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## **Grassroots responses to violence against women and girls in post-earthquake Nepal: lessons from the field**

**Kay Standing, Sara Parker and Sapana Bista**

*VAWG, including sexual violence, can increase after natural disasters. This article provides evidence from Nepal, a country where progress has been made on gender equality but VAWG remains an endemic problem. Research since the earthquakes involving women activists and NGOs indicates the continuing challenges facing disaster response efforts to prevent VAWG and protect women. Women and girls in camps and temporary shelters feel threatened and insecure due to the risk of violence and lack of privacy. Humanitarian aid, health care and disaster responses can VAWG to be challenged and safe spaces for women and girls to be established. This article draws on the views of grassroots women's activists in Nepal and shares lessons for development and humanitarian workers about steps to be taken to challenge and minimise VAWG in emergency situations.*

**Key words:** Nepal, Earthquake, Violence against women and girls, disaster response, humanitarian response, grassroots women's activism

### **Introduction**

On 25 April 2015, an earthquake of 7.8 magnitude hit Nepal, followed by a second on 12 May of 7.3 magnitude (GoN 2015; p1). Its epicentre was in Gorkha regions 80 km from the capital, Kathmandu. At least 8,891 were killed, a further 22,493 people were injured (GoN 2015, 1) and an estimated 605,250 houses were destroyed with over 288,250 badly damaged by earth tremors, landslides and floods (UNOCHA 2015).

There is a range of data on the impact of the earthquake in Nepal from both Government and Non-Government agencies. One of the most useful sources is from the Inter-Cluster Gender Task Force (ICGTF) formed 5 days after the earthquake which has played a pivotal role in ensuring data about the aftermath is disaggregated by sex, age and other factors (ICGTF 2015). The ICGTF (2015; p1) estimates that in the 14 districts most affected [1] by the first earthquake were home to approximately 2,710,239 women (50.5 per cent of total population) and that an estimated 26.5 per cent of the households affected were female-headed households. In the Gorkha district, the epicentre of the earthquake, the ratio of households headed by women was as high as one-third, as many men from this region are serving in the Gurkha army or working abroad as migrant labourers. Approximately 55 per cent of the casualties (4,726) were identified as female, and an estimated 3.2 million women have been affected by protection concerns (including 126,000 pregnant women, 21,000 of whom were in their final trimester) (ICGTF 2015, 1).

Women and girls are disproportionately disadvantaged in humanitarian crises due to gender inequality, which shapes and deepens vulnerability to hazards and constrains their responses, even while their duties as workers, wives and mothers remain and conditions

worsen (Chew & Ramdas 2005). More specifically, Lin Chew and Kavita Ramdas (2005) highlight a number of studies showing that sexual violence can increase dramatically after natural disasters. The ICGTF in Nepal estimated that, in May 2015, approximately 40,000 women were thought to be at immediate risk of sexual and gender-based violence (ICGTF 2015, 1).

In this article, we draw on first-hand accounts on social media and traditional qualitative research methods to understand the experiences of grassroots women as first responders to the earthquake in Nepal. We show how women's involvement in emergency responses, and ongoing humanitarian work, can challenge violence against women and girls (VAWG).

There is a growing literature documenting the gendered experiences of disasters, and questioning stereotypes about women's experiences. Women and girls continue to be widely seen as 'victims' of disasters, but gender-specific aspects of their experiences have only recently made it onto the agenda of humanitarian workers. Until the 1990s, sexual health and VAWG was not prioritized in responses to natural disasters; instead priorities were seen as water, food and shelter. However, research and activism has made the socially-constructed vulnerabilities of women and girls in disaster situations more visible. One strand of this focuses on women's gendered risk of dying in natural disasters [2], and a second strand focuses on the gendered experience of survival during and after the disaster.

The research we discuss here contributes to knowledge on this literature, providing data from Nepal in the aftermath of the earthquake. We focus on how women's activism can improve disaster responses to reduce VAWG after natural disasters. Whilst women and girls are stereotypically positioned as victims and vulnerable in times of crisis, there has been less focus on women's and girls' agency and accomplishments in the face of disasters, and the crucial role women play as first responders in natural disasters. The central role of grassroots women's leadership post-disaster needs to be understood more clearly by the humanitarian community, governments and policy makers, and is discussed here in the context of the earthquakes in Nepal.

Given our longstanding research links with organisations working in the field of gender and development in Nepal we decided to research women's agency and activism around VAWG in the aftermath of the earthquake [3]. We began by following developments and responses which were documented through the use of social media, and in particular through Facebook. We noted how accounts of immediate relief efforts, concentrating on saving lives and minimising the impact of the earthquake, were soon replaced with stories of support and mutual assistance from within the affected communities, including local people and local organisations who rose to the challenge of helping their fellow citizens. Within a few weeks, however, incidents of VAWG were being reported, and longer-term impacts of the earthquake on the vulnerability of women and girls were becoming evident.

