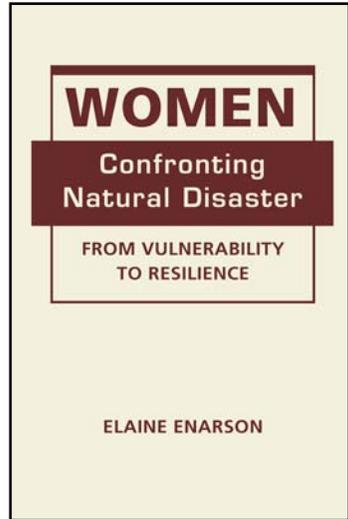


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Women Confronting
Natural Disaster:
From Vulnerability to Resilience

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1

Women and Disasters in the United States

Generations of researchers have asked how privilege creates disaster risk and how suffering is produced and endured. This book represents one slice of what has been learned, specifically about the United States and more specifically about women and gender relations.

Most of this literature is academic and appears in books and peer-reviewed journals, though I also draw on personal narratives, governmental and non-governmental reports, online reports, and other “gray” literature. Occasionally readers will learn something of nations quite unlike our own, when examples cannot be resisted, but for the most part the literature reviewed is from the United States. It is also predominantly from the social sciences, more sociological than psychological and more from the library of disaster case study than from cross-case or meta-analysis. The work reviewed also best reflects research conducted between 1990 and 2010. To authors of other work, know that readers will find you.

Disaster sociology is itself a social production, so I begin with observations on the different angles of vision through which we see (or fail to see) women, men, and gender. As Americans, we thrill to the fictional narrative of disaster on our movie screens and, perversely, to the human drama of the real earthquakes, fires, and explosions occurring with depressing regularity. How do we make sense of this? In the first three chapters, I explore different perspectives. Chapter 2 examines US disasters culturally through the eyes of the journalist, filmmaker, author, and artist. Chapter 3 asks a different question about “seeing”: What best frames gender and disaster theoretically? This discussion surveys competing strands of feminist thought before narrowing to a more focused discussion of gender as a social institution undergirding all social life. Chapter 4 then explores “the gendered terrain of disaster” with respect to the distribution of risk, examining gender as a crosscutting and root cause of so-

cial vulnerability. This is a practice-oriented discussion, perhaps of most interest to emergency planners.

In over fifty years of research on emergencies, disasters, and catastrophes in the United States, a conspicuous silence around gender has been maintained—a looking away, perhaps a calculated blindness. The policy, law, and corporate interests that frame fundamental decisions about hazards are based on unexamined assumptions. While important exceptions exist, students of disaster mainly investigate family decisions without accounting for gender power, and they seek to measure economic impacts without attention to women's livelihoods or the informal sector. The psychosocial effects of disasters on women are measured without examining the larger context of gender relations, and disaster-related interpersonal violence is conspicuously underexamined, whether against women or men, boys or girls. Studies of postdisaster sheltering, temporary accommodations, and permanent rehousing are conducted as if homes were filled with "occupants" and not by women and men of different ages and ethnicities. Organizations and "communities" are examined without regard to women's collective presence and leadership.

The striking disregard for gender in disaster studies is derived in part from generalizations about "human" behavior arising from decades of gender-blind research studies on preparedness, risk communication, emergency response, economic recovery, emergent organizations, public administration, and vulnerability. The result is a body of knowledge that both fails to specifically investigate gender in men's lives, and generalizes the knowledge gained "through men's eyes" to all persons. This covert grounding of disaster theory in men's lives benefits neither women nor men. Perhaps when critical gender studies are integrated into the canon and gender analysis comes to life in practice, we can speak of human experience in disasters. For now, because the knowledge gaps about women and girls are so egregious and because this has real consequences for how we prepare for and cope with disasters, this book is about girls and women in the United States.

Women in the United States, it is said or implied, are "beyond feminism" because they are "beyond inequality" and hence by implication "beyond vulnerability" in disasters. Certainly, elite US women inhabit a social universe with substantial shelter from the storm. From a comparative perspective, many millions of US women do live well and long—but which women and how well? Gender relations are never stable, but some patterns, even if contested, prove highly resistant to structural change. They make a difference in everyday life and in a period of crisis. Table 1.1 provides a bird's-eye view of some of the most salient patterns, rendered from readily available statistical data. It is important to bear in mind that differences within groups of women are often larger than those between women and men. As employers, supervisors, clients, customers, and teachers, large numbers of women in the United States are privileged over men due to intersecting patterns of gender, race, and class.

