Introduction

This book aims to provide a critical gendered reading of disasters in the developing world context. The focus of the book is not only on the ‘Third World’, but it also seeks to draw on academic debates within development literature to problematise current disaster thinking. While concepts such as poverty have received a great deal of attention within development writings, they are often taken at face value within disaster literature. Similarly, notions such as ‘participation’ and participatory processes now have as many critics as supporters among development professionals, yet they continue to be seen as an intrinsically good thing among many disaster practitioners. Despite the efforts of a small, but growing, group of women and men, this lack of critical engagement within the disaster literature with key concepts is echoed in the debates around gender and disasters.

Gender has now become part of the official disasters discourse and on the ground reconstruction is often targeted at women. Women are also increasingly being seen as a key to ensuring adaptation to the disaster risks presented by climate change. Many of these new gendered initiatives are drawing on development thinking to justify and design interventions. However, while there are lessons to be learnt from development theory and practice, development does not necessarily provide a good blueprint for how to ‘engender’ disasters. As the book seeks to highlight, the call to engender disaster risk reduction is a valid one but women’s inclusion in relief, reconstruction and mitigation activities can at times be as problematic as their exclusion. To be successful, it is important that initiatives do not just assume women to be more vulnerable to disasters than men, but that they seek to understand how women and men experience disasters differently.

This book, then, will not explain why volcanoes erupt or how tsunamis form, but instead it will explore the differential impact of these events on people and places, and in particular different gendered experiences of these events. While disasters are often pictured as cyclical with the hazard presented as the central ‘event’, it is the processes that such hazards provoke that will be the focus of the book, not the hazard itself.
The traditional depiction of disasters as cyclical (see Figure I.1) suggests there are discrete stages of planning and response to disasters, with different specialists working in each – structural mitigation being seen as something for engineers, preparedness for emergency planners, response as the domain of the emergency services, and reconstruction that of the United Nations and humanitarian relief organisations. It also suggests that activities are not only undertaken by different parties but are also sequential, suggesting, for example, that only when reconstruction of destroyed roads and houses is ‘over’ does preparation for the next event occur. This sequence of events will provide a structure to the book, which, after introductory chapters on disaster, development and gender, will focus on relief, reconstruction and mitigation. However, this is not to suggest that these should be seen as discrete or sequential, merely as providing a logical and well-established means of addressing the many issues raised by disasters.

Figure I.1 The disaster cycle

Hazardous events occur on a regular basis so the logic of presenting disasters as a cycle is clear. However, a cycle suggests that a disaster is an inevitable outcome of a hazardous event. This is questionable. Contemporary understandings of disasters highlight that preparation should and could prevent the next disaster by reducing the vulnerability of the population to the natural hazard. Rather than cyclical, the stages represent a progression of activities that build on each other. Reconstruction merges into development, or reinforces development processes and,
in turn, development projects should seek to mitigate the impact of future hazard events.

The need to ‘disaster proof’ development is increasingly being recognised by actors such as the World Bank amid the twin fears of the impact of climate change in increasing the number and intensity of events, and the fear that such events pose a threat to achieving planned advances in poverty reduction and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). There has also been increased recognition of the gendered impact of events such as the Indian Ocean tsunamis in 2004, which saw more women than men die due to culturally prescribed gender norms that helped dictate their relative risk. This has led to calls to mainstream disasters into development, and also gender into disaster risk reduction.

As noted above, it is important to demonstrate how and why women should be involved in disaster work and the consequences of their exclusion from disaster risk reduction, but it is also important to critically analyse this inclusion. To this end, the book will draw on existing studies to explore the impact of disasters not only on individual women but also women’s groups and movements. In particular, it will utilise empirical research undertaken by the author in Central America to highlight the point that women’s inclusion in post-disaster reconstruction can be as problematic as their exclusion. Studies undertaken after recent large-scale events such as hurricane Katrina, the Haitian earthquake of 2010 and the Indian Ocean tsunamis demonstrate that women are not a homogeneous group and they highlight the importance of understanding differences between women in how they experience disasters. The book then seeks to provide a critical reflection on the gendered impact of disasters and disaster response in the developing world and to problematise the way women are being incorporated into disaster-related work and the consequences of this for wider processes of development.

Chapter 1 will provide an introduction to ‘disasters’ and explore ideas around what is a disaster. It will contest the idea of ‘natural disasters’, noting that natural hazards only make ‘disasters’ when they impact on vulnerable populations that cannot withstand, respond to, and recover from the event. Thus the subjective rather than scientific nature of disasters will be highlighted, and the importance of vulnerability and risk for understanding experiences of disasters will be explored. In turn, risk and vulnerability will be deconstructed to reveal the complexity of these notions. The conceptualisation of disasters will be further explored through consideration of how those working in development often construct disasters as unusual, extraordinary events that ‘set back’ development rather than as a common feature of the developing world.
The consequences of this for both disaster response and for processes of development will be a key theme throughout the chapters that follow. Processes of development will be the focus of Chapter 2, which will present an introduction to development actors, development theorising and more recent development initiatives in practice, including key policy initiatives such as the Structural Adjustment and Poverty Reduction Strategy initiatives, in order to provide theoretical and policy context to the discussion of disasters. Particular attention will be paid to the notion of ‘poverty’, how it has been conceptualised and what this means for gender and for ‘disaster proofing’ development. The third chapter will continue the focus on gender and will provide an introduction to key concepts and feminist theories as well as explore the different ways gender has been integrated into development. A key issue will be the notion of ‘mainstreaming’, and attempts to ‘engender’ development by actors such as the World Bank will be critiqued. The chapter will conclude by asking how evolving understandings of gender and development have influenced understandings of disasters. The ideas raised in this chapter provide the basis for the analysis in the remaining chapters, as they explore the provision of relief and reconstruction post disaster as well as the ability to mitigate large-scale events in the future.