We subsequently gathered supplementary information through formal and informal discussions with NGOs in Nepal, through email and phone interviews, personal correspondence, and face to face interviews in Nepal. In total 20 interviews took place between October 2015 and Jan 2016. Informants' anonymity was important given the sensitive nature of the discussions, and key informants included representatives from police, International and national NGOS and participants working directly in temporary shelters in the field of VAW. Key informants were selected using convenience sampling in and around the Kathmandu Valley, one of the regions affected by the earthquake. We interacted with many other NGOS and women's organisations and groups across other regions of Nepal in the course of the research. One of the authors also participated in events during the 16 days action against VAWG, met with a range of agencies working on the field of gender and human rights and attended the launch of the UN Report which informs this article.

In the next section, we provide some context regarding gender inequality and VAWG in Nepal. We then move on to present some of the information gathered during our research, about women's views and perspectives, local immediate responses, and longer-term strategies, with particular reference to VAWG incidence and strategies to respond to it. Finally, we offer conclusions and recommendations.

### **VAWG in Nepal**

VAWG in the aftermath of conflict and natural disasters needs to be seen and understood within the context of gender based violence in society in 'usual' time. For those women and girls who survive natural disasters, gender inequality shapes and amplifies their vulnerability to VAWG. Sarah Fisher (2010) argues that post-disaster VAWG is a manifestation of women's pre-existing vulnerability to violence, which is exacerbated at times of disaster, along with existing social and gender based inequalities.

Renu Rajbhandari and Yifat Susskind (2015, no page number) assert that:

*In better times, women and girls can be guarded by the community bonds and state systems strengthened by women's civil society organizing, such as legal protections and feminist public education that shifts community norms away from violence. When a disaster like an earthquake hits, those systems are shaken too.*

Even before the earthquake, Nepal was characterized by persistent poverty, slow economic growth and high levels of gender inequality. The country is ranked 145<sup>th</sup> on the Human Development Index (UNDP 2015), and despite economic growth absolute inequalities continue to persist. Nepal is socially, culturally and ethnically diverse, with a population of over 27.47m, with 125 caste/ethnic groups recorded at the last census, 123 languages and ten religions (CBoSN 2015, 4). Although caste-based legal restrictions have been abolished many discriminatory attitudes and practices persist to the detriment of Dalits, indigenous ethnic groups and women. Women within the Dalit population are seen as the most

marginalised, given that the Dalit population has relatively higher levels of poverty (46% of the population) (DFID 2011, 1).

Nepal's ten-year-long civil war (1996-2006) has led to a new identity politics emerging amongst women and marginalised castes and ethnic groups, however, poverty and exclusion remain, especially in rural areas (Parker et al 2014). Nepal has made impressive moves towards a more gender equitable society despite its recent period of political instability.

During the decade of civil war, there is strong evidence that VAWG increased in Nepal. Contemporary reports indicated that women and girls were targeted by both Maoists and state officials for rape and sexual violence (Watchlist 2005). The absence of men, often forced into migration or fleeing due to violence, increased women's vulnerability to stranger rape, abduction and trafficking. The conflict also affected the ability of survivors of VAWG to get support. These issues remain live for many women in the present day. DfID (2011) has stated that sexual violence against displaced women and girls remains an under-reported aspect of conflict and post-conflict life in Nepal. Women, children and the elderly living in remote areas, are considered to be significantly marginalised and excluded, and the most affected by conflict (Parker et al 2014).

A UN Women report (2015a), covering the 20 years between 1995 and 2015, highlighted Nepal's progress and the gaps in the implementation of the gender equality agenda. It represents an evidence-based, updated record of the situation of women in Nepal covering violence against women and women's human rights and concludes that much more remains to be done [4]. VAWG is endemic in Nepal. Domestic violence, marital rape, dowry-related violence, child marriage, polygamy, female infanticide, witchcraft accusations, forced prostitution and the trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation are particular problems in (Standing et al. 2006, UN 2013).

There is an overall lack of data on VAWG in Nepal, making it difficult to assess the scale and extent of the problem, and where data is available it is often not consistent and under reporting is common (UN, 2013). Official figures from the National Demographic Health Survey 2011 states that as many as one in every five women experience physical violence in Nepal and one in 10 experiences sexual violence. Nearly one in 10 adolescents' aged 15-19 experience physical violence during pregnancy (MOHP 2012, 236-237). Most often the violence is perpetrated by someone a woman knows, including her husband or another male family member. Nepal has the highest rates of child marriage and intimate partner violence in South Asia. One source cites 45 per cent of Nepali women as suffering two or more types of sexual coercion in their lifetime (Ramesh Adhikari and Jyotsna Tamang 2010, 5).

