

Re-thinking Disaster Management Using a Gendered Lens

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Key Messages

- Research shows women are more likely to die, and die younger, in disasters than men. The reasons for this need urgent attention.
- Our qualitative research with 11 women involved in recoveries from Cyclone Gabrielle, the 2016 Kaikōura quakes, and Covid-19 show women are not always vulnerable victims. Instead, they are often juggling vital domestic, formal, and informal work that sustains and reproduces society.
- This juggling act gives women distinctive meta-competencies: multi-tasking, relationship building, and empathy. Rather than optimising for one thing, these women practised “horizontal efficiency” (killing lots of birds with one stone).
- These ‘superpowers’ – honed through social reproduction work – are well-suited for an emerging reframing of ‘disasters’ as complex, cascading and compounding.

Recommendations

- Women doing social reproduction work have developed skills that support community-based disaster management across Prevention (Reduction)/Preparedness (Readiness)/Response and Recovery (PPRR/the 4Rs). Seek them out in the places they frequent, listen carefully, and support the work they already do. Consider pre-event contracts (like those for ‘hard infrastructure’ providers, utilities and lifelines) for community-based social services operated by women.
- Adopt gender mainstreaming in policy, risk-based planning and infrastructure provision.

Background

It has been argued that too much disaster risk analysis is overly focused on hazards at the expense of social processes of organisation, including gender. This speaks to the concept of social reproduction; that is, the labour many women undertake to reproduce society over generations and across domestic, formal employment and voluntary spheres.

Both the places in which women’s social reproduction work takes place (e.g. public and community services, healthcare, childcare, elderly care)), and the infrastructure that supports their work tends to be more vulnerable to both austerity budgeting and disasters. Research shows natural disasters kill more women than men and kill them at a younger age.¹ This happens even in wealthier countries: on average, 75 percent of those hospitalised after snowstorms in Sweden were women.² This was attributed to the order in which roads and pavements were cleared of snow. In the 24 hours following the 2011 Christchurch earthquake, 65 percent of fatalities were women.³ This was because the buildings in which they work had lower rents but were substandard. The low visibility of their social reproduction work, combined with their increased susceptibility, can paint women as vulnerable victims; however, this is a partial picture needing further exploration. The research presented here is based on qualitative interviews undertaken in Aotearoa/New Zealand with 11 women/wāhine involved in disaster recovery initiatives in their communities 1 year after Cyclone Gabrielle hit the east coast of the North Island (2023), 8 years after the Kaikōura earthquakes (2016), and both during and after the Covid-19 pandemic (2020).

*From July 1, 2025, Manaaki Whenua – Landcare Research is operating as a group of Bioeconomy Science Institute

Key findings

Our research highlights important, but often overlooked, distinctions between inequality (i.e. unequal pay for doing the same work) and inequity (i.e. unequal recompense for doing work of similar value). Poor recognition of social reproduction work was highlighted in the term 'tea-towel-tanga'.

We grew up on the marae so when we have a tangihanga [funeral] we mobilise, and we know the tea-towel tanga – all those with the tea towels. They mobilise and they start the process (Tina, Cyclone Gabrielle).

Our interviewees were often doing risk reduction and recovery work in their domestic life, their day jobs (in iwi or public services such as health and education, retail and hospitality) or unpaid, after-hours community work. Some were deeply involved in high-level strategic work, balancing leadership and governance roles with hands-on family and community-based work.

Their tea-towel-tanga in domestic, formal employment and voluntary spaces is a critical training ground for 'meta-competencies' that serve well in disaster risk reduction and recovery.

It is mostly women in social services. We're already sitting in those spaces, serving our communities. And that's good because when it came to the Cyclone, we were already there, up and running (Moana, Cyclone Gabrielle).

We are used to [disasters] because we are working with our most vulnerable anyway, every day. We get to see it – not on the same scale as after the cyclone – but we get to see it every day. The only difference between the Cyclone and Covid was that there was less traffic during Covid which made it easier for us to get to those extra vulnerable... (Julie, Cyclone Gabrielle).

This kind of social reproduction work developed 'meta-competencies' that provide critical training for disaster management. These included whanaungatanga/relationship building, empathy, multitasking, and horizontal efficiency (killing lots of birds with one stone).

Whakawhanaungatanga – building relationships

Our interviewees highlighted the importance of building and maintaining relationships as part of their social reproduction work, noting how these connected apparently different 'jobs' nurtured important connections.

Some of those kids, their only meal is at kura when they have the lunches. So, we needed to identify who those whānau were so we could get there while the schools are closed. So, we did that quite quickly because 3 of our whānau at work are on boards of those kura so it was easy to get to those homes (Marama, Cyclone Gabrielle).

'Relationships' are not easy to measure, nor do they necessarily have objective Key Performance Indicators. This obscures the value and visibility of social reproduction work.

*It's difficult to keep track of everyone that comes through the door and how we've helped them. Success for each person is so individual. The reason they've come through the door is so individual. So, if someone gets their learner licence, that's something concrete that you can tick a box. But I just got a message from *** saying she's passed her driver's licence, which is really cool. But what's more important? That she passed or that she feels connected enough to me to say, "Hey, I passed!" (Vivian, Kaikōura).*

Women who are proficient relationship builders may not have formal roles in disaster management, but they may know how to get things done.

