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2015 Nepal Earthquake lessons for COVID-19: How to put women at the forefront of the crisis and recovery

*5 years on from the devastating earthquake in Nepal, **Kripa Basnyat (LSE)** and **Dipti Tamang (Darjeeling Government College in West Bengal, India)** explain the fundamental role Nepalese women played in the country's response to the natural disaster, and what lessons we can learn when confronting the country's response to current COVID-19 global epidemic.*

Five years ago today, Nepal was hit by a 7.6 magnitude earthquake that claimed 8,790 lives and injured 22,300 more. It is estimated that eight million people, almost one-third of Nepal's population, were affected. The experience of the earthquake and its aftershocks was traumatic; an unreal time when uncertainty and fear ruled our lives. In Covid-19, we face an event equally traumatic, and one which this time we share with the world. We do not yet know how many lives the pandemic will claim. What we can see, however, is what these two disasters have in common: the gendered nature of our government's responses so far.

Like natural disasters, "all epidemics have gendered effects," says Clare Wenham, associate professor of global health policy at LSE. "[The problem that is no one had talked about it, and policymakers weren't aware.](#)" The 2015 earthquake is a case in point, and an event that should have allowed the Nepali government to learn from its mistakes and do better next time. Following the natural disaster, the government drew harsh criticism for its inefficiency and its lack of transparency and accessibility in providing basic necessities, undertaking relief efforts and channeling comprehensive social security benefits to the most marginalised, namely those at the bottom of our society's class ladder. The consequences were even more disastrous for women.

Today, a similar scenario is unfolding in the government's response to the COVID-19 crisis, which has shone a spotlight on how it is still failing to take questions of gender and class into account. In 2015, coordinating organisations were able to draw on support from the broader population in providing relief and aid to those in the 14 most severely affected districts. In the current crisis, in contrast, the government lockdown has restricted people's mobility, and thus it is difficult for most of us to offer mutual aid to our most badly affected fellow Nepalis, namely the informal workers [walking back home on foot](#) from Kathmandu, or stranded on the Indo-Nepal border or in [Gulf countries](#).

Epidemics and natural disasters do not discriminate against individuals and communities – unlike governments and their policies. United Nations reports show that women, who make up 51 per cent of the population of Nepal, were the most adversely affected group during and after the 2015 earthquake. Similarly, women and other vulnerable sections of society are bound to be adversely affected by the current crisis. The photographic and video images of the more than [1,100 hundred Nepali migrant workers stranded across the Indo-Nepal border](#), and of the fourteen men who risked their lives to cross the Mahakali river, brought the plight of those worst affected by the pandemic into our homes via traditional and social media. The mass exodus out of Kathmandu included pregnant women and lactating mothers with small children, walking on foot, many without even slippers on their feet. The government's "pick and choose" response revealed its classist nature, and its ideas of "who belongs" as citizens. While stranded upper-class Nepali citizens were prioritised by being chartered back from Wuhan and provided with quarantine facilities, lower-class [stranded migrant workers](#) were left to fend for themselves. The lack of empathy shown by our elected representatives towards our least advantaged fellow Nepalis is shocking and alarming.

The 1,800 kilometre open border between India and Nepal has long been a route for poorer Nepalis to seek better work opportunities. Environmental and economic hardships in the Mahakali river basin have spurred most men in the region to seek work in the Indian states of Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh across the border, and send back remittances to their families. In the absence of so many male members of these communities, women have found new ways to survive and create spaces of empowerment for themselves, and to engage in [community development programmes](#). In doing so, they have found their voices, emerging as community leaders who participate and engage with decision-making at the community level.

The reverse migration of male migrant workers back to their villages during the coronavirus pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns has severe implications for women in the Mahakali basin, with the loss of income in the form of remittances curtailing their ability to provide for the household. Additionally, men's return will mean the reversal of current gender regimes, with women being driven out of open spaces and back to the confines of their houses and their household chores and duties. Moreover, we are already seeing an increase in gender-based violence, mainly domestic violence, compounding the difficulties faced by women's in addition to rising poverty, hunger and an economic crisis.

