people, half of whom were women, and 52% who were under 18 years old (UNHCR, 2015a). The global displacement is at its highest level ever—1 in every 122 persons in the world is either internally displaced, a refugee, or seeking asylum (UNHCR, 2015b). The primary contributor is the increased production of refugees from the Syrian conflict with 4 million refugees and 7.6 million IDPs seeking destinations in neighboring countries (Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt) and increasingly into Europe.

Such movements are hardest on women and children, who often are undernourished, malnourished, and easily susceptible to diseases. The journey itself is fraught with physical demands, let alone exploitation, sexual abuse, and trafficking of migrants, especially women and young girls. Unable to obtain access to basic services such as health, welfare, and education, these forced migrants experience more communicable diseases on top of chronic health problems that combine to increase mortality rates, especially in organized camps designed to keep the migrants contained until their final destination is determined. Poor sanitary conditions, shortages of food and water create health risks associated with cholera and hepatitis E. Lack of governance and safety provisions result in increases in gender-based violence (rape and sexual abuse), where women and young girls have increased risks of HIV infection, sexually-transmitted diseases, and unwanted pregnancies (United Nations, 2015b). Returning or repatriated refugees, especially widows, are disproportionately affected during post-conflict reconstruction having abandoned their livelihoods and homesteads, where they may not have legal proof of ownership of land or property for rehabilitation (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 2005).

In addition to conflict, climate change and disasters are rapidly becoming primary drivers of internal and international migrations (Heimann, 2015; Hunter, 2005; Warner and Affi, 2014). Since 2008, approximately 26.4 million people per year have been displaced from their homes because of disasters, roughly a third of all displacements (IDMC, 2015). In many countries, conflict combines with natural hazards to produce doubly displaced populations. Recent examples include Bosnia-Herzegovina (first ethnic conflict and then from May 2014 flooding), Pakistan (conflict and 2012 flooding), and the Philippines (ethnic conflict and Typhoon Yolanda in November 2013). In each case, it is women and children who are most adversely affected. Disasters in and of themselves contribute to internally displaced populations such as the diaspora after 2005's Hurricane Katrina in the US (Weber and Peek, 2012) or the 2014 Typhoons Rammason and Hagupit displacing 2.99 and 1.82 million people, respectively, in the Philippines (IDMC, 2015). Nuclear disasters prompted the permanent re-location of 400,000 people from heavily contaminated areas in Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia after the Chernobyl disaster, and more recently, 160,000 people, were displaced from their homes due to the radioactive contamination from the Fukushima nuclear facility in Japan (IDMC, 2015).

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