An Exploration of How COVID-19 Impacted Women and Girls Around the World

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The Hidden Toll

Edited by

Fikresus Amahazion

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To women and girls around the world – who remain the backbone of our families, communities, and societies, and continue to hold up half the sky.

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BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BLA	Bangladesh Labour Act
BMDC	Bangladesh Medical and Dental Council
BNC	Bangladesh Nursing Council
BPRP	Bangladesh Preparedness and Response Plan
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women
CCR	Corona Control Room
CHW	Community-Based Health Worker
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease
DV	Domestic Violence
ECLAC	United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
ESCWA	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GoB	Government of Bangladesh
HCD	High Court Division
HWs	Health Workers
ICN	International Council of Nurses
ICU	Intensive Care Unit
ILO	International Labor Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
IPC	Infection Prevention and Control
IPV	Intimate-Partner Violence
ISCO-08	International Standard Classification of Occupations 2008
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MoHFW	Ministry of Health and Family Welfare
MoLE	Ministry of Labour and Employment
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
OSH	Occupational Safety and Health
PES	Public Emergency Services

PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SOP	Standard Operating Procedures
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency
US	United States
VAW	Violence Against Women
VAWG	Violence Against Women and Girls
WHO	World Health Organization
WMA	World Medical Association

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

More often than not, completing a book is a formidable task. It tends to require considerable effort, a lot of patience and persistence, and, not to be forgotten or overlooked, the support and contributions of many people. I can state with high certainty that developing this book would have been far more challenging and difficult – and perhaps not even possible – without the unstinting encouragement and incredible efforts of so many people. I would like to acknowledge the publisher, editors, reviewers, and support staff at Cambridge Scholars Publishing for all their help during the various stages of producing this book. I express deep thanks for their infinite patience along the way, as well as for their thoughtful comments and suggestions. Many thanks and sincere appreciation of course are also due to the various authors who contributed chapters. Not only did they provide work of high-level quality and interest, they demonstrated tremendous professionalism and great commitment throughout the completion of this project.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

FIKRESUS AMAHAZION

When natural disasters, such as disease outbreaks, emergencies, conflicts, and humanitarian or other crises, strike societies, everyone is impacted. But not all people are affected equally or in the same ways. Rather, when societies are hit by disasters, women and girls are impacted in a much different way – and often more adversely – than men and boys (Alam and Rahman 2014; Bradshaw 2013; Cao and Kamel 2011; GFDRR 2018; Ginige, Amaratunga, and Haigh 2009).

It has commonly been suggested that, "women always tend to suffer most from the impact of disasters" (UN/ADPC 2010: 8), and a large and still growing body of empirical work conducted in a diverse range of settings around the world has powerfully demonstrated that disasters and crises, and their oft-destructive aftermath, frequently tend to be deadlier for women than for men (Cutter 1995; D'Ippoliti et al. 2010; Oxfam 2005; Peterson 1997).[1] Following the devastating 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh (Cyclone Gorky), for instance, female mortality was higher than male across most age groups (Ikeda 1995), while in a highly-cited longitudinal study of disaster strength and the gender gap in life expectancy in a sample of 141 countries from the year 1981 to 2002, Neumayer and Plümper (2007) found that natural disasters lowered the life expectancy of women drastically more

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[1] However, it is important to note that there are also many cases of disasters and crises with excess male deaths or more men dying relative to women. These trends are often associated with specific country contexts or cultures (Gomáriz 1999; Jonkman and Kelman 2005; Salvati et al. 2018). In one relevant historical example, Tandlich, Chirenda, and Srinivas (2013) utilized an array of quantitative data to examine gender disparities in disaster contexts in South Africa across the period 1980 and 2011. Their findings revealed that men were 10 percent more vulnerable than women regarding their health status, and also that men were five times more likely than women to suffer fatal injuries during disasters.

than that of men, and that this effect intensified as disasters increased in severity (as approximated by the number of people killed relative to the total population size).[2] Notably, their statistical modelling revealed that women (along with children) were up to 14 times more likely to die in a natural disaster than men.

