

*‘I am alone, no husband no children, so I’m worried about where will I live. I am wondering how much will it cost me to bring down my half-damaged house, and then what will I build the new house with’.*  
Female focus group participant, Samari, Nuwakot<sup>1</sup>



Photo Credit... Oxfam

## 1. Introduction

On April 25, 2015, Nepal was struck by a 7.6 magnitude earthquake and by an equally powerful aftershock on May 12. Over 8,700 people died, half women; 23,500 were injured, and over 8 million were affected across 31 districts<sup>2</sup>, 53% of them women. More than 117,000 people were displaced, of whom 26,000 remained so a year later. Loss of and damage to physical infrastructure was severe, and over 850,000 houses were destroyed or damaged.<sup>3</sup> Of these, 26% belonged to women heads of households. In addition, 375 out of 446 health facilities, covering 1.4 million women and girls of reproductive age were affected. An estimated 93,000 among them were pregnant when the earthquake struck.<sup>4</sup>

The existing deep gender inequality in Nepal meant that women and single women in particular, suffered most in the aftermath of the earthquake. They were also least able to be heard, and to receive adequate assistance in the response.

**As the reconstruction and recovery efforts have started, there is a powerful imperative and a new opportunity to create the much needed better and more just conditions for single women affected by the earthquake in Nepal.**

- 1 BUILDING BACK RIGHT: Ensuring Equality in Land Rights and Reconstruction. April 2016. Oxfam, Humanitarian Accountability Monitoring Initiative, Himalayan Conservation Group, the National Network of Community Disaster Management Committees Nepal, and Community Self-Reliance Centre Nepal.
- 2 Government of Nepal. (2015). Nepal Earthquake 2015: Post Disaster Needs Assessment Executive Summary. [http://icnr2015.mof.gov.np/uploaded/PDNA\\_Executive\\_Summary\\_new.pdf](http://icnr2015.mof.gov.np/uploaded/PDNA_Executive_Summary_new.pdf)
- 3 Government of Nepal. (2015). Nepal Earthquake 2015: Post Disaster Needs Assessment Executive Summary. [http://icnr2015.mof.gov.np/uploaded/PDNA\\_Executive\\_Summary\\_new.pdf](http://icnr2015.mof.gov.np/uploaded/PDNA_Executive_Summary_new.pdf)
- 4 DIGNITY FIRST UNFPA NEPAL 12 MONTH EARTHQUAKE REPORT April 2016

## 2. Women in Nepal<sup>5</sup>



Photo Credit... Oxfam

The Government of Nepal has instituted legal reforms to eliminate gender discrimination, including gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) policies and gender-responsive budgeting (GRB). As a result, some progress has been made; for example, the country has reached gender parity in primary education, and maternal mortality rate has declined from 539 to 170 between 1996 and 2013.

But the position of women remains marked by acute poverty, inequality and marginalization, especially for single women, and those of 'lower castes'. Women are entirely responsible for the care of children and home. A patriarchal mindset dominates, as the statement of a male official<sup>6</sup> shows: 'We [men] work all day and when we return home we are hungry and they have to cook for us. It is our culture, thus, women should stay at home.'

Violence against women and girls is pervasive: according to the 2011 Nepal Demographic Health Survey among the women of ages between 15-49, one in 5 experiences domestic violence at least once in her life. 41% of women still get married before they are 18, despite a legal age of marriage at 20.

Women mostly work in subsistence agriculture and in the informal sector. Mens' migration has substantially increased the number of women in agriculture, and has contributed to an increase in female-headed households from 15% in 2001 to 26% in 2011.<sup>7</sup> However, women are much less likely than men to inherit land, to have land registered in their name, or obtain documentation to prove their entitlement. Before the earthquake, over 25% of Nepal's population was landless or land poor, the majority were Dalits, Janajatis, and women.<sup>8</sup>

The 2015 Constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender,<sup>9</sup> and establishes equal property rights for spouses.<sup>10</sup> However, the Civil Code of Nepal (the *Muluki Ain*) limits the inheritance rights of daughters to those who are unmarried, assuming that married daughters have access to property through their husband. This reflects patriarchal norms that discriminate against single women and female-headed households. The National Strategy for Disaster Risk Management of 2009 recognises that women are particularly vulnerable to disasters, and states that all programmes should be gender-sensitive. However, it does not lay out an implementation strategy to accomplish these aims.

