

## **Disaster an Act of God or is it?: Is there Any Place for Women in Disaster Mitigation? Lessons for Africa Going Forward**

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### **Abstract**

The possibility of disasters within communities is just apparent and need all progressive institutional authorities to adopt appropriate chemistry mechanisms that seek to guarantee the survival of such communities out of the disasters. As much as disasters cannot be eliminated totally there is need to sufficiently mitigate the disaster effects. While it is widely agreed that disasters are an act of God, for which communities need to gracefully embrace, the view cannot go unchallenged in the face of the impacts on the vulnerable groups. As much as some disasters are natural, local wisdom is important and can be used to deal with disasters. Through this local wisdom which is a social capital to meet their need in the form of traditional knowledge, norms, rules, and skills that has been passed through generations. Disasters have been experienced in Africa since time immemorial. They have left so much property destroyed, people maimed and killed. The impact on vulnerable groups particularly women has been severe yet they are excluded from the disaster mitigation, preparedness and recovery interventions within communities. The disasters have been known to cause unprecedented disruptions to community functionalities. The effects of such disruptions have ravaged the serenity of communities. The current status quo in which women are regarded as ‘the other’ needs to be interrogated with the view of fostering inclusive interventions. Without inclusivity, the future of communities will remain bleak.

**Keywords:** Women, disaster, vulnerability, disaster mitigation, inclusivity

### **Introduction**

Disaster mitigation which refers to efforts that are structural or non-structural adopted by communities to reduce vulnerability and risk of a disaster (Hidayati, D, 2019) <sup>[16]</sup>, undisputedly becomes successful through proactive approaches in prevention, preparedness, planning and analysis. While it is widely agreed that disasters are an act of God, for which communities need to gracefully embrace, the view cannot go unchallenged in the face of the impacts on the vulnerable groups. As much as some disasters are natural, local wisdom is important and can be used to deal with disasters. Through this local wisdom which is a social capital to meet their need in the form of traditional knowledge, norms, rules, and skills that has been passed through generations (Hidayati, 2019) <sup>[16]</sup> communities can conceive ways of dealing with their circumstances.

A lot needs to be done by all progressive citizens committed to ensuring better lives and livelihoods for communities. Disasters have been experienced in Africa since time immemorial. They have left so much property destroyed, people maimed and killed. The impact on vulnerable groups particularly women has been severe yet they are excluded from the disaster mitigation, preparedness and recovery interventions within communities. The disasters have been known to cause unprecedented disruptions to community functionalities. The effects of such disruptions have ravaged the serenity of communities. The current status quo in which

women are regarded as ‘the other’ needs to be interrogated with the view of fostering inclusive interventions. Without inclusivity, the future of communities will remain bleak. Evidence across the world has shown that the impact of disasters on women, children, the aged and disabled is higher compared to that on men hence the lack of commitment to embrace all voices within communities before, during and after disasters. The import of this reality is thus to ensure that gender mainstreaming during pre-disaster, emergency response and post disaster are urgently needed to reduce the deafening impacts of disasters on the vulnerable. Adopting interventions that guarantee access, participation, control over resources and decision making is thus the main anchor in addressing disasters in Africa and beyond. Disaster impacts have been known to have far reaching effects since the disaster effects do not end with immediate elimination of physical effects of a hazard or when the survivors have been rescued, relief supplies have been set in place or cameras taken to another place. Restoring the economic resources, utilities and welfare services can take many years and in some instances causing a lot of trauma and disruptions on the lives of communities.

### **Disasters an Act of God but can we not Do Something About it?**

There has been wailing and yelling when disasters come. Many voices have repeatedly concluded that there is hardly

anything that communities can do to avoid disasters but Hidayati, D (2019) <sup>[16]</sup> believes that local wisdom can significantly make a difference within communities if seriously embraced but all meaning citizens. While indeed some disasters are natural in their nature there are some disasters for which man has a hand. This could be reason why there is talk about sustainable development in the current discourse. Sustainable development to the ensuring that current generations benefit from exploiting current resources without depriving the future generation of the right to benefit from the same resources. Some of the disasters that man is grappling with today have actually been seen as a result of the activities of man that depleted the ozone layer. Consequently the world is the mercy of climate change. This climate change has been bringing droughts, cyclones and floods. As much as disasters may be seen as an act of God, good disaster management is critical, so that the affected, citizens are ready to face incident when disasters occur. Disaster management is actually an activity undertaken by all and sundry, the women included.