We wanted the school to reopen to give parents a break and take the pressure off, but we had nothing to put in lunches. So, again, I put out a social media post saying, "This is what we would like to do". And a coffee lady from the showgrounds messaged me. She said, "I am the coffee lady at the showgrounds" and she was the one taking coffee to all the official Civil Defence groups camped down at the showgrounds. She didn't have an official role. But she took my list of things we needed, and those things came up on a Unimog that same afternoon (Sharon, Cyclone Gabrielle).

Empathy and care-full recoveries

While the interviewees had observed men showing empathy, they also reflected on some potential gender differences that show up in crises.

Why is it that women do these sorts of things and men do those sorts of things? I think women have empathy. I think women have a closer relationship to our own feelings. We think if this person can't even say out loud, "My toilet's broken, I need someone to fix my toilet. Please." You need to be able to put yourself in that person's shoes. I'm fixing it because I'm helping this person rather than I'm fixing it because it's a thing that needs fixing. So females have more empathy... It is that we help the

person by getting someone to fix the thing. It's a means to an end, not the end in itself (Tori, Kaikōura).

Men will go out see what's needed there, but [they don't see] more is needed over here. Men see black and white, women see grey. Like they say they need this, but I could see that they also need this and that, whereas the man will just hear what they are told. Females look [at] black, white, and grey. We look at the bigger picture. We look more further afield, not just at the now (Jo, Cyclone Gabrielle).

Multi-tasking, triaging, pivoting in uncertainty

Juggling domestic, formal, and informal community work demanded immense flexibility, adaptability and resourcefulness. The balancing act meant it was difficult to optimise for one thing; rather these women were adept at horizontal efficiency.

In this place multi-tasking is so important because it's open door and you don't know who's coming in and why they're coming in. You know, you have

your day structured, and it goes out the window with the first person who pops in. But you still have to accomplish what's on the list. So you are consistently stopping that to pick up that, to go back to that, but also dealing with something over there. This place requires you to multi-task, but also to be prepared to jump in and support the rest of the team (Vivian, Kaikōura).

With us in the community we had all the flexibility in the world, but CDEM [Civil Defence Emergency Management], they have to stay within a boundary. ... They stick to their guidelines, and they can only stick to the straight line. But the world is all crooked! (Julie, Cyclone Gabrielle).

The last quotation shows how these meta-competencies involving relationships, empathy and multitasking – honed through social reproduction work – are well suited for an emerging reframing of 'disasters' as complex, cascading and compounding events. These findings challenge neat distinctions between Prevention (Reduction), Preparedness (Readiness), Response and Recovery (i.e. PRRR/the 4Rs) because social reproductive work cuts across domestic, informal and formal spheres, and is often crisis driven even in 'peacetime'.



Photos: Te Kupenga Hauora

Figure 1. Te Kupenga Hauora worked with Manawa Ora Mirimiri post-cyclone to lift hinengaro (mind), tinana (body) and wairua (soul).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Recognise and respect those women undertaking social reproduction work who are already looking after our most vulnerable people. They are already doing disaster management all day, every day in their homes, jobs and communities. They are 'the first to respond, last to leave' and have developed skills that support community-based disaster management across all PRRR/the 4Rs.

Rather than re-inventing the wheel, explore ways to support the work they are already doing – and will continue to do – when the official 'response' is over.

2. Recognise that women are not a 'largely untapped resource', contrary to what some have suggested (e.g. IUCN [2015, p.1]).⁴ Rather, they are often 'tapped out', overworked and underpaid. They are too busy and too tired to take part in formal pre-disaster readiness or risk reduction, or post-disaster Build Back Better (BBB) initiatives.

Go to them: Undertake consultation, collaboration and engagement activities with women as they do their social reproduction work, in the places they frequent, like libraries, kids' sports games, marae, kura, supermarkets.

3. Engage, empower, and enable women doing social reproduction work by whakawhanaungatanga/building relationships – and support their work before major events happen.

Consider developing pre-disaster contracts (like those for 'hard infrastructure' providers, utilities and lifelines) for community-based social services operated by women who care for vulnerable groups including, but not limited to, Māori healthcare, women's refuge, foodbanks, early child-care centres, aged care facilities, etc.

4. Ensure that the places women do their tea-towel-tanga, and the infrastructure they use, are safe(r). This can be done through gender mainstreaming during policy, planning, and infrastructure provision.

Strengthening and protecting the infrastructure women use can be promoted by design (seismic strengthening, lighting, proximity to other services such as bus-stops, etc) and risk-based planning. Risk-based planning can use 'sensitivity classes' in subdivision and land-use consenting to mitigate risk for schools, rest-homes, and other services used by or operated by women.

Further reading

<https://www.landcareresearch.co.nz/news/gender-and-man-made-disasters-the-role-of-women-in-recovery>

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Photo: Sally Cockerill-Neveall

Cyclone Chick Project

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³ Ardagh, M., Standring, S., Deely, J. and Johnston, D. (2013). A sex disparity among earthquake victims. *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness*, 10(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1017/dmp.2015.81>

⁴ International Union for the Conservation of Nature [IUCN]. (2015). Gender and climate change: strengthening climate action by promoting gender equality. Accessed 11 Nov 2024 from: https://iucn.org/sites/default/files/2022-07/gender_and_climate_change_issues_brief_cop21_04122015.pdf