<sup>5</sup> Much of the country context information in this section is from: UNFPA 2015. PROGRESS OF WOMEN IN NEPAL (1995-2015) SUBSTANTIVE EQUALITY: Non-negotiable.

<sup>6</sup> From the research on which this document is based.

<sup>7</sup> Government of Nepal Central Bureau of Statistics; Population Census Report 2011; <http://cbs.gov.np/image/data/Population/National%20Report/National%20Report.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> CSRC et al (2009) Land and Land Tenure Security in Nepal. <http://csrcnepal.org/uploads/publication/y6nhKRavwrhsbVf2AeClUdDUKcd-M7F8.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Constitution of Nepal (2015), art. 18. <http://www.inseconline.org/linkedfile/Bill%20of%20Constitution%202015%20Sept.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. art. 38(6).

# 3. The earthquake's impact on single women



Disasters aggravate vulnerabilities of ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, older people, and of women. In fact, women, constitute a disproportionately high percentage of disaster fatalities.<sup>11</sup> Those who survive, experience threats to personal security; unmet reproductive needs and inadequate sanitary facilities; exclusion from decision making, and problems in receiving assistance for lack of human resources, information and personal documents.<sup>12</sup> They are also more likely than men to be psychologically affected. Resources to meet basic needs, including water, food, cash and fuel, are scarce in disasters, and culture dictates that husbands, children, and in-laws are prioritized, so it is women who do without. Single women<sup>13</sup> are most exposed to violence and abuse and, are the sole providers for their families, they are more likely than others to be deprived.

Awareness of women's vulnerability should not hide the fact that they are effective first responders, often responsible for taking care of their families in an emergency, leading children and animals to safety, and playing important roles in risk assessments and early warning.

It is not surprising that women in Nepal, as in most parts of the world, are disproportionately vulnerable during and after disasters, including the 2015 earthquake. This document summarised the findings of a survey of 495 single women-headed households. Qualitative and quantitative tools and techniques were used in the survey. Focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIs) were conducted with single women household heads, local officials, and representatives of non-governmental organizations in the districts of Gorkha, Dhading, Sindhupalchowk, Nuwakot, Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur.<sup>14</sup>

As a start, women's participation in the earthquake relief and reconstruction was poor: only 22.4% respondents in the research had been consulted at any time. One male official rationalised the lack of women's participation this way: *'We ask women to participate but they are reluctant to. They say they cannot speak or read and write. They want to give thumbprints rather than signatures.'*

11 Neumayer, E., & Plumper, T. (2007). The Gendered Nature of Natural Disasters: The Impact of Catastrophic Events on the Gender Gap in Life Expectancy, 1981–2002. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 551–566.  
12 Halvorson, J. P. (2007). The 2005 Kashmir Earthquake: A Perspective on Women's Experiences. *Mountain Research and Development*, 296–301.  
13 Single women in Nepal are defined as unmarried women over 35; widowed, separated and divorced women; and women with migrant or missing husbands. SINGLE WOMEN: Light On Their Plight, <http://www.spotlightnepal.com/News/Article/SINGLE-WOMEN-Light-On-Their-Plight>, issue Name : Vol: 06 No. -16 Feb. 08- 2013 (Magh 26, 2069).  
14 The research was commissioned by Women for Human Rights (WHR) and Oxfam, and carried out in 2015 by the Social Science Baha. The document also relies on information from the Briefing Paper BUILDING BACK RIGHT: Ensuring equality in land rights and reconstruction in Nepal, produced in April 2016 by Oxfam in partnership with the Humanitarian Accountability Monitoring Initiative, Himalayan Conservation Group, the National Network of Community Disaster Management Committees Nepal, and Community Self-Reliance Centre Nepal.



Disasters destroy means of livelihood and increases work, and this was the case for two-thirds of the single women in the research. For most, workload had at least initially increased because they had more childcare duties (due to closure of schools), and the task of clearing debris. The earthquake did not alter the fact that the women were the breadwinners in almost 60% of surveyed households. Most of them had been farmers; others had generated incomes through weaving, running small retail shops, rearing livestock, or as daily wage labourers. In the majority of cases, the tremors or landslides had swept off agricultural land, destroyed premises or buried tools. <sup>15</sup> Many respondents said that they were trying to start new occupations, but skills and material were needed to make them viable.



