

## Re-Building Lives from a Feminist Perspective: Learnings from WOREC's Earthquake Response Initiatives



### Summary

Unequal effects of disasters on women and marginalized communities is a result of ecological injustice and structural violence that they have been constrained to face historically. Thus, effective disaster response should prioritize addressing systemic discrimination and unbalanced access to and control over environmental resources and decisions, along with an approach to change the narrative of the community as passive beneficiaries. Such types of response must focus on acknowledging diverse needs of people with intersectional identities throughout the disaster management cycle. Community-based participatory approaches and women's leadership have been proven effective for resilient disaster response efforts.

## CONTEXT

Nepal is highly vulnerable to natural calamities such as floods, landslides, and earthquakes that pose significant threats to community safety and stability. The recent 5.7 magnitude earthquake on November 3, 2023, in Jajarkot District, Karnali Province, highlighted the severe impact with 26,557 households fully damaged, 35,455 households partially damaged, and over 150 lives lost. The earthquake resulted in significant property loss, decline of socio-economic status, and deprivation of basic needs, which profoundly impacted the psychosocial well-being of displaced communities. It also disproportionately affected women in diversity, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities, impacting sexual and reproductive health (SRHR) and mental health, and increasing sexual and gender-based violence (GBV). Earthquakes tend to increase gender gaps, amplifying the adverse impacts on women, making them more susceptible to long-term socio-economic consequences limiting their ability to recover and rebuild (CARE Nepal, RGA report 2024). Besides these, as of May 2024 WOREC has documented 161 GBV cases and 113 cases of sexual and reproductive health problems in earthquake-affected areas. However, most of the cases are hidden in the family and community due to victim-blaming and the lack of sensitive and survivor-friendly service delivery.



**Hira (name changed) was born as a first child in an economically poor family and carried the whole family's responsibility from a young age. She got married at the age of 15 and has a two-year old daughter. Her husband is a drunkard and used to beat her badly. Two weeks before the earthquake she came to her mother's home to be safe from her husband's violence. However, the earthquake destroyed her mother's home and they were living in a tarpaulin. She was scared thinking that her husband would come to beat her as there was no safe place to hide. Due to this fear she could not sleep for several days and was feeling hopeless.**

**I am a 44-year old woman living in a joint family under a tent. My abusive husband forcefully had sex with me always. I am feeling miserable but cannot do anything against him because I have 3 small children and I am so worried about their future.**

## REVIEWING MAJOR POLICIES AND MECHANISMS

Some national and local policies and mechanisms have been institutionalized in all three tiers of the government following international commitments. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction advocates for an inclusive, all-of-society approach to reduce disaster risk, recognizing the different vulnerabilities faced by women. Nepal has integrated the Sendai Framework's principles into its National Disaster Risk Reduction Strategic Action Plan 2015-2030 as well. The Local Government Operation Act of 2017 and the Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act of 2017 have established structures and mandated the formation of disaster management funds, councils, and authorities to ensure comprehensive disaster management. Similarly, the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Authority (NDRRMA) plays a pivotal role in coordination. WOREC's experience of working with more than 50 community-based women led organizations shows that the existing management system and processes, along with policies and activities, failed to address unequal power relations and structural inequalities that widen the impact of humanitarian crisis on marginalized communities. Furthermore, there are weak partnerships with various stakeholders and women-led organizations who have been working as front-line responders and who are always left behind in humanitarian coordination mechanisms. They are rarely considered as humanitarian actors despite their huge contribution to community-based immediate response and the preservation of indigenous knowledge. Hence, there is no proper mechanism to address unequal power relations and structural violence that can truly rebuild the lives of women by strengthening the inner power. Thus, without implementing the policies that strengthen women's leadership and challenge the power relations in the disaster response mechanism, the narratives of women only as beneficiaries cannot be shifted and women's diverse needs will remain unaddressed.



