Discussion Brief

Women Environmental Defenders and Covid-19: Lessons for Transformative Disaster Risk Reduction

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Key messages

► The Covid-19 pandemic, here considered as a disasters, coupled with inadequate measures taken to manage this disaster magnified the pre-existing challenges faced by marginalized groups

► Women have been particularly affected by increased care and domestic responsibilities – gendered roles that remain essential for resilience building in the context of disaster

► Women working towards socio-environmental justice i.e., women environmental defenders, have been critical actors in the management of the pandemic

► Women environmental defenders' networks enabled redressal of inequalities in terms of access to information and relief, providing the most isolated and vulnerable with critical resources to face the pandemic

► Their actions to quickly adapt to challenges and creatively expand their work and networks strengthened women environmental defenders' organizations in disaster risk reduction (DRR)

► This brief provides insights to DRR practitioners and development professionals to inform transformative DRR efforts with the help of women environmental defenders in the future

Introduction

Women, Indigenous peoples, and other social groups whose livelihoods rely on natural resources tend to be framed as vulnerable in the context of climate change and disaster. Yet their vulnerability is not inherent, but the result of social structures and discriminations, creating barriers to access critical resources such as education, formal employment, land tenure or participation in decision-making. Without these resources, their livelihoods remain precarious, and policies often overlook the needs and rights of these social groups. But far from being passive victims, these groups have developed strategies to reduce their vulnerability and build resilience.

The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) considers **environmental defenders** to be "anyone (including groups of people and women human rights defenders) who is defending environmental rights, including constitutional rights to a clean and healthy environment, when the exercise of those rights is being threatened" and further recognize that "many environmental defenders engage in their activities through sheer necessity; a number of them do not even see or regard themselves as environmental or human rights defenders" (UNEP 2018, 2).

"Environmental defenders" is therefore a generic term encompassing many realities, from isolated individuals and communities to more established organizations and movements. This brief highlights the work of organizations in Nepal and the Philippines working on environmental, Indigenous, land, Dalits' and women's rights, who, even if they do not identify themselves as environmental defenders, contribute to advance socio-environmental justice.

Women environmental defenders are critical yet overlooked actors of DRR. Their mobilizations against environmentally harmful practices not only prevent hazards, but also constitute an empowering process. The variety of initiatives led by women environmental defenders at multiple scales call for structural change towards greater environmental and social justice. Beyond their direct contributions to traditional DRR practices, women environmental defenders pave the way for transformative DRR, whereby the root causes of disasters are identified and addressed.

The Covid-19 pandemic made Indigenous and rural communities increasingly reliant on their natural environment, as lockdowns impacted employment and mobility. Meanwhile, people's capacities to mobilize for the protection of their environment have been significantly impacted by social distancing measures and travel restrictions. These barriers limited and reshaped the ways in which women environmental defenders access resources and protect their communities. These renewed strategies offer important lessons to consider in DRR efforts and can help inform policies and practices that enable transformative DRR in the future, whereby the root causes of disasters are identified and addressed. In this brief, we consider the Covid-19 pandemic as a disaster[1] and measures taken to mitigate, prepare and respond to the crisis as DRR.

Covid-19: Another disaster affecting women environmental defenders

The vulnerability experienced by marginalized groups before the pandemic have been magnified by the pandemic and the subsequent inadequate disaster responses. For instance, women, Indigenous peoples, Dalits and rural communities often have limited access to information and social services. They also have lesser access to education, formal employment and political power, which limit their opportunities to participate in, and influence, decisions that benefit their communities. As a result, the pandemic hit those groups the hardest, because they did not have access to timely information and equipment to protect themselves, had lesser access to healthcare, had lost their precarious employment and had received limited support to ensure their survival. However, these groups also developed strategies to build their own resilience, and contribute to broader DRR efforts.

Women are crucial actors for resilience building, as they are disproportionately represented in the service and care sectors, in addition to the gendered expectations that make them primary care givers in times of crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic increased the responsibilities of women, from ensuring food security in times of shortages and mobility restrictions, to taking charge of homeschooling for their children. This aggravated their time poverty and limited their possibilities to participate in the public sphere. Women environmental defenders struggled to manage household responsibilities along with activism to protect their environment and communities. Yet despite these challenges, examples of how women environmental defenders in Nepal and in the Philippines pursued their commitment for socio-environmental justice shows their determination.

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[1] The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) defines natural hazards as naturally occurring physical phenomena caused either by rapid or slow onset events, which can be geological, hydrological, climatological, meteorological and biological hazards (disease epidemics, insect plagues).
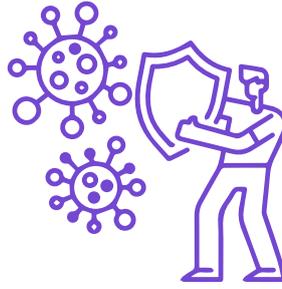
Women environmental human rights defenders contributing to Covid-19 prevention, response and transformative resilience

Women environmental defenders' networks are pivotal DRR actors, as they are able to reach remote communities in times of disasters. Prior to the pandemic, women environmental defenders' organizations in Nepal and in the Philippines built networks able to support isolated communities in protecting their environment when their resources are threatened. Many national organizations have several local offices able to reach socially and geographically marginalized groups throughout the country. These connections have been pivotal to reach communities left behind during disasters, and also instrumental during the pandemic to provide timely information and basic necessities. Most of the defenders' organizations interviewed in Nepal and the Philippines shared having provided food, masks, sanitizers and livelihood support to their communities. Organizations working with Indigenous groups also shared how they supported them in revisiting traditional food systems to ensure the self-sufficiency of marginalized groups in times of food shortages, therefore building their resilience to disasters.

