

Discussion Brief

Supporting Women Environmental Defenders for Transformative Disaster Risk Reduction in Nepal

Camille Pross, Dayoon Kim and Sara Vigil – Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), 2022.



Key messages

- ▶ Women environmental defenders are critical yet overlooked actors of transformative disaster risk reduction (DRR)
- ▶ In Nepal, gender and social norms and inequalities make women, Indigenous peoples, Dalits and rural communities more vulnerable to disasters
- ▶ Marginalized groups developed knowledge and strategies to defy their own vulnerability, for instance by building networks for more inclusive DRR
- ▶ Some of these strategies aim to redress structural inequalities which constitute the root causes of disasters. Through education, capacity building, advocacy and collaboration among marginalized groups, women environmental defenders are enabling a transformative approach to DRR
- ▶ This brief provides recommendations to decision-makers, the development community, researchers and DRR stakeholders to support the work of environmental defenders towards transformative DRR

BRDR program partners



Supported by





Introduction

Nepal has a complex geology, from Himalayan mountains to hills and low-lying plains, all of which are exposed to various climatic and physical hazards. Climate change is increasing the frequency and intensity of disasters. More than one quarter of Nepal's land area is covered by forests, which are essential to local communities, especially to women, Indigenous peoples and those in situation of poverty, who rely on their natural environment for food and livelihoods. Protecting forest areas is not only crucial for the economic and social sustainability of local communities but also contributes to disaster risk reduction (DRR) by mitigating the effects of climate change from local to global levels. However, economic development through resource extraction and infrastructure development threatens the viability of forests ecosystems, and can increase disaster risk.

In this context, people who rely on their environment are particularly vulnerable to anthropogenic environmental changes and disasters, but they are also the first line defenders of their environment, and key contributors to DRR. The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) consider **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.

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.

This brief presents the key findings of a study conducted by the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI). It is informed by interviews conducted with 18 organizations working to advance socio-environmental justice in Nepal. This research is an output of the Building Resilience through inclusive and climate adaptive Disaster Risk Reduction in Asia-Pacific programme (BRDR).

BRDR is led by the Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC) and jointly implemented with SEI, the Raoul Wallenberg Institute (RWI) and the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB), with the support of the Swedish International Development and Cooperation Agency (Sida). The aim of this programme is to improve regional cooperation in DRR and climate resilience by sharing best practices and tested approaches among countries in the region. The programme puts gender equality and rights-based approaches at the forefront of improving DRR and encourages South-South cooperation in Asia.

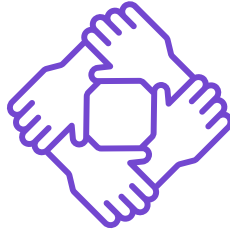


Women environmental defenders' contribution to DRR

The social stratification in Nepal assigns different roles and responsibilities to different social groups, each with their strengths and pitfalls in the context of disasters and DRR. Women, Indigenous peoples, Dalits, rural communities and the poor face similar structural challenges, such as limited access to education and formal employment opportunities, barriers to secure land tenure, and lack of representation in decision-making. These inequalities shape their vulnerability to disasters, as their needs and rights risk being overlooked in DRR policies due to their lack of meaningful participation in decision-making, while their lack of access to resources worsen their exposure to hazards and limit their capacity to adapt and be resilient.

Yet, women, Indigenous peoples and Dalit people contribute to the resilience of a community as a whole through their traditional gender and social roles. Women for instance are considered primary care givers, making them essential respondents in the aftermath of disasters. Similarly, Dalits are overrepresented in the service sector, making them essential workers in times of crisis. Indigenous peoples and those whose livelihoods are dependent on natural resources developed an empirical knowledge of how to use resources sustainably along with practices to mitigate disasters and adapt to environmental changes. However, the important contributions of these social groups to DRR efforts continues to be overlooked and their vulnerability to disaster risks persist. To address these gaps, some organizations working with Indigenous women, such as the Center for Indigenous Peoples Research and Development (CIPRED) play an important role in documenting marginalized groups' contribution to DRR. This not only increases the visibility and recognition of traditional DRR practices, but also serves to advocate for evidence-based DRR and natural resource management policies.

Women and marginalized groups are also increasingly building their capacities on DRR and leading inclusive DRR activities. The Women-Friendly Disaster Management group (WFDM) is constituted of organizations representing marginalized segments of the society such as Dalit women, Indigenous women, Muslim women, disabled women and the LGBTQ+ community. Together, they are advocating for inclusive DRR at the national and local levels. One of their key achievements is the development of the Kathmandu Declaration. They adopted a participatory process, involving women who survived the 2015 earthquake along with policymakers, and successfully advocated to make post-disaster needs assessments more gender sensitive. WFDM provides training to the members of their own organization, but also to policymakers and vulnerable groups to enhance capacities and advance policies towards more inclusive DRR.



Enablers of transformative DRR

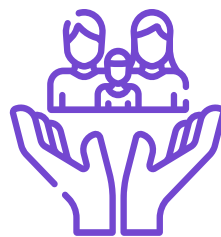
Aside from contributions to the traditional DRR sphere, women environmental defenders also adopted strategies that aim to transform the structural causes of vulnerability and disasters. This section presents the enablers of a transformative approach to DRR.

The **collaboration between the state, DRR practitioners and the civil society** is a key enabler for transformative DRR in Nepal. Following the 2015 earthquake, many local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) spontaneously participated in disaster relief and continued to work on DRR afterwards, applying their expertise to this field. The civil society has played an active role in addressing structural discriminations in DRR, starting by raising awareness about how disasters affect people differently and how the root causes of vulnerability lie in existing social inequalities. This contributed to Nepal's recent shift from reactive DRR to a more pro-active and multi-stakeholder approach to DRR, which allows for transformative change.