A DfID (2011, 1) report suggests that 75 per cent of women experience gender based violence in their lifetime in Nepal. Another study, published by the Government of Nepal in

2012, states that 48 per cent of Nepali women report to having experienced some form of gender based violence in their life time and 28 per cent had experienced violence between 2012 and 2013; emotional violence (40.4 per cent) was most commonly reported, followed by physical violence (26.8 per cent), sexual violence (15.3 per cent) and economic abuse/violence (8 per cent) (GoN 2012, ix). The report further stated that 'women from Dalit or religious minority groups, widowed, divorced or separated women, and women living in the hill regions, were significantly more likely to report lifetime experiences of violence' (GoN 2012, xii).

Although the Government has made commitments to ensuring that laws and policies on VAWG are in place, change is slow to occur, in part because of the culture of silence surrounding VAWG, which makes it notoriously hard to quantify. Police records show that on average between 2007 and 2013 only 234 cases of rape and 114 cases of sex trafficking were reported. These low figures are in stark contrast to the UN and local NGOs' estimates. The UN suggests that between 10,000 and 15,000 girls a year are trafficked from Nepal (UN 2012, no page number). A local NGO, Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC) recorded 793 cases of domestic violence, 200 cases of social violence, 256 cases of rape, 42 cases of attempt to rape, 163 cases of murder and 22 cases of attempt to murder, 32 cases of trafficking and 55 cases of sexual violence between April 2012 and 2013 (WOREC, 2016; no page number).

It is not common for women to seek assistance from any source for violence they have experienced, WOREC found that 77 per cent have never sought help and 64 per cent have never told anyone (WOREC 2016, no page number).

### **Gendered experiences of the earthquake in Nepal**

At the 69th session of the United Nations General Assembly, 13 May 2015, the member states emphasised the importance of integrating a gender perspective in the Nepal earthquake response, as well as ensuring women take an active and equal role in all relevant aspects related to disaster management and rehabilitation (Inter-Cluster Gender Task Force 2015, 1).

The problems facing women and girls in the aftermath of the earthquake were complex and their scale was immense. Many survivors of the earthquake were displaced and police estimated around 100,000 people had to move into temporary camps which could be located far from their homes depending on the location of the earthquake (BBC News 2015). Some 'camps' were more a cluster of tents erected by family and community members, whilst others were more formal and linked to the larger development agencies. It is estimated that around 34,000 people lived in makeshift government camps in the Kathmandu Valley alone (OXFAM, 2016).

The majority of these displaced people were living among strangers in the camps. Life in temporary camps can be hazardous, as women and girls face risks in everyday survival, using unsegregated or otherwise unsuitable toilet and washing facilities, or undertaking certain roles, such as gathering firewood. They are at greater risk of forms of VAWG already present in their communities, and of additional forms which arise as a result of the crisis. These include sexual violence, trafficking, child marriage, exploitation and abuse. The breakdown of civil society and law and order, displacement of family and community structures, violent and dominant male behaviour, and the bringing together of disparate socio-ethnic groups and castes in camps means perpetrators often abuse with impunity. Female-headed households may also be disadvantaged in terms of salvaging materials and rebuilding/repairing homes.

The next sections focus on the responses we learned of during our research. We draw on women's perspectives and perceptions gathered from many different sources, as outlined earlier.

### **Local-level responses by women and young people**

Across Nepal, one of the most notable factors was the nature and size of the local-level, civil society response to the earthquakes - including the extent to which the younger generations mobilised to meet immediate relief needs. They did this in many forms, including sharing information and insights on social media, which can lead to small but critical local-level interventions by organisations and groups close to the ground.

A feature was the focus on VAWG among local women's rights activists. Within Nepal, there is a growing movement of gender-based organisations working at all levels of society. The then-Nepali Prime Minister, Madhav Kumar Nepal, declared 2010 the year to end VAWG, and supported a 16 day campaign entitled 'Activists Against Gender Violence' in December 2010. This movement has grown in the years since, and serves to bring together gender focused agencies in Nepal on an annual basis. It is these agencies who provide the most up-to-date accurate insight into VAWG in Nepal.

Before the earthquake, training and awareness-raising on trafficking and gender-based violence was the most common form of work for women's rights groups and organisations. However, immediately after the first earthquake a network of on the ground grassroots women activists shifted to meeting immediate practical needs, delivering food aid and health kits, and establishing safe spaces for women, health care and emergency aid.