In such disasters, is it not the right thing for man to come up with ways and means to avoid them or at least reduce their impacts? In response to this call the world is actually pleading with man to adopt sustainable interventions that include making the environment green. Through-out the passage of time man has been seen engaging in many activities, some of which have been seen to promote or perpetuate disasters. In such instances, man is implored to adopt approaches that do not promote the emergency of undesirable developments. Disasters seriously threaten human life, resulting in damage, loss and loss of life (Yuliati & Hastuti, 2019). This could explain the thinking that integrated approaches to disaster risk reduction are necessary to improve the lives and livelihoods of those most vulnerable to disaster. Women Empowered Approach provides economic and social opportunities for women to build resilience to respond to disasters (Story *et al*, 2020) <sup>[17]</sup>.

There is a lot man can do to mitigate disasters because disaster impacts can be immediate and long term. Current disaster management practices focus mainly on immediate search and rescue overlooking long term disaster impacts (Athifa, 2020), As much as some disasters are natural local wisdom is important. The locals have to prepare to reduce these calamity risks. Ideally the communities ought to borrow from Bob Marley who said in one of his songs, ‘... non but ourselves can make ourselves free...’Communities inevitably need to fire from all cylinders in a bid to come up with ways of mitigating the impact of disasters

### **The Place of Women in the Disaster Matrix**

The women within virtually all communities are the major victims when disasters come. There are just as many reasons to explain why the women and children remain the most affected by the effects of disasters whatever their nature. Hemachandra *et al* (2020) suggested that, women have been disproportionately affected by natural hazards due to many reasons. The most pronounced reason has been the minimum representation of women in disaster decision making. Consequently, this has spiraled their vulnerabilities in disasters and inviting all well-meaning citizens and authorities to consider empowerment of the women. The empowerment of women is thus a sure strategy to address vulnerabilities and strengthen societal resilience to future disaster. The occurrence of disaster and the resultant impacts should not be resigned to fate. Communities must endeavor to play their

role in reducing the hazards and risks if that is within what they can do. They have to be responsive. The majority of the women interviewed indicated that society has given women a raw deal in this regard yet women have respectable coping capacity (Bari,1992; Bradshaw, 2013; Chowdhury, 2001; Dankelman, 2010; Enarson & Marrow, 1998; Hewitt, 1997; Mitchell *et al*, 2007) <sup>[10]</sup>.

While the women at times regard themselves as less valuable than the men (Athifa, 2020), this should not allowed to perpetuate because women have proved beyond doubt that they are just competent as the males when it comes to decision making. In this regard the Constitution of Zimbabwe under Section 17 now recognize that women are just as good as their male counterparts. *It says*,

1. The State must promote gender balance in Zimbabwean society and in particular:
  - a) The State must promote the full participation of women in all spheres of Zimbabwean Society on the basis of equality with men.
  - b) The State must take all measures, including legislative measures needed to ensure that.
    - i) Both genders are equally represented in all institutions and agencies of government at every level and
    - ii) women constitute at least half the membership of all Commissions and other elective and appointed governmental bodies established by or under this Constitution or any Act of parliament; and
  - c) The State and all institutions and agencies of government at every level must take practical measures to ensure that women have access to resources, including land on the basis of equality with men.
2. The State must take positive measures to rectify gender discrimination and imbalances resulting from past practices and policies

### **Why are the Women the Most Impacted by Disasters?**

Ruszczuk, *et al* (2020) <sup>[21]</sup> argues that the role of women in community based disaster risk reduction efforts is an area of limited academic research and continues to be a thorny issue for policy and practice. Notwithstanding that position, evidence across the world continue to show that women are the most affected by the disasters whenever they occur compared to the men. The mortality of women, children, the aged and disabled has been seen to be sickening. This situation has escalated to levels that no progressive thinker can remain silent hence the need for the study undertaken with a group of women conveniently selected in Harare.

The women are affected more because of the following reasons:

- **Women do not have Much Strength**

Naturally the women folk are known to be weak when compared to the men Disasters are known to demand a lot of strength as citizens try to escape to safety. The women may not last the distance. In this vein the majority of the women perish during disasters. The majority of the women interviewed revealed that indeed it is true that women are not as strong as the men. In this regard it is usually a problem to last the distance if strength is required. Kwan C (2020) <sup>[14]</sup> concurred but focused on older women. From this contribution older women particularly those widowed, head households and living in poverty are the most affected. Probed further the respondents indicated that the moral fabric is now tattered and torn to the extent that not many within the

extended family have space to accommodate these groups of people.

- **Women cannot Endure as Men Do**

Naturally the men are said to absorb pain. This allows them to pull through the jaws of disasters. The women who fail to endure will give up and die.

- **Usually Women are Big in Size**

The biological set of the majority of women is that they are physically big. Their size may make it impossible for them to carry themselves. They may equally make it difficult for those that may consider assisting them to safety.