Perhaps historically overlooked as an issue of concern within post-disaster and conflict settings, women and girls are also often highly vulnerable to trafficking, exploitation, gender-based violence, sexual violence, and rape (Alston 2013; Dynes and Rodriguez 2007; Farhoudian et al. 2006; Jewkes 2007; Jones et al. 2014; UN OCHA 2019). Disturbingly, "there is good…evidence that if women and girls survive disasters, they face a greater risk of experiencing gender-based and sexual violence during disaster recovery" (True 2013: 79). Several studies conducted after Hurricane Katrina, a destructive Category 5 Atlantic hurricane that struck in mid-2005, found that the prevalence of gender-based violence against women rose significantly (Anastario, Shehab, and Lawry 2009; Schumacher et al. 2010), while after the 2011 Christchurch earthquakes in New Zealand, which were among the deadliest and most destructive in the country's history, there was an approximately 40 percent increase in intimate partner violence within rural areas (True 2013).

Violence against women and girls may be triggered by a number of stressors that emerge or are exacerbated during and after disasters. These include, among others, housing and economic insecurity, unemployment, substance abuse, a disruption to or breakdown in infrastructure, basic services, and law enforcement, a contraction in resources available to support victims, and mental or emotional distress (Thurston, Stockl, and Ranganathan 2021).

While the establishment of temporary relief shelters, informal settlements, and displacement camps is a standard development following disasters, overcrowding, lack of security, and poor sanitary conditions within these spaces[3] can contribute to extreme anxiety, discomfort, and various physical and mental health risks on the part of women and girls (Bradshaw and Fordham 2014; Duramy 2011; IFRC 2010; Toole 1997). Indeed, the general safety and security concerns and potential harms that can arise within relief

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[2] In other words, larger disasters tend to lead to more severe impacts on women's life expectancy (relative to that of men) than smaller disasters do.
[3] For example, relief camps and shelters may lack segregated sleeping, toilet, and washroom facilities or private spaces for breastfeeding mothers.

shelters and camps may lead women and girls to completely avoid using them (Plan 2011).

An important core dimension of sexual violence and rape during and after disasters is that it remains underreported. This is as a result of a variety of reasons, such as the existence of poor monitoring mechanisms, victims choosing to focus on basic recovery (rather than reporting), as well as a general lack of access to or existence of adequate support services, such as health clinics, counseling services, and shelters for victims, among others.[4]

It is a deeply distressing fact that rape, sexual exploitation, and abuse against vulnerable women and girls may even be perpetrated by those that societies expect or mandate to alleviate hardship, ensure safety and protection, and offer much-needed aid or support, such as relief workers and international peacekeepers. For example, it has increasingly been recognized that peacekeepers from the United Nations (UN) have, "a sexual abuse problem" (Wheeler 2020). In a long list of countries, including but not limited to, Cambodia, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, Somalia, and South Sudan, relief workers or UN peacekeepers (or other individuals and groups with similar mandates, such as those from the African Union), have raped women and girls, or systematically sexually abused and exploited them in exchange for small amounts of food or meager support (Genovese 2018; Kent 2007; Mednick and Craze 2022; Notar 2006; Olsson 2009). Not only are peacekeepers and relief workers rarely punished or genuinely held accountable for their crimes or transgressions, they often end up "leaving behind" fatherless children who are forced to confront a range of challenges and problems (Lee and Bartel 2020; Wagner et al. 2022).[5]

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[4] Of course, this phenomenon is also quite common during so-called "normal times" or non-disaster settings. Within these contexts underreporting is largely the result of the existence of considerable barriers to reporting, victims lacking appropriate support, concerns about confidentiality, retaliation, and stigmatization, lack of recognition by victims, and overwhelming feelings of shame, embarrassment, and helplessness (Allen 2007; Anderson and Doherty 2008; Koss 1985; McDougal et al. 2018; Sable et al. 2006).

[5] Within the literature, these abandoned children are sometimes referred to as "peacekeeper children" or "peacekeeper babies". In Haiti, children fathered and abandoned by foreign peacekeepers who participated in the UN Stabilisation Mission in Haiti, also known as MINUSTAH (an acronym of the mission's French name), have been referred to as "*pitit Minustah*" (Bhatia 2022).

