Environmental injustices result from the unequal geographical distribution of risks, hazards and disasters worldwide. In fact, reported disaster frequency has doubled every ten years since 1960 and approximately 90% of the disaster-related losses are incurred by developing countries (UN/ISDR, 2004). Furthermore, several economic studies have indeed shown that human and/or economic losses associated with disasters are less frequent in countries with higher levels of wealth, education, more open economies, more complete financial systems and more democratic institutions (Kahn, 2005).

Within countries, disaster risks are not equally distributed. In this regard, it is crucial to evidence that the impact of disasters is increased by socially determined differences in roles and responsibilities of women and men and inequalities between them in access to resources and decision-making power (Enarson and Meyreles, 2004). In fact, women and children are particularly affected by disasters (WHO, 2002). In addition to the general effects of natural hazards and lack of health care, women are vulnerable to reproductive and sexual health problems, and increased rates of sexual and domestic violence during disasters. Moreover, gender roles dictate that women become the primary caretakers for those affected by disasters – including children, the injured and sick, and the elderly – substantially increasing their emotional and material work load (Fordham and Ketteridge, 1998). Women’s vulnerability is further increased by the loss of men and/or livelihoods, especially when a male head of household has died and the women must provide for their families (Bradshaw, 2004). Post-disaster stress symptoms are often but not universally reported more frequently by women than men (Richter and Flowers, 2008).

The environmental justice framework of analysis is instrumental to stress that an accurate study of disasters should not focus only on their ‘naturalness’ (as in the phrase ‘natural disasters’), otherwise these phenomena will be purely presented as unavoidable extreme physical events. Since disasters “occur in a political space” (Cohen and Werker, 2008: 795) they create both losers and winners and who loses and who wins is not random but a result of an unequal distribution of risks and access to power, wealth and resources.

The above mentioned aspects are particularly relevant in disaster response. In fact, during the distribution of relief aid and compensation, government agencies and NGOs sometimes found themselves unwittingly reinforcing customs that marginalized women. In many instances, relief workers relied upon traditional village councils, to help distribute aid. But village leaders often resist delivering aid directly to women, following their customary style of working through male heads of households.

The environmental justice paradigm provides a useful analytical tool for examining and explaining why women are disproportionately affected by disasters. This framework brings to the surface the ethical and political questions of “who gets what, why, and how much” and why the needs of people marginalized by gender are left behind before and after disasters strike.
References