Engendering Policies: The Way forward

Five years on, the shortcomings of the Nepali government's response to the 2015 earthquake are clear to all. It must show that it has learned from its mistakes and commit to more humanitarian, transparent and inclusive policies to address the consequences of COVID-19. Despite being vulnerable and severely affected by the earthquake's impacts, in 2015 Nepali [women were in the forefront of rebuilding communities](#) and mitigating the impact of the disaster. They became frontrunners, aided by a range of non-state actors, in rebuilding their communities and the nation. Afterward, women of the lowest strata went on to be engaged as community workers in numerous community development programmes, particularly in disaster-prone areas where the majority of men migrate to seek work. [Women in the Mahakali basin](#), for example, have grown as community leaders, taking on new roles and responsibilities and building skills in disaster management through such programmes. In the current crisis, the government must remember how women were key to Nepal's recovery and resilience post-2015. It must include women in decision-making and planning structures at local levels, with the aim of gender-inclusive policies becoming the norm. Women must also be reflected, consulted and addressed by state programmes for welfare and socio-economic policy designed to mitigate the impacts of coronavirus pandemic.

The World Bank has approved a fast-track \$29 million [COVID-19 Emergency Response and Health Systems Preparedness Project](#) to help Nepal prevent, detect and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and strengthen its public health preparedness. This support is critical – but the government must match that financial commitment with a commitment to act. As in India, however, Nepal's government has thus far failed to be clear about its proposals or set out its plans to support the huge section of the population that is directly impacted by the crisis.

To an even greater degree than the devastating 2015 earthquake, the COVID-19 crisis is a once-in-a-lifetime event that will be unprecedented in its impact. Therefore, the response of the government must also be unprecedented, in scale and scope, if it is to address and mitigate the socio-economic and humanitarian consequences. As a matter of urgency, it must undertake the following steps.

1. The government must ensure accountability, transparency and accessibility in terms of allocation of resources to marginalised groups scattered in different parts of the country, without conditionalities.
2. The government must accept and incorporate the [Feminist and Queer charter of demands](#) presented to the Minister of Defence Ishwar Pokhrel, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizen and also with all the chief ministers of the provinces on April 20, 2020 by the women's rights network^[1] with support from UN Women, so that responses to COVID-19 do not magnify or exacerbate existing inequalities and vulnerabilities.
3. Millions of migrant workers in the Gulf states have [lost their jobs and are returning to Nepal](#), which will result in plummeting remittances. A clear strategy should be developed to absorb the returnee migrant workers through expanding entrepreneurial development projects. Relief in public borrowing should be made more accessible to women and further promote the engagement of women in these spaces.
4. In designing relief packages and financial aid for the post-pandemic reconstruction, the government must pay special attention to addressing the embedded social hierarchies of class, caste and gender. The [quality of relief packages](#) should follow human rights standards.
5. The government must ensure that proper mechanisms are put into place to channel funds to small and medium enterprises at the grassroots, and draw on women's experience in community initiatives.
6. Immediate attention is needed to providing [pregnant and lactating mothers with access to health services](#) and providing services to survivors of domestic violence and those suffering from poor mental health.

The socio-economic fallout of the COVID-19 epidemic is bound to be worse than the economic crisis that began in 2008, or the devastation brought by the earthquake in 2015. In the weeks and months to come, the countless Nepali families relying upon income from migration across borders or working in agriculture are bound to experience the most severe impacts of the crisis – and of any inadequacies in our government’s response to it. In the aftermath of 2015, women have shown their leadership at multiple levels in the community, challenging stereotypes, confronting patriarchal, social and economic obstacles and emerging as strong pillars of society in Nepal. In engendering its responses to the current disaster, Nepal’s government, acting on behalf of the whole nation, has the opportunity to show that it has learned the lessons of the past, and committed to building a stronger, fairer and more resilient country for all.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured Image: Nepal – Earthquake Lessons. Credit: [Water and Sanitation Collaborative Council, Creative Commons, Flickr](#).