Along with these various risks, the multifaceted sexual and reproductive health and needs of women and girls during or after disasters may be severely under supported or entirely neglected, contributing to unplanned pregnancies, steep rises in maternal mortality, or increases in the risk of sexually transmitted diseases (Carballo et al. 2005). In one study examining access to contraceptives among a large sample of women from diverse backgrounds following Hurricane Ike, which struck the Texas Gulf Coast in 2008, 13 percent of women reported considerable difficulties in accessing contraception and a lack of access to birth control was closely related to having a higher frequency of unprotected sex (Leyser-Whalen, Rahman, and Berenson 2011). Compelling research exploring post-disaster contexts, such as in Haiti and the United States (US), has also indicated that women and girls may experience a loss of status, respect, and dignity (Horton 2012; Sterett 2012).

When large-scale crises and disasters take place, pre-existing gender-based inequalities, barriers, vulnerabilities, and discrimination faced by women and girls are frequently aggravated, intensified, or increased (Demetriades and Esplen 2008; Fordham et al. 2006; Morrow and Peacock 1997). As explained by True (2013: 83), "The impact of a natural disaster…magnifies a society's divisions and inequalities." In a longitudinal analysis of gender-related vulnerability and resilience in a small coastal community following the 2010 earthquake and tsunami in Chile, researchers found that patriarchal[6] relations that were imposed during the emergency and recovery period intensified long existing patterns of aggression (Moreno and Shaw 2018), while a study of the challenges faced by girls and women following the 2012 twin earthquakes that hit eastern Iran revealed that many girls were subjected to forced and child marriages, partly as a result of harsh socioeconomic conditions and poverty (Sohrabizadeh et al. 2017). Similarly, across large swathes of Sub-Saharan Africa so-called "famine marriages" see families push girls into child marriage as a coping mechanism for drought and famine (North 2010; Otzelberger 2014).[7]

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[6] Patriarchy is a system of unequal social, sexual, and economic relations between the sexes, which produces and maintains men's control, authority, and power over women (Buck 1992).

[7] As a coping mechanism for drought and hunger, families and households may push their young daughters into marriage in order to reduce the size of the household (and thus the number of people that must be fed or cared for), as well as utilize the traditional dowry provided by the family of the groom as a source of cash.

Although resorting to child marriage may serve to enhance the general resiliency or coping capacity of families and households faced with drought or hunger, the girls who are pressed into marriage are confronted with myriad consequences. Beyond constituting a flagrant violation of a variety of fundamental rights, as articulated within a range of international human rights documents and declarations (CEDAW 1979; UDHR 1948; UNCRC 1989),[8] child marriage also directly and profoundly impacts young women and girls' health and general wellbeing. Work shows that it increases the risk for depression, sexually transmitted infections, cervical cancer, malaria, obstetric fistulas, early pregnancy and multiple or rapid repeat childbirth, and maternal mortality (Nour 2006; 2009). Moreover, young women and girls generally suffer from isolation or seclusion, a lower status within their new families, reduced bargaining power, and diminished autonomy, agency, or decision-making ability (Marphatia, Ambale, and Reid 2017; Tenkorang 2019). They also have a greater likelihood of experiencing physical violence at the hands of their partners or their new families (Fan and Koski 2022; Kidman 2016).[9]

The overall burden borne by women, already considerable during "normal times", increases and intensifies in a number of ways during and following disasters. Frequently, their working conditions within the household and paid workplace significantly deteriorate, a development that is closely associated with a lack of childcare and increased work and family conflicts (Enarson 2000). Women may also find themselves having to spend considerably more time carrying out the functions of daily living for their families (because those particular duties have become much more difficult or complicated post-disaster),[10] having to continue in or to find paid work, and increasingly targeted for reconstruction activities (such as rebuilding homes, livelihoods, and communities).

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[8] These include, but are not only limited to, the right to education, freedom from violence, reproductive rights, access to reproductive and sexual health care, employment, freedom of movement, and the right to consensual marriage.

[9] As well, child marriage can have adverse impacts on the health and wellbeing of children born to women and girls married as minors, and it is associated with higher rates of child mortality (Garcia-Hombrados 2022; Raj and Boehmer 2013; Raj et al. 2010).

[10] Such as lining up to receive relief supplies, having to travel farther in order to access water or search for firewood, and cooking in extremely challenging or dangerous conditions.

