

OPINION

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The terrible news from Kerala and Kodagu district has galvanized relief efforts, online and offline. The receding waters have revealed great devastation and reconstruction must commence almost on a blank page. What will we write on that page? Every disaster presents an opportunity to rewrite the kind of development we choose and also social and gender relations. Sadly, disasters remain mostly missed opportunities.

Disasters impact men, women and others differently. Men and boys are usually physically able to save themselves—working outside, they hear the warnings; they know how to swim or climb, and are unfettered by clothing; they tend to move alone. Women are raised to be less physically adventurous, so climbing up a tree or swimming may not seem an option, especially with children in tow. When homes are destroyed, living and sleeping in the open increases the vulnerability for women and girls, and also non-binary persons, who are invisible and overlooked in the provision of assistance.

In providing relief, we typically address men as representative of their family or community. This is slowly changing among the larger relief organizations, and adding sanitary napkins to relief packages seems to convey that our relief work is gender-sensitive. However, women's bodies are only the beginning of their gendered experience, and this is true of other gender identities too. What happens after the relief phase? The distribution of sanitary napkins does not absolve us of the responsibility to rebuild in ways that are sensitive, inclusive and transformative.

Swayam Shikshan Prayog's well-documented work post-Latur, Kutch and tsunami, as well as in other locations, offers an illustration. They involved village women in redesigning homes, trained them to do the rebuilding and mentored them to negotiate permissions and loans with government officials. Consequently, they have left a cadre of skilled (re)builders (masons, carpenters) in each instance who are confident community leaders. These women have since moved around the country training other women when their areas have been hit by disaster.

Feminists dream that post-disaster reconstruction everywhere will be similarly transformative for gender relations. However, for it to be gender-sensitive at least, we must understand the following issues clearly.

Who actually lives there? Unconsciously, we imagine communities as including "men and others". But in some places, the men do not actually live there at all. They are off working elsewhere and repatriating their earnings. It is women who, in fact, provide early warning of disasters, create the conditions for resilience, prepare for the event by moving families and valuables out of danger, come back to see what can be salvaged, clean, and then rebuild what is destroyed. Projects planned anticipating that men will perform this or that task are doomed. The men are not there, and the women are not invited.

What do people need? When packaging relief materials, we send what we think is essential based on our habits and also our assessment of what people will accept in their desperation. This continues when we look at reconstruction projects—for instance, houses with asbestos roofs in areas where the sun beats down. While no one expects extended needs assessments at moments like this one, some effort must be made to ascertain what the community thinks are its most urgent needs—short and long-term.

But when we do this, who are we listening to? We tend to chat up a few older men somewhere

as authoritative spokespersons. This is not good enough. Even an informal needs assessment, or news reporting, for that matter, must involve all genders and age groups.

Disasters do not mean that children do not need a place to play or a well-lit space to resume their studies. Women might want more than a set of pots and pans. They may have been entrepreneurs—running a store, or a workshop, or even marketing fish or vegetables. They may need credit to restart their businesses. Men, women and non-binary persons would all be vulnerable to post-traumatic stress disorder and need some counselling. If we allow one group to speak for everyone, our reconstruction projects are simply impositions of our will.

It is important that post-disaster projects do not perpetuate gender stereotypes—or worse, export our stereotypes to an area that does not have them. Relief material, physical rebuilding, livelihood projects and emergency credit can all do this. Are we giving girls only sanitary napkins and not the cycles they lost? Are we building new homes with toilets, water supply and a little privacy, or is replicating the old good enough? Are our livelihood projects sending erstwhile women entrepreneurs in a hot place to knit sweaters in a factory? Post-disaster, are we burdening women with community mobilization work without relieving them of household responsibilities? Are we reaching out to women as we offer credit lines or replace lost property papers?

This is the bottom line: Sensitive and inclusive reconstruction processes build community resilience. If you ignore most people in your zeal, you are building one wall and calling it a house—but it is not one. Gender-blind reconstruction that reinforces inequality is not reconstruction; it is a second disaster.

Swarna Rajagopalan is a political scientist and the founder of Prajnya which works in the area of gender equality.

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