Women's groups quickly identified that the needs of women and girls in many communities were not being met, and drew on their experience of community-based organising and networks to organise relief and support – an experience written up for the e-zine and discussion forum, *Open Democracy* (Rajbhandari and Susskind, 2015). High levels of bureaucracy, and in particular, the establishment of a Prime Minister's fund through which to channel relief, as a means to monitor aid and goods flowing into country, were seen by

many (both on social media and in subsequent interviews) as slowing down the response. The fact that the National Reconstruction Authority, responsible for rebuilding and disbursing aid, took six months to be established is testament to the political tensions and slow response to the disaster within Nepal (Rai and Shrestha 2016).

In contrast, smaller organisations and groups were in a stronger position to listen to local needs and respond at the grassroots level. Immediately after the earthquakes, women's rights organisations visited the affected areas to do assessment of needs, as with other organisations young people and the youth wing were active in responding - as one female informant from a women's rights organisation said,

*we couldn't wait for relief (for the big international aid agencies) a rapid response was needed, there was no time to wait. [The] youth wing took control, two days after first earthquake over 100 youths mobilised to assess needs and provide immediate support.*

Lora Moftah (2015) reports that access to earthquake relief aid was unevenly distributed based on caste, ethnic and gender. Access for Dalits was of particular concern. The International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) documented how widespread and inequitable access to these resources has been in the wake of the disaster, with 80 per cent of Dalits surveyed reporting feeling that there had been wilful negligence in providing relief and support to their communities. Sixty-five per cent also said they had been unable to access rescue services and shelter on time.

Learning from previous crises in Nepal and worldwide informed the responses at different levels, and to different degrees. In the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes, at least 500 women's groups in 14 districts mobilised to raise awareness and advocate on issues around VAWG (OCHA, 2105. P5). Five days after the first earthquake, the Inter-Cluster Gender Working Group (IGWG) was established. Chaired by UN Women, this is a multi-stakeholder forum, with over 60 members from INGOs, NGOs and smaller grassroots organisations [5].

Other networks, such as the National Network Against Domestic Violence (established in 2009), mapped the work of 36 Kathmandu-based NGOS working in different parts of Nepal on different aspects of gender and women's rights, to ascertain what actions they might take to support grassroots women to respond to the crisis.

It is important for women to distribute relief aid to ensure that women get sufficient food for themselves as well as their families [6]. When women are seen as leaders in humanitarian work and on the frontline it gives other women and girls confidence to come forward and report abuse, and also avoid being forced into exploitation or trafficking, for example in return for food.



## **Issues and responses**

The two main issues in relation to women and girls being at risk following the earthquake was that of being trafficked and also increased vulnerability to VAWG, due to being displaced from their homes. Initially in the media attention focused on the risk of trafficking.

### ***Increased risk of trafficking***

Our research indicates that trafficking of women and girls increased in the period after the earthquakes, and that woman and girls in camps and temporary shelters felt threatened and insecure due to the risk of violence and lack of privacy. This is supported by a report from the Guardian in May 2015 which notes that local originations were getting reports of 'people pretending to go and look for people' with the view to trafficking them (Burke 2015, 1).

A number of NGOs working in the field of gender such as Maiti Nepal, WOREC, and Women for Human Rights (WHR) all reported that the chaos that followed after the earthquake led to an increase in trafficking. By June 2015, there were 245 cases of rescued children reported though there is no record of the gender of these children. UNICEF Nepal report that between April's earthquakes and the end of September, its partners intercepted 793 people at risk of trafficking at Nepal's border with India. Of these, over half (455), were women and girls (UNICEF 2015). In addition, the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs reports that there was threefold increase in cases of rescued children along the Indian border alone between 25 April and 10 October 2015 (Tiwary 2015). However given the illegality of trafficking, exact data on those at risk and trafficked is difficult to obtain.

Trafficking rose because children became separated from their families, and the loss of livelihoods and worsening living conditions after the earthquakes for many families made it easier for traffickers to convince parents to give up their children by promising them education, food and a better life. It is important to note here that young boys are also at risk of trafficking and data needs to be collected on gender and age of those at risk and rescued. Deeptiman Tiwary (2015) reports that most of the victims recovered in India were minors with girls and boys in equal numbers.