- **Women are Relatively Slow to React to Situations**

Research has shown that part of this slowness is caused by the type of clothing that the women will be wearing. Traditionally women in Africa are expected to dress in a particular manner. This is not always in the best interest of the women. A case in point is seen in Tanzania where a Member of Parliament, Condester Sichwale, was ejected from parliament for wearing tight pants. The justification of this ejection was that she had to dress *well and acceptably*. The speaker of parliament Job Ndugai actually said, "Go dress up well and...Join us back later." This aptly confirms that women are expected by society to dress in a particular manner that society approves yet at times it is the way the women dress that finds them as victims when disasters strike. The clothes would restrain them as they try to escape to safety. Yuliati & Hastuti, (2019) suggested that women are more likely to be victims when a disaster occurs because they have a domestic role that is to take care of the house and children so that when a disaster occurs it is difficult to carry out rescue or to propel themselves to safety.

### Reasons for High Vulnerabilities of Women

There are so many reasons why women are vulnerable to disasters. These include but not limited to:

- Limited resources
- Limited access to education: Women were more likely than men to be vulnerable and seriously affected by a disaster due to their limited access to information and resources necessary to prepare for risk assessment, response, recovery and adverse effects of a disaster (Adger, 2006; Agarwal, 2003; Blaikie *et al*, 1994; Demetriades & Esplen, 2008; Dentron, 2002; Kumar, -range, 2001; Fothergill, 1996; McGregor, 2010; Terry, 2009)
- Lack of income
- Decision making limited to men
- Traditional and cultural taboos

### Why Women should be involved in Disaster Mitigation

Women inevitably need to be considered as important partners in disaster mitigation. There are many reasons why this ought to be the case yet they have been sidelined in most communities. It cannot be contested that women the world over have resilience and skills untapped in coping with crises that befall communities. Women are thus a critical resource that society has failed to sufficiently exploit for the betterment of mankind. Women have uncontested understanding of societal challenges which is an indicator that they ought to be involved at all levels of decision making. Since they are the most affected and inflicted there is no rationale in sidelining them. This explains why some women have advanced the

view that, '*there is nothing for us without us.*' Women are believed to understand societal issues more since they are domiciled within the communities more and longer than the men in the majority of cases. If this is anything to go by they would contribute more meaningfully to any interventions contemplated or adopted by communities.

Women are undeniably enterprising and engage in a lot of activities to supplement the household income or livelihoods. With this background they could surely suggest interventions that in their view are conveniently enduring since they are also the implementers of the interventions. It cannot be challenged the world over blue prints or interventions conceived fail at the implementation stage. This could be explained by the view that those who decide are not in the majority of cases are not the ones affected, hence come up with interventions that do not work. Those that are affected will then realize that the prescriptions advanced do not work. Society is however denying women this crucial role yet that is the only way that could ensure that the women are not perpetual victims of disasters within communities.

Empirical evidence has shown that in most communities the women are the head of families since the men would have migrated to the towns in search of better fortunes. The women are therefore the majority within communities. The men live them to face the vagaries and thorns that come with rural living. It is thus reasonable and the just thing to do to ensure that women occupy strategic positions in any committees meant to address the societal challenges.

Women are the ones society expects to take care of those that are sick, injured, aged, disabled and the children yet the same society denies them the right to decide on issues that affect them. This lack of hygiene is not anything that progressive communities should smile at in this age and time. Women should now occupy their space. When this happens the world will never be what it is today. Women have a soft spot in their hearts and would always seek to come up with interventions that are functional than their male counterparts who are known to be driven by greedy and self-centeredness.

Women have been known to possess a lot of technical and traditional knowledge that would help communities at various episodes of their lives, particularly after disasters. Communities have denied them this latitude yet transformation of society cannot be possible without the participation of women. Women should not be looked at as 'the other' but as an equal partner in disaster mitigation. Women have a lot to contribute before during and after the occurrence of disasters. For that reason their role should not be impeded yet there are minds that look at women as, '*mere items at the disposal of women.*' (Michael Henchard in the Mayor of Casterbridge by Thomas Hardy). It cannot be challenged that, inclusive recovery efforts following disasters should encompass the needs and vision of various groups especially women, youth, elderly and people with disabilities. In view of this reality, the planning methods of recovery programmes need to respond to diverse needs of disaster affected communities and improve their local governance.

Women within African communities are known to have the knowledge that relates to preservation of food to use during difficult seasons. In Sudan for instance, women are known to have invented 90 different dried and fermented foods.

It cannot be challenged that African women within communities have so much knowledge about traditional medicines. This rare skill should then qualify them to be involved in decision making yet gender inequality is pronounced in Africa and beyond. Disasters require

sensitivity and involvement of all sectors of the society, women included. In this regard Sikandar, R (2020) argues that gender is an essential consideration for disaster response and buoyancy. Women and children are the most vulnerable groups especially the ones in rural areas where the rate of susceptibility increases due to delayed response during disasters. This view was equally collaborated by both the men and women in this study.

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