The extension and complication of what for many women is already a long, difficult working day not only may have a significantly negative impact on their health and wellbeing, but also can have a profoundly detrimental knock-on effect on their daughters' wellbeing, particularly if the latter are forced to step in to help their mothers or fill the void. Also, similar to the case in "normal times" or non-disaster settings, since women and girls' reproductive and community roles are widely regarded as unproductive (in the sense of not generating an income), they are taken for granted, greatly undervalued, or generally overlooked. For instance, in their case study of gender and disaster during the 1997 Red River Valley flood in the Canadian province of Manitoba, Enarson and Scanlon (1999) found that the work conducted by women during and after the destructive flood largely remained invisible. Another glaring case is how, following the East Japan disaster of 2010, women based within the evacuation centres were required to prepare meals, a task for which they received no compensation. By stark contrast, male evacuees were not expected to contribute to this task, while also having the option of collecting and removing rubbish, for which they received compensation (Saito 2012).

Interestingly, however, the potential shifts or expansion in roles that women experience during and after disasters occasionally may have positive implications. In particular, women assuming new roles within the family or community can help engender changes in power dynamics between women and men, as well as lead to expansions in their sense of self. Moreover, this process of "role accumulation" can also help allow women to successfully develop or discover a new sense of confidence, self-worth, and general competence (Fothergill 1999).

Since women and girls are generally more likely to experience poverty, be heavily constrained by deeply entrenched traditions or sociocultural norms,[11] and be unemployed or have less socioeconomic power, control over resources and assets, or access to education and information than men and boys, it may be considerably more difficult for them to adequately prepare for, adapt to and cope with, resist, or recover from disasters. For instance, the fact that in many nations around the world women and girls

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[11] Sociocultural norms are the informal and formal rules, laws, beliefs, expectations, and practices that help to determine collective understanding of what are acceptable attitudes and behaviours in groups and societies. They are generally learned and accepted from an early age, and they are held in place by a system, often rigid, of social sanctions and benefits (Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren 1990; Fitzgerald 2016; Harper et al. 2014).

are still not permitted to freely and fully participate within the public sphere means that they are frequently less likely to receive the critical information or vital early warnings that are necessary for appropriate preparation or responses, while the commonly lower levels of education for women may limit the extent to which they are able to secure meaningful employment outside traditional female reproductive roles following disasters (Ozsoy et al. 2010: 105). In many areas women may be especially vulnerable to losing their livelihoods because they tend to be overrepresented within some of the socioeconomic sectors that are worst hit by natural disasters, such as the informal sector or tourism, domestic work, accommodation and services, fishing, and agriculture.

In countries around the world, women comprise a large proportion of those in poverty or who are economically dependent (Munoz Boudet et al. 2018; Munoz Bouget et al. 2021).[12] Within post-disaster settings, this frequently translates into them having limited access to critical resources, such as resilient housing. In some settings, women are especially disadvantaged in terms of access to vital relief materials or services because they lack mobility (which is often closely associated with familial restrictions or cultural and financial constraints), are not perceived as the main breadwinners and decisionmakers, or only male heads of households may be registered in relief camps (Alam and Rahman 2014).

It is a sad irony that while they are fundamentally integral to disaster response (and socioeconomic growth and development, more broadly), women and girls are invariably left out of the planning, design, and decision-making process of recovery and intervention initiatives (Bradshaw 2013). As a result, not only are harmful stereotypes and discrimination about women and girls' roles sustained or perpetuated, but their special needs and particular priorities tend to get neglected or be simply overlooked (Byrne and Baden 1995; Enarson and Morrow 1997). What is more, their general vulnerability, including to gender-based violence or other harms, increases (True 2013).

A historical case that poignantly exemplifies how strongly influential sociocultural norms and deeply rooted traditions can serve to have a negative impact on women and girls during disasters is the December 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia. One of the contributing factors to the fact that many more women died than men – approximately four times as many

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[12] In general, "the poorest of the poor are women" (Richter 2011: 21).

women than men died in India, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka – was that men were much more likely than women to be able to run, swim, or climb trees, while women also lost precious evacuation time as they attempted to look after children and other relatives. Additionally, because the tsunami struck on a Sunday morning, many women were at home looking after children, engaged in domestic activities, waiting on the shore, or bathing in the sea, while men were running errands which took them away from the seafront (MacDonald 2005; Oxfam 2005). In a similar way, part of the reason that approximately 90 percent of the victims of the devastating 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh were women and girls was because prevailing sociocultural norms restricted their mobility and access to critical information (Ikeda 1995).