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Lack of livelihood normally reduces access to food. However, for over 60% of the women food intake remained the same, and for 20% it increased. It is possible that for some, food intake could have increased through relief supplies, for others it could be due to the common but unsustainable practice of selling assets to survive during crises.

Disaster-affected families often lose personal documents necessary to access relief, and rebuild their lives. In Kathmandu as much as 24.4% of the women covered by the research had lost property papers, and over 49% citizenship certificates. Replacement of different papers was inconsistent and slow: at the time of the research in some districts only 42.2% of the lost identity cards had been replaced. Matters can be more complex. Many women in any case lack citizenship and marriage



Photo Credit... Oxfam

<sup>15</sup> Dhading and Lalitpur Rapid Assessment Report WHR and The Asia Foundation, August 2015



certificates, and even birth certificates, because of lack of information, or limited direct access to services (which are mediated by husbands and other men in the household). If a land ownership certificate is in the name of a man who has migrated, his wife must prove her marriage in order to access support in emergencies. But if the marriage certificate is lost (or the marriage never registered) a community verification system has to be used, open to abuse, and relying on the skills of local representatives.

Houses have been destroyed or damaged by the earthquake, leaving most (92%) of the women and their families in tents and under tarpaulins. Respondents said: *‘Our houses are cracked and we fear that the continuous aftershocks may destroy them completely.’* Only few (16.2%) had assistance to clear house rubble. A majority received a Government grant for building a temporary shelter, or material such as tents and zinc sheets; many, however, were severely hampered in their efforts by the fact that they were alone in carrying out house repairs. Feeling of insecurity and anxiety living in such precarious and insecure accommodation were widespread.

Most women had a strong desire to relocate, driven by fear of further tremors, lack of relief assistance, or by conditions of scarcity in temporary resettlements that, with social networks disrupted, undermine people’s capacities to mitigate the effect of the crisis through mutual aid. However, women can lose out in resettlements, as they tend to rely on local and common property for livelihoods and food security, and have not guarantee to have new land or property registered in their name. Research<sup>16</sup> has shown that women would be greatly in favour of mandatory Joint Land Registration (JLR) for resettlements sites, but there are indications that legal changes, especially if referring to original land, would need to be accompanied by education and awareness-raising programmes on the benefits of JLR to women and the wider community.



16 Oxfam, the Humanitarian Accountability Monitoring Initiative, Himalayan Conservation Group, the National Network of Community Disaster Management Committees Nepal, and Community Self-Reliance Centre Nepal April 2016, BUILDING BACK RIGHT: Ensuring equality in land rights and reconstruction in Nepal.

Drinking water facilities were badly damaged by the earthquake, though to different extents. In Gorkha, where the damage was relatively low (21%), single women had to travel half an hour or more and queue for up to three hours to get just a few litres of water, though it was the rainy season. Sanitation facilities fared considerably worse, with 43% of women reporting damage to their toilets. Though most (except in one district, where 30.2% used the outdoors) had toilet facilities of some sort, temporary, public or in the house of a neighbour, some participants in Nuwakot remarked that sewers were so filled with rubble that sewage overflowed onto roads, fly infestation was rife, and the incidence of diarrhoea and fever among children had risen.

Only a minority (23.0%) of respondents reported receiving hygiene kits, and a large proportion (60%) of menstruating women, found it hard to get feminine hygiene products. In addition, while women in far west Nepal often practice *chaupati*, i.e. live separately from their family during menstruation, only one in ten were segregated, raising concerns about their privacy, dignity, and security after the earthquake. Single women are more likely to be stigmatised when menstrual taboos are not observed.

Damage to public health facilities was considerable, and those that existed had no medicines other than paracetamol tablets. Women felt that in some cases, physical damage to health posts made them too scary to go inside them. Psychologically, fear and anxiety were common, but treatment absent. Eyewitnesses to the earthquake were haunted by memories and felt sad and depressed, all symptoms suggesting post-traumatic stress disorder.

