

Recovery after Disaster: Women's Perspectives on Shelter Self-Recovery

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Abstract

'Self-recovery' is a new term that is being used by humanitarian actors in reference to supporting shelter reconstruction after disaster, but there is limited literature and no solid conceptual underpinning to the term. This research seeks to contribute to and inform current debates by approaching shelter self-recovery (SSR) from a people-centred perspective with a strong focus on gender and diversity, learning from the lived experiences of women in vulnerable situations who are recovering from disaster.

The latest literature on disasters and recovery points to disasters being socially created and identifies structural vulnerability as an underlying problem that needs to be addressed in the recovery phases. Literature on vulnerability talks about relational vulnerability and the need to focus on processes and power relations, looking at the why rather than the how. Literature on gender, shelter and recovery points to gender and shelter as a key axis of discrimination and marginalisation in disaster settings, and to the need of addressing strategic gender needs in order to achieve meaningful change. Literature on urban development planning and housing provides relevant precedents in relation to shelter in the urban setting and collective models that can address housing needs at scale.

The research is approached with an interpretive world view that sees social reality as something that its members produce and reproduce, as opposed to a positivist world view which sees social reality as a pre-given universe of objects. The ontological and epistemological assumptions behind this research are based on constructivism, following the understanding that reality is socially constructed by individuals as they interact with their social world and that researchers construct knowledge; they do not find it. The research is also approached with a critical feminist lens that questions social norms and power relations and gives prominence to women's voices and experiences. The research is conducted through one in-depth case study in the urban ward of Machhegaun, in the Chandragiri Municipality of the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, after the April 2015 earthquakes. Data collection is currently ongoing with focus group discussions, key-informant and semi-structured interviews.

Initial findings highlight how land and property rights are at the intersection of vulnerability and SSR after the earthquake, how complex bureaucracy in a changing administrative and policy landscape can be a barrier to reconstruction for vulnerable groups and how women's saving groups are changing gender roles through access to finance. Practical implications include the need to ensure the most vulnerable are adequately identified and supported, question formal land ownership as criteria for beneficiary identification, and explore the role of women's networks in urban reconstruction.

About the Speaker

Lucila's interests are around urban development planning, gender and social justice. Her current work focuses on post-disaster recovery and gender in the urban context. Having trained as an architect and worked internationally in commercial practice for over a decade, Lucila completed the MSc in Urban Development Planning at University College London in 2015. Her thesis analysed the practices of the Federations of Urban Poor as a model for development. In 2015 Lucila enrolled in the Engineering Doctorate program at UCL's Civil, Environmental and Geomatic Engineering Department. She completed the MRes in Urban Sustainability and Resilience in 2016 and conducted research on gender and construction in urban and rural locations of Nepal that had been affected by the earthquake. Lucila is associated with CARE International UK as industry partner for her EngD, where she works with the Humanitarian Shelter Team.