## WOREC'S APPROACH

### A Critical Need for Feminist Disaster Response

During the Koshi Flood in 2008, WOREC initiated the SNEHA campaign to challenge power dynamics and gender neutrality in humanitarian response. SNEHA stands for Strengthening women's Network for Humanitarian Assistance and it means love and affection in Nepali. Since then, WOREC has been continuously providing services through SNEHA Kendra (Women Friendly Spaces), which is a women-only space where feminist care, empathy, and solidarity has been exercised with the feeling of "You are not alone". WOREC's approach of SNEHA

Kendra proves that this feeling comes from emotional support and connectedness. Survivor-centric service delivery, leadership, and networking of self-representative groups and enhancing the voices of the women-led organizations are the approaches of SNEHA Kendra where unequal power relations can be challenged. SNEHA Kendra not only provides essential services but it has been supporting women to build their resilience and inner power to fight against the violence and injustice they have been facing. WOREC operated eight SNEHA Kendras in Rukum-West and Jajarkot after the earthquake and succeeded to earn the trust and love of the community as a solidarity to fight for the equitable response mechanism. We need feminist disaster response for creating a safe environment for women to recover, respite, rebuild and reclaiming their right. **"Feminist Disaster Response"** emphasizes dismantling patriarchal structures and recognizing the and addressing unequal power relations and unique needs and strengths of women and marginalized groups. Feminist Disaster Response advocates for women's leadership and shifting the power throughout the disaster management cycle, ensuring that women's voices are fundamental to planning, decision-making, and implementation processes. It addresses structural inequalities and adopts an intersectional perspective to ensure resilience-building of the most marginalized groups.

**"Women-only space is a political space where love, care, support, safety, and dignity of women are ensured. They can exercise freedom of expression without emotional surveillance and each voice will be heard with empathy. In such a space, women can learn to build resilience from their own experience challenging unequal power."**

## THE CHALLENGES

**Welfare Approach vs. Rights-Based Approach:** Both governmental and non-governmental disaster response efforts tend to focus more on a welfare/distributive approach, providing relief items to affected populations. This approach often overlooks the rights-based approach which involves actively addressing inequalities, empowering communities, and ensuring participation in decision-making processes.

**Gap in Availability of Information, Technology, and Knowledge:** There is a significant gap in the availability and dissemination of information, technology, and knowledge related to disaster risk and management in Nepal, especially for women and marginalized communities who are the frontlines in any disaster response. This gap hinders effective disaster preparedness and response as there is limited access to critical data and tools that could improve their resilience and response capabilities.

**Lack of Women's Voice and Leadership:** Women's voices and leadership are often underrepresented in disaster response mechanisms. Despite being frontline responders, women and women-led organizations' contributions are not recognized and they are overlooked as humanitarian workers. This lack of representation means that the specific needs and perspectives of women are frequently overlooked in planning and decision-making processes.

**Policies, Budgeting and Planning Fail to Address Structural Inequalities:** Nepal's disaster response often lacks gender-sensitive budgeting and planning, leading to inadequate resource allocation and response programs for diverse groups. Many disaster management policies and programs fail to recognize and challenge the structural inequalities and multi-dimensional impact on women.

**Lack of Well-functioning Disaster Response Mechanisms and Failure to Incorporate Women's Leadership:** Nepal has Disaster Response and Management Committees and cluster mechanisms at different levels. However, there is a lack of well-functioning response mechanisms, a negligent amount of women's representation, and an absence amount of women's leadership in those coordination mechanisms.

**"Various organizations provided food and non-food relief items, but WOREC's emotional support and feeling of sameness gave us hope to rebuild our lives. This is a safe space for us to express our sufferings and reclaim our inner power."**



**We gained numerous lessons from WOREC's approach and intervention in disaster response. We had never thought of gender sensitivity and women's specific needs after disaster as WOREC did. However, we realized that we have done lots for infrastructure development and now it's high time for being sensitive on inclusive human development."- Local Government Representative, Rukum-West**

## Policy Recommendations

- Disaster response policies that fail to have political analysis of current structures and address intersectional perspectives and power dynamics must be reformed and amended.
- Integrate gender-transformative budgeting and planning into disaster response efforts to ensure resource allocation and response plans consider the differential impacts of disasters on diverse groups.
- GBV response services should be included as emergency services during the disaster and psychosocial counseling and SRHR services should be compulsorily included in the relief package.
- The distributive approach and the perception towards communities only as receivers of relief needs to be replaced by the rights-based approach and marginalized communities' participation and leadership in decision-making must be addressed with the re-distributive approach.
- The narrative of humanitarian leadership must be evolved and women-led organizations (WLOs) should be trusted and their work and identity as humanitarian workers should be recognized by the state as well as national and international organizational leading/coordinating humanitarian response programs.
- Existing humanitarian/disaster response and coordination mechanisms such as the Disaster Response and Management Committee and cluster mechanisms, especially the protection sub-cluster, should be well functional and women's and WLOs' leadership must be mandated in those mechanisms.



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