### ***Increased Violence Against Women and Girls***

The gender and humanitarian response literature tells us that women and girls living in temporary camps after the earthquake are particularly at risk from VAWG. Often separated from their families and the other women in their community, women felt isolated, homeless and helpless. The overall feeling from those we spoke to was summarised by one male activist interviewed felt that:

*men abuse because think they can get away with it, because women are isolated or mentally afraid.*

One women's rights activist reported that:

*after the earthquake women experienced rape, mental torture, abuse and harassment, there are many examples and reports of this, but not to police or authorities*

One report notes from the Kavre district, one of the worst earthquake affected areas that services and special care are needed to mitigate men's increased alcohol consumption, to respond to a rise in violence against women in temporary shelters (IWFA). Adolescent and young girls most often reported feeling insecure in camps due to risk of violence and lack of privacy. A female key informant from a women's rights organisation in Kathmandu argued that:

*Women and girls after the earthquake are even further down marginalised line. Girls are sometimes harassed seeking shelter with other families, if they are separated from their family it is a big problem, inappropriate touching was a big problem outside tents and inappropriate comments, girls are frightened to say anything, [they are] threatened with more harm if they say anything"*

In an online interview, a female case worker from Gorkha district gave the example of a:

*14 year old girl who was looking after her two younger siblings was raped by her close relative while her widow mother had gone to collect relief materials 3 hours walk away from their village. A local case worker suggested reporting it to the police but mother refused it as she was afraid of further abuse if they report it.*

A year after the earthquake there are still reports of women and girls feeling threatened and being abused in camps as reported by Yesoda Adhikari (2016). The report provides examples of drunk males and strangers are entering the camps leaving people feeling insecure. Most parents with daughters become restless as the night approaches, as anyone can enter their temporary shelters (tents) easily at night. Many boys and drunk men hang around the tents teasing girls. A teenage girl who lives in a tent with her parents said, my mum and dad sleep in turn to ensure my safety at night'. A widow who lives in a tent in a temporary shelter said:

*men that come here in the evening are not nice. Sometimes I see even male police officers joining the boys and teasing girls. The language they use is filthy. I don't sleep during the night as I am alone and don't know who will enter my tent at night*

Another felt:

*The government has not done anything so far to move these people from tents. Most of the people who live in tents now are the ones who lost everything during earthquake and now struggling to save their daughters' dignity.*

### ***Self-defence training***

In order to support women living in camps and reduce the fear and risk of VAWG, one immediate response to violence on the part of women's organisations, both local grassroots organisations and larger INGOs, was to provide self-defence training for women and girls in the temporary camps. A key informant from the police recalled that:

*We knew that after the Haiti and Japan earthquakes rape increased, the incidence of molestation was high, we needed to do something [...] to enable women to protect themselves.*

This particular initiative began after concerns about an increase in reports of sexual assault and sexual harassment in temporary camps, and a concern camps would be targeted by traffickers. Police training, teaching women and girls judo and karate and how to kick and punch, began in camps in the Boudha area of Kathmandu and expanded into other areas, and were delivered by a range of organisations, including the army, and private security companies, as well as NGOS.

A prominent women's rights activist and social worker interviewed felt that self-defence training in the camps was generally seen as a positive initiative, to raise women's confidence:

*These safety trainings seem productive as the women and girls manage to learn something new to boost their confidence and felt empowered, and at the same time they got to share their experiences and laughed about it which helped them to get out of the trauma a little more.*

However, there was mixed feedback from respondents in our research as to who provided the most effective service. We interviewed one local man who was heavily involved in mobilising young people, male and female, in the immediate rebuilding process after the earthquake. He was also a father, who runs a local youth club and he felt that:

*the training provided by the Armed Police Force was the most effective one as they were highly respected during earthquake recovery period and when there was a presence of police teaching girls and women to fight back, it really sent out the signals to not to mess with our girls and women.*

However, whilst an increased police presence was one recommendation for women's safety in camps, made by some women's rights activists on social media, others were more critical of this as a solution. One female respondent noted that:

*The police also provided, but only self-defence, not psychological support, many do not trust the police, they were abusive, there are reports of the police abusing [women], it also may make the situation more dangerous and escalate the violence. There is little you can do in one days training, six months on situation is still there.*

Whilst there was recognition that self-defence training was empowering for women, and something which challenged traditional gender norms, there was also the awareness that it may lead to 'victim blaming' rather than focusing on the perpetrators of violence. In an interview, the female programme leader of a local NGO stated:

*Maybe there were some good outcomes from these safety trainings to young girls, at least to their confidence but this is not enough. We need to be training the male to respect women, to not to abuse them – not at the time of crisis or at any other time.*

One of the most important issues raised by respondents was the pivotal role that safer spaces play in supporting women. This arose in regards to the self-defence training, where one female respondent commented in an interview that in the camp training sessions:

*Sometimes men want to come and watch, you need to create safe space for women only.*

### ***Provision of safe spaces***

Safe spaces for women were essential not only to provide privacy and security, but also counselling and psycho-social support, legal services and referral services. For example, WOREC established 10 safe spaces in Dhading and Ghorka districts, where women and girls could access psychosocial support, referral services, and midwives trained to work with women who had suffered forms of VAWG, working with other NGOs and INGOs, for example UN Women, UNFPA and grassroots women's organisations .