Anecdotal evidence in the research areas suggests that single women and their children were often mistreated and stigmatized, and even made the targets of violence and trafficking<sup>17</sup>. In addition, like in other parts of the world, a woman is considered worthless and polluted in Nepal once she becomes a widow. Along with shock and trauma of losing a husband, widowhood also increases sexual vulnerability and discrimination.<sup>18</sup>

## 4. Conclusions and recommendations

There is no question that the 2015 earthquake had a devastating impact on the 495 single women-headed households studied: nearly all continued to live in temporary shelters offering little protection and comfort, and have no access to health services; two-fifths lost toilets, at least a fifth suffered disruptions in their supplies of drinking water, and from considerable psychological distress. Work load has increased, and many essential personal papers were lost.

Despite this, single women were very rarely consulted in any way, and the support they have received was minimal: shelter, livelihood and resettlements needs were broadly ignored, regardless of the fact that the majority of the women were the sole breadwinners for their households. The fact that over 60% of menstruating women had trouble accessing feminine hygiene products testifies to the inadequacy of the response.

**The fact that single women have managed on their own testifies to their resilience, but also underscores the deep-seated gender discrimination. Thus Nepal needs to recognise and make use of the resourcefulness of single women, and respond to their immediate and strategic needs.**

<sup>17</sup> Nationwide, 12% of women reported having experienced physical and sexual violence since the earthquake (IASC, 2015).

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.spotlightnepal.com/News/Article/SINGLE-WOMEN-Light-On-Their-Plight>; Issue Name: Vol: 06 No. -16 Feb. 08- 2013 (Magh 26, 2069)





Photo Credit: Oxfam

A decentralised and community-based approach would provide single women with more opportunities to contribute to disaster preparedness and responses, so that they can be and be seen as useful resources, and agents for change. Other actions essential to address the needs and rights of single women in the current and future post-disaster recovery and reconstruction situations, and to improve the effectiveness of future relief efforts include:

**The active participation of** single women in planning and implementing of disaster preparedness, response and recovery programmes, and of resettlement plans. The fair and active representation of women’s in district disaster response committees and the central reconstruction committee should be mandatory.

**Gender-sensitive risk, vulnerability and needs assessment:** Under the leadership of the government, all development and humanitarian organizations should always conduct gender-sensitive post-disaster assessments to identify context-specific needs and priorities of women of different social and ethnic group, age and marital status. This should inform the planning and implementing of disaster risk reduction, disaster management, and rehabilitation and reconstruction programmes.

**Effectiveness and coordination of recovery initiatives:** Discrepancies in relief distribution have meant that at times single women were left out. Appropriate mechanisms – involving coordination among multiple stakeholders - should be put in place to guarantee that single women/ female head of households are prioritised in reconstruction and recovery process, including the replacement of personal documents.

**Strengthening livelihood and assets ownership:** The government and the development and humanitarian organizations should build the economic capacity, and increase livelihood options and

ownership of assets of single women, to reduce their vulnerability to disasters, boost their resilience, and redress the prevailing economic discrimination. A start could be made by implementing cash-for-work and cash-for-training programmes, including those imparting non-traditional skills.

**Promoting women’s registration on land ownership certificates** and other forms of land tenure documentation are key. The Government of Nepal should ensure that Joint Land Ownership registration is mandatory for all new integrated settlement sites, and strongly encouraged for duplicate documentation or rebuilding on existing land, accompanied by community level information dissemination, and awareness raising activities. Policies that discriminate against the property rights of single women should be reformed.

**WASH, health and hygiene:** Gender-specific needs related to health and hygiene, particularly reproductive and menstrual health, must be satisfied. WASH programmes should prioritise segregated toilets and bathing facilities to protect the privacy, safety and health of women, and suitable waste management solutions to improve community cleanliness. The government must act on the fact that the mental health concerns of women differ from those of men, and they include fears associated with pervasive gender-based violence. It should address those, as well as earthquake-induced psychological problems by providing psycho-social counselling services.

**GESI Strategies and Gender-responsive budgeting:** At a broader level the government should develop a national strategy for the advancement of women in disasters, supported by action plans and resources. As part of this, a **special emergency fund** should be established for vulnerable and marginalized single women who are so often left out of essential support in natural disasters and other crises. Gender-responsive budgeting and monitoring should be applied to disaster risk reduction and management policies and programmes so that adequate resources are channelled to meet the needs of single women, transparently and accountably. The media should be mobilised to develop awareness of disaster related gender-based vulnerabilities, and to make information about disaster preparedness and management readily accessible to single women.



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