The groundwork led by civil society is crucial to improve education and the capacities of marginalized groups, therefore empowering them to challenge their own vulnerability. Organizations such as the Feminist Dalit Organization (FEDO) and the Nepal Indigenous Women's Federation (NIWF) both have local offices across the country to reach isolated and marginalized women. They provide them with education about their constitutional rights and build their awareness and capacities on using the mechanisms in place to assert these rights. By redressing inequalities in terms of access to education and information, such organizations effectively address the vulnerability of marginalized groups and build their capacities to become advocates for more inclusive and transformative policies.

National and international legal frameworks are impactful tools to protect environmental and human rights, therefore mitigating disaster risks. In Nepal, the non-profit environmental lawyers' organization ProPublic led successful litigation cases where the rights to resources of local communities were threatened by infrastructure development. In several instances, communities were denouncing how such projects would alter their environment and increase disaster risk, but the legal support of ProPublic, who revealed a lack of transparency in the environmental impact assessment, helped to halt and revise the projects for better environmental and social outcomes. Similarly, the Terai Human Rights Defenders Alliance (THRD) assisted Indigenous peoples to access justice in the context of environmental conflicts, with the support of the National Commission on Human rights and the UN Special Rapporteur. NIWF also uses national and international frameworks to hold duty-bearers accountable for the respect, protection and promotion of Indigenous women's rights in Nepal. These examples demonstrate that, despite legal frameworks protecting environmental and human rights, transparency and accountability can be lacking, but with the support of environmental defenders, duty-bearers can address these structural issues.

Recognition, financial resources, and connections are essential to enable women environmental defenders' efforts to transform DRR. Despite their involvement in local environmental movements, grassroots women defenders are largely invisible in Nepal, shadowed by more institutionalized organizations. For instance, ProPublic has the capacity to win public litigation cases thanks to the support of an international network of environmental lawyers, as they are the national branch of Friends of the Earth. This network provides them with human and financial resources to conduct such actions, and their status gives them the authority to work directly with State authorities. Similarly, the WFDM group receives support from international organizations, which gives them the credibility to engage with policymakers to advance gender inclusion in DRR. Grassroots women environmental defenders who lack these resources are unable to make their voices heard, suggesting that supporting and bridging these isolated defenders would increase the potential for transformative DRR.



How to support women environmental defenders for transformative DRR in the Nepal?

While “women environmental defenders” encompasses many realities in Nepal – from grassroots activists to more established networks – the multiple strategies they developed contribute to transforming DRR. Their work is often undervalued, yet they empower marginalized groups to defend their environmental and human rights, use existing legal frameworks to hold duty-bearers accountable, and lobby decision-makers for more inclusive policies – in other words, they try to transform the current systems which produce and reproduce inequality, environmental destruction and disasters. As key contributors of transformative DRR, women environmental defenders need the support of decision-makers, the development community, researchers and DRR stakeholders. The following recommendations aim to guide these stakeholders to acknowledge, develop and upscale the efforts women environmental defenders are already leading in Nepal. Taken together, these recommendations would enable a transformative approach to DRR, which places socio-environmental justice at the core of policies and practices, therefore limiting disaster risk.



Recommendations

- ▶ **Align national legislation with international human rights frameworks, and ensure women, indigenous peoples and Dalits can fully enjoy their human rights.** This entails fast-tracking processes for the recognition of Indigenous peoples' tenure rights and strengthening commitments to the right to free, prior and informed consent to protect vulnerable communities from losing their land. It also includes a review of existing policies to address the formal and informal barriers that women, Dalits and Indigenous people may face to exercise their rights. This step is essential to address the marginalization of these groups which makes them vulnerable to disasters.
- ▶ **Ensure the accountability of State and non-State actors with national human rights and environmental regulations when planning and implementing infrastructure development and climate mitigation initiatives.** This entails the consultation of affected communities prior to any development initiatives, including infrastructure development, climate mitigation initiatives or extractive activities. States, development stakeholders and businesses have an obligation to assess the environmental and social impacts of their activities and to take the appropriate steps to mitigate negative impacts while ensuring the benefits are equitably shared among social groups.
- ▶ **Strengthen efforts to educate marginalized groups** about their environmental and human rights and **build their capacities** to use the mechanisms in place to exercise their rights. This would empower them to protect themselves when these rights are threatened, and guide State and non-State actors toward equitable and sustainable development and DRR efforts.
- ▶ **Facilitate a multi-stakeholder and proactive approach to DRR at all levels,** by mandating the representation of marginalized social groups, including women, Indigenous peoples and Dalits, along with DRR experts and decision-makers. This will enable a better recognition of these groups' existing contributions to DRR, leveraging their strengths and addressing their vulnerabilities to enable a more holistic and efficient approach to DRR.
- ▶ **Document the best practices of grassroots women environmental defenders** who contribute to environmental protection and DRR, **as well as their successful mobilizations** in the context of environmental conflicts. This type of research can be used to advocate for a better recognition and financial support of their work, and allow for a better understanding of how mobilizations to protect environmental and human rights can be empowering and transformative.
- ▶ **Bridge grassroots women environmental defenders with more institutionalized human rights and environmental organizations and movements.** As grassroots defenders lack visibility in Nepal, enabling them to access the resources and connections of more established organizations would allow for a grounded understanding of environmental and social issues, and transformative action at multiple scales.