Women also needed safe spaces if they were able to remain in their homes or close by, outside the camps. In communities which had not been displaced and where the community was still present and largely intact, including the local *Aama Samuha* (local mothers/women's groups) in attempts to providing spaces for women to meet seems from our research to be of central importance, as every village community has one. Women's rights organisations were able to work in this way in a number of districts as they have close links to the local women's groups which are a central part of Nepali society. By utilising these networks social mobilisers in women's centres were able to distribute dignity kits and food aid enabling women to talk about their experiences. These spaces provided women with the means to report incidents of VAWG, including trafficking. However in a study of 82 sites CCCM Cluster (2016; 9) report that only 11% have designated safe/social places for women.

### ***Using social media to combat VAWG***

Communication via mobile phones, internet and Facebook proved invaluable in the post-earthquake response in terms of reporting the impact of the earthquake, especially in remote regions. UNDP (2015; no page) reports that 82.5 per cent of the population have mobile phone subscriptions and 15.4 per cent of the population are internet users. According to Anil Aakar (2014) there are over 4.1 million (14.5 per cent of the total

population) Facebook users in Nepal (2.8m male and 1.3m female) with over 3 million people accessing Facebook by a mobile device. This is an increase of nearly 3.25m since 2011 (Aakar 2014, 1). Access to mobile devices and social media proved to be invaluable with a 'register yourself as safe' facility set up within a few days. However, mobile phones did not always work and Internet connectivity cannot be counted on.

Social media provided a vital way of preventing and protecting women and girls against VAWG by enabling NGOs to get their message out to a wide population. It was used for reporting assaults and providing support and information. In such contexts, transmitting how to stay safe messages through radio channels was also important as many remote villagers without electricity still use battery-operated radios. One organisation, Nidarr, is currently developing an app to provide a secure, private platform for users to report gender based violence and maximize the safety of vulnerable groups, women, girls, and children in the community (Nidarr 2016). This app will enable victims to message or ring for help or to record or video the incidents as evidence.

Social media also enabled flash appeals to be made by a range of agencies including UN Women and other agencies to help raise awareness of the gendered impacts of the earthquake and to ensure gender needs were taken into consideration. Within a week of the earthquake, UN Women (2015b) reported that USD\$ 11.3 million was needed in order to reach 3.2 million women and children whose protection was at risk in Nepal.

### ***The importance of integrating VAWG into sanitation***

Such significant steps toward responding to gender concerns are put into perspective by some extraordinary omissions, which show a very poor record on providing facilities to meet women's basic needs in ways which prevent hardship, discomfort, and protect against VAWG and abuses. In May 2015 91 per cent of displaced camps did not have gender sensitive or separate toilet and washing facilities, which leaves women and girls at further risk (IGTF, 2105). CCCM Cluster (2016, 9) reports that a year on from the earthquake 73 per cent still lacked gender-segregated toilets and washing facilities. This is a shocking statistic in light of the gender and humanitarian expertise available, and the critical importance of ensuring water and hygiene provision is designed and implemented in a gender-sensitive way (Anand 2010).

Several organisations commented that many international NGOs were vocal in advocating for women's rights and gender equality, but they did not work together in the wake of the earthquake to find out women's own concerns. For the future, strategy co-ordination and co-operation is key.

This is not to say that there was not some significant small-scale successes regarding sanitation and hygiene. There was a lack of basic feminine hygiene products available to

displaced women, and taboos around menstruation in Nepal mean women and girls may be reluctant to ask health workers for supplies, putting them at risk of violence and abuse. Beliefs around menstruation mean women and girls who are menstruating are often seen as 'unclean' and to avoid 'polluting' the household, they may have to sleep outside of the tent they are living in until their period is over. This puts women and girls at further risk of abuse. One NGO worker stated:

*If menstruating, women may have to stay outside the tent, they are asked to leave because they are thought to be unclean, this can leave them vulnerable to touching and abuse.*

A large number of groups distributed culturally-appropriate sanitary pads, and UN Women 'dignity kits' to women in temporary camps (UNFPA 2015).