Table 1.1 Challenges of Women's Everyday Lives: Selected Indicators

Women compared to men, overall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More likely to live below the poverty line More likely to live into old age (80+) and to be widowed More likely to head households alone More likely to head households below the poverty line More likely to rent More likely to work part-time Lower earnings with comparable education and work patterns Less likely to have pensions Less likely to have advanced college degrees More likely to work in low-status occupations More likely to be major family caregivers Contribute more hours to domestic labor and volunteer work Higher rates of obesity and hypertension More likely to live with disabilities or mental illness More likely to be nursing home residents More likely to experience partner abuse and sexual assault More need for medical services including reproductive health
Women of color	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most earn less than other women Most earn less than men in same ethnic/racial group More likely than other women to live in poverty More likely than other women to live in poverty in old age More likely than other women to head households alone More likely than men in their ethnic/racial group to be poor More likely than other women to live with health problems More likely than other women to live in poor health More likely than other women to lack preventative health care More likely than other women to lack prenatal care
Senior women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most live on lower incomes than senior men More likely than senior men to live in poverty More likely than grandfathers to care for grandchildren More likely than senior men to live alone in old age Less likely than senior men to be married More likely than younger women to be limited physically

Note: For detailed information, often available on a state or county basis, see the American Community Survey and other US Census Bureau data, as well as reports from the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control, the Administration on Aging, the Office of Women's Health, the Bureau of Justice Statistics and Department of Justice, and other government agencies. Advocacy groups and think tanks also provide statistical profiles based on survey research, including the Institute for Women's Policy Research, the Family Caregiver Alliance, and others.

Before turning to health, safety, family, housing, and work, some important limitations must be acknowledged in this new subfield. First, we have learned more about women than men, a problem that awaits the interest of a new generation of men in emergency management and gender studies. For the most part, the research questions asked have been answered largely through qualitative research design or mixed-methods. As a devoted field researcher myself, I make no apology for this—we are in excellent company. But different questions are also important and will be answered differently; our field cannot remain so wedded to the qualitative, exploratory case study. Happily, each year brings more publications by gender and disaster researchers who take a mixed-methods or quantitative approach. Research and writing about women and disasters in the United States also relate primarily to just four major events of the past two decades: Hurricane Andrew in 1992; the Upper Midwest floods of 1997; the September 11, 2001, attacks; and the Gulf Coast storms of 2005. Sex-specific data available in other studies are included when they bear on the themes explored here, as are some preliminary findings from the *BP/Deepwater Horizon* oil spill of 2010, but these four major events define the field to date—for better and for worse.

As much as we might wish otherwise, gender relations in disasters do put the majority of women in the United States at increased risk, whether through poverty or physical challenges, racial or ethnic marginalization, insecure housing, language barriers, violence, or lack of voice—or some combination of these interwoven factors. Understanding these vulnerabilities and impacts from a gender perspective is the essential precondition for building on and enhancing women's leadership in crisis. So, with sympathy for readers inclined to fast-forward from vulnerability to resilience, the hefty midsection of this book revolves around five data-rich chapters on areas of major concern facing women in this country when disasters turn their world upside down.

Chapter 5 discusses sex- and gender-specific reproductive, mental, and physical health issues to be addressed in emergency planning. Here I argue the need to integrate what women know through their formal and informal providers of health care and through their care work in the family and neighborhood. Safety concerns, too, are critical, so Chapter 6 introduces the growing body of knowledge regarding domestic and sexual violence against women. I seek to explain the counterintuitive occurrence of gender violence at just the time when, ideologically, we all pull together. Wary of overly neat divisions superimposed on our muddled social worlds, I take a close look in Chapters 7, 8, and 9 at what happens to women in disasters with respect to family life, housing, and work. The intimate relationships of women before, during, and after these events are the context within which everything else occurs, as Chapter 7 explains. There is a great deal more to be learned here about women's sexual lives and the other intimacies they share with partners, as well as about how women negotiate disaster-related conflict with family. Chapter 8 grounds the

preceding discussion of health, safety, and intimacy, focusing on the material and psychic meanings for women of safe and secure housing. Barriers to housing security are of major concern, and readers will also learn about how women hear and respond to warnings, ideally finding their way back to home and hearth. The last chapter in this section of empirical findings examines patterns in work and employment, especially how women in different work contexts are impacted and how they respond. Here the research is underdeveloped, so Chapter 9 is more exploratory.

The focus of Chapters 5 through 9 is reactive, in response to the most basic of research questions: Where are the women and girls? How are different women differently impacted? The answers are not conclusive, of course, but these chapters sketch out in more detail than before the gendered terrain of disaster seen through women's eyes. Expanding this view, the final three chapters of the book examine the real and potential contributions women make to disaster resilience. These chapters explore in different ways how gender equality goals intersect with those of disaster risk reduction. Chapter 10 is a snapshot of the many ways US women have intervened to help prevent or respond to past disasters here at home. Chapter 11 then considers progress and obstacles to gender mainstreaming in the practice of emergency management. I close, in Chapter 12, with thoughts on the potential significance of US women's social movements to the larger project of disaster resilience. While more analysis and research are needed, I hope this discussion leaves readers as encouraged as I am about women as key actors in building a safer, more just, and more disaster-resilient future.