How Has COVID-19 Impacted Women and Girls around the World?

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), an infectious disease caused by a recently discovered coronavirus, has led to an unprecedented and devastating global tragedy. On 31 December 2019, Chinese media reported for the first time on an outbreak of viral pneumonia in the city of Wuhan. Several months later, in early March 2020, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO), a specialized agency of the UN (WHO 2020). Since its emergence several years ago, the pandemic has been one of the greatest global crises in perhaps a century and led to unimaginable human suffering. To date, hundreds of million cases have been confirmed across the globe, millions of people have died,[13] and the livelihoods of billions continue to be profoundly affected.

Following the emergence of COVID-19, a considerable amount of coverage and much attention have been dedicated to exploring the complex, wide-ranging consequences of the unprecedented global crisis. This includes probing the pandemic's health-related outcomes and consequences, and exploring massive economic losses and reverses in developmental progress, psychosocial harms, and political implications. However, at the same time, comparatively little focus has been directed to examining the impact of the

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[13] It is possible that the "real" or "exact" figures on COVID-19 may never be fully known and that the true toll of COVID-19 may be much higher than official records suggest. This is down to several factors, such as a lack of testing and death certification, and case reports in many countries not being exhaustive (COVID-19 Excess Mortality Collaborators 2022; The Economist 2022).

pandemic on women and girls. Accordingly, the present edited volume is specifically dedicated to critically interrogating and deeply examining how the COVID-19 crisis has impacted women and girls around the world.

Comprising a rich collection of rigorous analyses that touch upon an extensive number of topics from an array of countries, the present volume is significant for a number of different reasons. For one, it offers critical, timely insights and contributes to increasing general awareness and broadening understanding of an important, albeit hitherto underexplored, aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic: the differential experience of girls and women.

As well, with history time and again showing that women and girls' fundamental human and gender-related rights are repeatedly and flagrantly violated in disasters and crises, often solely on account of their being women and girls (Enarson and Fordham 2001), shedding light on their plight and varied experiences, alongside amplifying their voices and perspectives, and promoting their inherent dignity, humanity, worth, and empowerment, is a clear moral imperative and an extremely significant, worthwhile undertaking in itself.

Furthermore, while work examining the differentiated impact of disasters on women and girls has expanded substantially in recent times (Enarson, Fothergill, and Peek 2018), there has been, by way of comparison, a paucity of attention directed to low-income or developing countries. The fact that an array of low-income, developing countries are investigated by the authors within this volume helps to plug the existing gap, offers instructive lessons, and ultimately contributes to presenting a more inclusive, comprehensive picture. What is more, with high-quality contributions by experienced international scholars and experts from numerous fields and disciplines, and containing research based on a variety of methodologies and approaches, the present volume ensures a wide-ranging, evidence-based exploration and nuanced perspective of a pressing issue. Such a holistic approach and multidisciplinary collection can only deepen and enrich our overall understanding.

Karl Marx famously advised that the point should be changing the world rather than merely analyzing or interpreting it (Marx 1965). Positively transforming, better addressing, and more effectively responding to the differentiated, indeed frequently harmful and negative, impacts experienced by women and girls in crises and disasters fundamentally requires a greater

recognition of and deeper inquiry into the special vulnerabilities, unique challenges, and distinct issues that they face. The various chapters within this volume, both individually and as a broader, general collective, represent a progressive step in that direction.

Last, it is critical to understand that many of the concerns and questions raised within the present volume will only increase in terms of their bearing and relevance in the years ahead, particularly due to the fact that natural disasters and extreme events are increasing in frequency, severity, and duration worldwide (Thomas and Lopez 2015; WMO 2021), thus making this collection timely, significant, and worthwhile.[14]

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[14] This may be driven by a number of factors, including climate change induced by unsustainable human activities and practices, more severe or extreme weather, and improved monitoring and reporting mechanisms. According to a 2022 report from an intergovernmental climate panel of the UN, the negative impacts of climate change are mounting much faster than scientists predicted less than a decade ago and are expected to hit the world's most vulnerable populations hardest (IPCC 2022).

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