### ***Training healthcare providers to respond to VAWG and sexual violence***

Health care is critical for survivors of VAWG and sexual violence, but it sometimes needs to come from everyday sources in order to feel accessible to women. In Nepal, women mentioned the importance of ensuring normal health care providers are able to treat women survivors. The shame, stigma, and pressure from communities and families often prevent survivors from seeking any help from specialist support, let alone reporting abuse to the police or legal services. Going to a doctor or nurse, however, or the mother's group, does not carry the same associations, and if trained, health care providers can often uncover abuse, and follow up with good treatment and referrals, even when women do not mention it explicitly.

In the words of one health worker interviewed:

*All training and support [on VAWG] have to be accessible to every remote village women population and with existing support groups, such as the mothers' group in each village.*

### ***Combatting trafficking: the role of the police and the army***

In our research, many spokespeople for organisations praised the initial response to the earthquakes by the police and army. Some activist organisations such as Maiti Nepal and WOREC gave examples of how they had worked with police to strengthen responses to trafficking. Examples included distributing flyers raising awareness of the dangers of trafficking, participating in radio broadcasts, and working alongside increased numbers of police and anti-trafficking officers at borders to identify girls in danger and reduce their vulnerability, but they felt a greater police presence and more regular police patrols were needed in the camps. The presence of female police officers was seen as positive.

One of our key informants, a female representative from UN Women felt that,

*the presence of female police officers around the camps and our borders meant that the girls could find them easy to approach than the male officers.*

Further a 22 year old girl who took safety training stated that she felt safe around female police officers because she felt they understood what the girls in the camp were going through. She noted that the female officers,

*were easy to talk to and taught us how to stay safe and how to fight back.*

This highlights the importance of listening to women's experiences and the need to further explore the role and need for women to be at the heart of humanitarian and emergency responses to these and other disasters. It also highlights the need to explore the role as women not solely as victims of disasters but as active agents in the response to emergencies.

### **Lessons from the research**

Lessons can be drawn from the research on combating VAWG in Nepal and more widely in natural disasters. There are many practical lessons and insights to be taken from the research, but here we focus on the need to draw on local grassroots leadership and ending discrimination.

To combat VAWG in Nepal, in the current moment with a history of a decade of conflict, a new constitution and the recent earthquake, grassroots women's leaders need to be included in policy-making at all levels. The new constitution was adopted in October 2015, making Nepal a federal state. However, women's organisations argue the new constitution continues to discriminate against Nepalese women, in what is already a patriarchal society (Pant and Standing 2011). Protests from some socio-ethnic groups claiming discrimination and lack of rights in the constitution, and a blockade of the Indian border, are continuing to affect Nepal's ability to respond to the reconstruction needs after the earthquake (Haviland 2015).

As one WOREC organiser said in an interview:

*Nepal's community of grassroots women organizers is ready to offer their leadership, and to help guarantee that reconstruction policies meet the needs of the most marginalized. Their demands centre on a crucial point that: women must not be seen only as recipients of aid but also as meaningful participants and leaders in reconstituting their country.*

In particular, in crises where time is of the essence in getting rapid yet effective and appropriate responses to the needs of women and girls, it is important to augment the national and international responses by drawing on the expert knowledge that grassroots organisations have. Many lessons come from the voices of women involved in the Nepal crisis – some on VAWG, and others on other issues. For example, WOREC compiled core guidelines for government and relief aid agencies on gender sensitive humanitarian aid work to ensure needs of women and children were met and called for Gender, Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and trafficking indicators to be integrated into the Displacement Tracking

Matrix developed by the International Organisation for Migration in their role as the Lead Agency in the Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCM) Cluster (CCCM Cluster 2016) [6] as well as the distribution of a GBV service directory.

Local-level activism is often able to advance the interests of particular groups whose identity is complex, adding to the 'gender and humanitarian' focus of larger organisations which focus on women's rights in many different contexts. There is a need to understand the complexities of women's situation, and how this varies by age, caste, marital status and other issues of intersectionality. In Nepal, Dalit women, single women, and widows, are already discriminated against and marginalised. In contrast, a focus on the undifferentiated categories, 'women' and 'girls' is common in 'development establishment' literature and policy documentation, reinforced at the policy-making level with the Department for Women and Children in Nepal. By grouping these together the stereotypical preconceptions of 'women and children and being vulnerable' is reinforced. While it is important to focus on these groups to get widespread change to advance rights, meeting the needs of specific individuals and small groups in an emergency depends on a more sophisticated and tailor-made response, involving consultation and learning.

Instead, a gender and life-cycle analysis needs to be undertaken to focus on the young women and adolescent girls who are particularly vulnerable to particular forms of VAWG, including trafficking. Their vulnerability is not 'natural', but social in origin. It is clear from the Nepal experience that natural disasters can have a disproportionate role on young women and adolescent girls, particularly those under the age of 20, who form over half the population in many disaster settings throughout the developing world (UNFPA 2015).