Adapting quickly to mobility restrictions and social distancing, most of the women environmental defenders' organizations in Nepal and in the Philippines shifted their activities online and provided their communities with smartphone and cellular data to keep their networks alive. For example in Nepal, the Media Advocacy Group targeted remote communities through radio programmes providing essential information about Covid-19 prevention, but also raising local awareness about disasters by unpacking the root causes of vulnerability to environmental change and to the pandemic. In the Philippines, Lilak developed a system of chain text messages to reach Indigenous women who do not have access to cellular signal and maintain contact with their networks.

While the pandemic presented many challenges for women environmental defenders, this disaster also made them stronger. Organizations in the Philippines shared that the required shift to online tools increased collaboration between networks of defenders, first to share the costs of licenses to host online meetings, but then gradually also allowing to build synergies and to expand their reach. In both countries, defenders' organizations noted that their increased use of social media during the pandemic allowed them to raise awareness about their work and the challenges on the ground with a wider audience, which has been particularly effective to sensitize youth to these issues.

The pandemic also provided entry-points to strengthen advocacy efforts for gender and social justice in the context of disasters. For example in Nepal, the Women-Friendly Disaster Management group developed the Charter of Demands, calling the government to act in accordance with human rights standards in their management of the pandemic to avoid exacerbating the vulnerability of marginalized groups. This Charter builds on the experience of the social groups who were the most affected by the pandemic, and was used as a tool for advocacy and lobbying, leveraging the existing network of influence developed by this organization. All these efforts demonstrate how women environmental defenders adapted to the crisis to strengthen their existing work and networks, altogether contributing to transformative DRR.

Conclusion

Prior to the pandemic, women environmental defenders already proved to be critical actors of transformative DRR. Their work on multiple scales, from local communities to broader policy and development processes, emphasizes how socio-environmental justice is a pre-requisite to reduce disaster risk. They are essential to the empowerment of marginalized communities, educating them and building their capacities to assert their human and environmental rights. At the same time, their advocacy and lobbying efforts aim to transform the social structures causing vulnerability, and the power dynamics facilitating environmental destruction which increase disaster risk. During the pandemic, women environmental defenders found ways to pursue their mission while quickly adapting to the reality and limitations of the situation. The learnings from this disaster could greatly benefit future DRR efforts, and the following points summarize why DRR practitioners and development professionals should engage with women environmental defenders.

Key takeaways and insights from the study:

▶ **Women environmental defenders show that marginalized groups organizing themselves can address their vulnerability and transform approaches to DRR.** Women environmental defenders in Nepal and in the Philippines belong to, or represent, the most marginalized segments of society who are the most vulnerable to disasters. But organizing around shared identities and similar challenges helps them mobilize the resources necessary to challenge their structural vulnerability. Providing resources to grassroots movements is essential to support their efforts.

▶ **Women environmental defenders' networks can address inequalities in disaster relief,** as they leverage their local presence to deploy resources and provide marginalized groups with first necessity items, livelihood support and access to disaster information. In future DRR efforts, engaging with such networks would be essential to ensure no one is left behind.

► **Women environmental defenders' organizations find creative approaches to overcome challenges and maintain support to marginalized groups.** Such organizations cultivate strong bonds with their local communities and understand the challenges they face. The necessity to shift community-based activities online could not have been successful without addressing the connectivity issues faced by remote and marginalized communities. In this context, women environmental defenders' organizations quickly adapted and developed strategies to maintain contact and support. Such strategies can be further supported, upscaled and replicated in the context of future disasters.

► **Women environmental defenders' organizations are able to build synergies and expand the coverage and scope of their work.** The pandemic brought civil society organizations together and made them stronger. Synergies between organizations focusing on different communities and social groups helps build solidarity around similar challenges, and pooling resources to expand their reach. This ability to synergize with like-minded organizations can be helpful to coordinate disaster response, but also to expand their influence for advocacy and lobbying towards transformative DRR.

► **Women environmental defenders' advocacy and lobbying efforts contribute to transforming the socio-economic systems producing and reproducing vulnerability.** Despite the pandemic, women environmental defenders' organizations continued their efforts to address the root causes of inequality and vulnerability by engaging policymakers through lobbying and advocacy. This shows that they are able to manage disaster response and long-term strategies to address vulnerability. As they efficiently bridge the struggles of marginalized groups with decision-making spheres, they should be further recognized and supported in these efforts to address the root causes of vulnerability.