Chapter 4 will look at the period during and immediately after an event, focusing on how people help themselves and as well as the ‘humanitarian’ response of national and international actors. It will draw on existing studies to highlight that how an event is experienced may be shaped by culturally prescribed gender specific roles. It will critically explore the notion that these gender roles will, in turn, be shaped by the event, as cultural boundaries are, through necessity, crossed in the event and its aftermath. The coping strategies that households and individuals adopt will be critically examined and the discussion will highlight the corrosive as well as therapeutic nature of household and community response. The arrival of relief organisations, and the changing status of those affected – from ‘survivor’ to ‘victim’ – that this can bring about, will then be considered, as will the role of the media in shaping how the event is understood and responded to. This focus on the practical aspects of the relief period will be complemented in Chapter 5 by a conceptual discussion of the evolving, and contested, understandings of ‘humanitarianism’ and its implications for those working in the field. Much of the writing around humanitarianism has focused on conflict situations. This chapter will highlight the growing links between conflict and disasters, given the nature of contemporary crises, but also, given the response to recent crises, the increasing role for the military post disaster. It will also highlight the links increasingly being seen between relief and
development, and the resultant involvement of actors such as the World Bank in post-disaster work. A gendered reading of the processes will be presented, something that has largely been absent from the debate. The discussion will not only question the extent to which a distinction should and can be drawn between relief efforts, reconstruction and wider processes of development, but also the consequences of a closer relationship between them.

The evolution in thinking around the reconstruction period will frame Chapter 6: from the notion of building back what was lost to the idea of transforming lives to be more resilient to future events, as popularly captured in the idea of ‘build back better’. Once again, a discussion of the practical elements of reconstruction will be combined with a discussion of the relevant conceptual debates. In particular, echoing calls for ‘participatory development’, there has been a move toward ensuring the participation of individual and civil society organisations within reconstruction. Problematised within the development discourse, the chapter will use the post-disaster context to explore the potential issues raised by ensuring women’s ‘participation’ in reconstruction. The chapter will suggest there is a need to challenge the seemingly received wisdom within the disaster literature that participation is automatically a good thing. The empirical data presented questions that there is a ‘window of opportunity’ for change post disaster. This is an assumption that has been used to justify the promotion of the participation of women in reconstruction by donors. While case study evidence points to a change in gender roles occurring after an event, with women assuming non-traditional roles, there is little evidence to support the view that there are long-term changes in gender relations for the better. Rather than focus on seeking to prove that change does occur, it will highlight how different women may have different experiences of the same event. The chapter will provide the background for a more detailed discussion of some key issues for women and for gender roles and relations raised by reconstruction.

Chapter 7 focuses on some of the ‘secondary disasters’ that may occur as a consequence of how post-disaster reconstruction is handled. This chapter will provide two ‘case studies’ of secondary disasters – violence against women and the psychosocial impact of disasters. In each case the theme will be introduced through a summary of the key thinking and contested areas, as well a presentation of relevant empirical studies. It will relate back to issues raised in the first chapter around what is a disaster, suggesting that, while this may be understood as the tangible loss of livelihood, it may be felt more as an intangible loss of well being through experiencing violence or poor mental health. This may be the ‘real’ disaster, at least for many women.
Chapter 8 will seek to move from discussion of individual men and women to considering the role of civil society organisations in responding to events and how this response may impact on them. While disasters may lead to greater cooperation between groups and organisations, they may also lead to old conflicts re-surfacing and new conflicts emerging. The discussion will draw once again on primary research undertaken by the author as it considers the tensions that may be set up within women’s movements as well as between women activists and male dominated spaces and processes. The conceptual framework for the chapter will be the notion of civil society and specifically the phenomenon of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), drawing on debates within the development literature to explore and contest their role in the post-disaster context. While noting the key role for women’s groups and for gender NGOs in reconstruction, it will contrast the high visibility of women’s leadership in the reconstruction period with women’s limited engagement in longer term ‘mitigation’ initiatives, highlighting the changing official discourse – from the social focus of reconstruction to the more technical focus of mitigation – as having a role to play in explaining this.

The last substantive chapter continues to examine the changing discourse around disasters, focusing on the international policy discourse. It will consider how Disaster Risk Reduction fits within other related discourses, including Climate Change Adaptation. Two key policy initiatives will frame the discussion: the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). It will critically examine the HFA in terms of its purported ‘gender perspective’ and discuss this in relation to the gendered critique of the MDGs in order to highlight the debates around the inclusion of a gender focus in such initiatives, and the key contested areas of this inclusion. How such global initiatives are to be operationalised will be considered and, in particular, the lack of acceptance of global responsibility for disasters will be highlighted. It suggests that at present, at the macro level, international agencies and governments have not accepted responsibility for disaster risk reduction. However, at the micro level, it is women that have been obliged to assume the responsibility for disaster response. Recent critiques of engendering development have focused on the inclusion of women in development as efficient providers of services, or the engendering of development on efficiency rather than equality grounds. They suggest there has been a feminisation of responsibility for ensuring that development goals are met. The chapter suggests a parallel process may be evident within processes to engender disasters and, as such, warns that care needs to be taken before welcoming such processes uncritically.
Rather than present a handbook on how to include women and gender in disaster response and risk reduction, the book seeks to reflect on processes to date within both disasters and development. It highlights that while there are valuable lessons to be learnt from processes of engendering development to date, a valuable lesson might be how best not to engender disasters.