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# Women Confronting Natural Disasters: From Vulnerability to Resilience

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## **Abstract**

In this monograph Enarson provides vivid sociological accounts of disaster from a gender perspective throughout twelve well integrated chapters. The author has broad experience with gender relations in disaster through years of research, involvement in women's advocacy networks active in disaster and emergency management practice. Through retelling many women's stories Enarson provides a good guide to new thinking about disaster risk and resilience. She brings original ideas to the table for policy makers and researchers as well as emergency managers, covering gender-sensitive research needs and emergency management practice.

## **Disciplines**

Civic and Community Engagement | Emergency and Disaster Management | Energy Policy | Gender and Sexuality | Health Policy | Urban, Community and Regional Planning

## **Comments**

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## BOOK REVIEW

Women Confronting Natural Disasters: From Vulnerability to Resilience Elaine Enarson (author) 2012. 245pp. ISBN 978-1-58826-831-0 (hardcover). Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc.

In this monograph Enarson provides vivid sociological accounts of disaster from a gender perspective throughout twelve well integrated chapters. The author has broad experience with gender relations in disaster through years of research, involvement in women's advocacy networks active in disaster and emergency management practice. Through retelling many women's stories Enarson provides a good guide to new thinking about disaster risk and resilience. She brings original ideas to the table for policy makers and researchers as well as emergency managers, covering gender-sensitive research needs and emergency management practice.

The central thesis of the book is that gender matters in disasters. Women's representations of their experiences during disasters through cultural artifacts and social media can teach researchers and emergency managers about how gender shapes perceptions and feelings in disaster context to craft meaningful recovery programs and rebuild the fabric of social life. Enarson draws on competing strands of feminism and social justice theories to illuminate the connections among gender, development, disaster reduction, and the creativity displayed by communities of women at risk. She suggests that gender should be understood as a root cause of social vulnerability as well as a crosscutting factor. Numerous case studies of post disaster health and well-being, violence against women, intimacy and family life, houses and homes, work and workplace illustrate gendered vulnerabilities and needs as well as the valuable capacities of women in disaster response and recovery. Enarson suggests that emergency planning should reflect men and women equally and be sensitive to gender differences in disaster vulnerability and capacity to respond to disasters or mitigate hazards. Gender blindness has real consequences on how we prepare for and cope with disasters and therefore leads to structural gaps between what women need and the assistance that is offered.

The last three chapters of this monograph address the need to document and attend to women's leadership in disasters, especially at

the local level, for disasters can be empowering for women. Enarson provides a typology of women's organized and collective work in disasters grounded in service and faith, in place and local activism and finally in feminism and social justice with stories of such groups and networks in various contexts. She also gives several examples of women-led emergent groups with gender concerns and calls for more research about conditions that shape women's disaster initiatives. Arguing that women's leadership is the essential key to disaster resilience Enarson wants to put disaster prevention on the radar of mainstream women's movements.

Achieving gender equality in emergency management and decision making is a long-term and ongoing project that Enarson tackles in her writing. We can find several pragmatic guides to reaching this goal in the book, particularly focused on local emergency managers. In a practice-based appendix Enarson provides a list of online mainstreaming resources for community-based and women-friendly approaches to risk reduction. The mainstreaming approach suggested here aims to transform organizational cultures, structures, and policies that in and of themselves are gendering processes.

The main target group of the book is emergency managers and I think Enarson opens up a lot of important gender discussions and concerns for them to attend to. Each chapter raises several questions for researchers as the neglected gender aspects in disaster risk and resiliency. A graduate level course on sociology of disasters and particularly gender and disasters would definitely benefit from the comprehensive account of gender in American disasters offered here, along with the numerous online resources provided in the appendix. □ "Women confronting natural disasters" has a critical and provocative tone which makes it more appealing however some of the sociological terms used and the narrative style might be challenging for those students of disasters without strong American sociological knowledge. Most of the tables and figures adequately summarize the author's review of the literature or her recommendations for practice, but the book would benefit from more of them. Pictures from the field studies along with the discussions would also have helped readers better grasp the arguments and critiques.