To prevent VAWG and protect women, men also need to be a focus of attention. Challenging violence starts with changing the attitudes and beliefs of perpetrators. The Inter-Cluster Gender Working Group reported that men widowed in the earthquake needed support to deal with their new roles as single parents. This 'gender swapping' of roles can contribute to challenging generational patterns of gender discrimination.

Local women's rights activists also have a critical role in the planning and provision of infrastructure to prevent VAWG. Safe spaces are central to supporting women in emergencies. Local providers and grassroots organisations who have knowledge and understanding of both the geography and socio-cultural background of women in that area.

Another message that comes through clearly from the research is that there is a need to educate and raise awareness of men about VAWG so they can become activists on women's rights and anti-VAWG. Many of the NGOs have worked with the victims but failed to work with the perpetrators. Many of the immediate responses, such as self-defence training and safe spaces, whilst important initiatives, are in themselves problematic, as the focus becomes on women to protect themselves, rather than men not to rape and abuse. The psychological impacts of disaster on men as well as women must be addressed, with many



agencies reporting rises in male drinking and alcoholism. However, it is important not to confuse triggers such as stress and alcohol with the underlying 'rationale' for VAWG in a male-controlled society. Violence is used as a means to assert power and control over women in both disaster and 'usual' times.

Strategies involving perpetrators to redress VAWG is required, and this must come from local knowledge and initiatives, one male interviewee stated:

*It was shameful that we had to beg to outsiders for the safety of our women and daughters.*

Finally, governments, national and international NGOs need to work alongside local-level organisations to ensure high-quality large-scale yet appropriate responses to VAWG and gender inequality in times of crisis. This means attention to improving interagency working, both by agencies in Nepal and the wider INGO community. There are currently 234 INGOs and 39759 NGOs with more than 2,300 NGOs focusing on services targeted to women and girls (SWC 2015, no page number).

An example of the success of leadership training can be seen in the fact that in January 2016 a group 150 of women, representing 2,200 grassroots women from projects in rural Nepal supported by Oxfam's leadership programme in Nepal, 'made history' by marching to the office of the Prime Minister and President, and presenting a memorandum calling for an end to violence against women and girls and the strengthening of women's status in Nepal. This action demonstrates the important role women's organisations are playing in Nepal in tackling violence against women and girls and the need for cooperation between government non-governmental agencies along with civil society.

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## **Endnotes**

[1] The 14 most affected districts include Bhaktapur, Dhading, Dolakha, Gorkha, Kavrepalanchowk, Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Nuwakot, Ramechhap, Rasuwa, Sindhupalchowk, Makawanpur, Sindhuli and Okhaldhunga

[2] There is evidence from earlier South Asian natural disasters in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India (Chew and Ramdas 2005) that women suffer higher mortality rates than men.

[3] Two of the authors have several years' engagement in gender and development research in Nepal, working with British and Nepalese institutions. Since 2006, they have been involved in a UK Government-funded Development Partnerships in Higher Education (DeLPHE) link that resulted in connections to a range of stakeholders working in the field of

gender and development in Nepal (Parker et al 2014). The third author is Sapana Bista a PhD student in the Centre for Public Health at Liverpool John Moores University whose research is focused on exploring issues surrounding disability rights and provision in Nepal.

[4] The full report from UN is available here <http://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/12/substantive-equality-non-negotiable>

[5] More information on the Inter Cluster Gender Working Group (IGWG) in Nepal is available at <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/nepal/gender-task-force> (last checked 19 April 2016) and IGWG reports give a good insight into the gendered experiences post-earthquake in Nepal. Issue 5 is available at [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/system/files/documents/files/gender\\_equality\\_update\\_no\\_5\\_-\\_17th\\_september\\_2015\\_1.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/system/files/documents/files/gender_equality_update_no_5_-_17th_september_2015_1.pdf) last checked 7 May 2016.

[6] Another recommendation was that relief distribution should be done through women's organisations and female porter associations. While women have for several decades been a target for receiving food supplies, the issue of who actually distributes the supplies is perhaps less well-discussed. This was important to ensure pregnant and lactating women and older women, who cannot necessarily come forward in a public forum to receive food, are reached. In addition, women's groups could be given supplies to cook on behalf of these women, to ensure that they and their dependents who are less able to process food supplies actually receive prepared food regularly. Having women distributing aid also shows women as active agents of change, and can empower women through seeing women take a lead in distributing relief to encourage women and girls to come forward and report abuse.

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