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Women in the Face of Disaster: Formulating Gender-Sensitive Policy

Program Track: The Challenge of Policy Formulation and Service Delivery in the 21st Century

Bridgette Cram

Florida International University

Executive Summary

Exploring gender in the context of disasters is an important area of focus for policy-makers. Research has demonstrated that women are more vulnerable and resilient in the face of disasters in different ways than men. Furthermore, social equity, the third pillar of public administration, exemplifies the necessity of equity in policy-making; thus, public administration scholars and practitioners must be aware of this divide and engage in meaningful research and implementation strategies to address these inequalities. To inform this process, the following paper explores the factors relating to the vulnerability and resilience of women in the disaster context. It serves as an introduction to the disaster literature and provides preliminary recommendations to guide future research and policy creation.

Introduction

Disaster policy is often the center of debate after a region is affected by a natural disaster. More often than not, these policies are criticized for not accounting for the diversity of the region, whether geographic, demographic, or physical. Disasters, whether in developed or developing countries, expose or exacerbate realities that may not be readily acknowledged in every day life. Disaster research as a whole, however, has produced a variety of literature that discusses these realities. An important finding that this research has produced is that disasters have been shown to affect women more, and in different ways than that of men (Fothergill, 1998, p. 126). This finding is important to the field of public administration, as the creation of gender-sensitive disaster policy is critical to every aspect of the disaster cycle; a neglect to develop gender-sensitive disaster policy is the antithesis of the third pillar of public administration, social equity. This paper discusses the need for policy that recognizes gender differences guided by public administration's tenet of social equity.

Public Administration & Social Equity

According to Frederickson (2010), the "social equity perspective in public administration ... has survived and taken its place as part of both the normative base of the field and as the subject of considerable empirical research" (p. 4). With the establishment of social equity as the "third pillar of public administration" and its recognition as a standing panel within the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA), the concept of social equity in public administration will only increase in importance. According to NAPA (2010), social equity in the policy making process is defined as "*the fair, just and equitable distribution of public services and implementation of public policy; and the commitment to promote fairness, justice, and equity in the formation of public policy.*" This paper is guided by this definition.

Gender Equity in the Context of Disaster

According to Enarson & Meyerles (2004), “historically, the dominant theoretical perspectives, research strategies, and guiding questions in disaster social science have been determinedly male-oriented if not male-dominated” (p. 49). However, more and more researchers are now focusing on why disasters impact gender differently. Most of the inequalities are based on social and economic divisions that already exist in society; thus, disasters tend to exacerbate these inequalities, which are gendered in their nature.

This literature demonstrates that women experience disasters in different ways than men. Therefore, it is critical to question the lack of gender-sensitive disaster policy. To truly exemplify the pillar of social equity, public administrators and scholars must recognize the need to take gender into consideration. Thus, public administration scholars must pave the way by conducting additional studies on this topic to enhance and expand this growing subset of research within the area of disaster studies. With this additional research, concrete recommendations can be put forth so that policy makers can successfully integrate gender as a critical component of disaster policy and planning. To maintain the spirit of social equity in public administration, gender cannot be further ignored; the field of Public Administration as a whole must attack the issue of gender and disaster from both an academic and practical perspective to increase equity in the disaster planning and policy process.

Women in the Face of Disaster: Vulnerability and Resilience

One of the first major hurdles that must be cleared to create gender sensitive policy is to define what “vulnerability” and “resilience” means in the Public Administration context. The following section begins this discussion with a brief overview of both the vulnerability and resilience literature and provides the background for making suggestions that can guide future

research to help policy makers develop gender-sensitive disaster policy.

Vulnerability

Vulnerability is most often defined as “the potential for loss” (Cutter, Boruff, & Shirley, 2003, p. 242). In terms of the vulnerabilities of women to disasters, it is important to note that not all women will experience disasters in the same way, as the intersection of race, culture, gender, class and other characteristics create a unique experience for each woman (Cupples, 2007, p. 157). In a review of the literature (Cram & Ganapati, Forthcoming), women are shown to be more vulnerable in 5 categories: Built Environment, Political, Holistic, Socioeconomic, and Geographic. Women may be vulnerable in one or more of these categories, thus demonstrating that the concept of vulnerability is broad and multi-dimensional.

Resilience

As with vulnerability, the term “resilience” varies in connotation throughout, and even within, different fields of study (Cutter, Burton, & Emrich, 2010; Reams, Lam, & Baker, 2012; Pendall, Foster, & Cowell, 2010). Put simply, resilience has stirred up a variety of concerns, including “disagreements as to the definition of resilience, whether resilience is an outcome or a process, what type of resilience is being addressed ... and which policy realm... it should target” (Cutter, Burton, & Emrich, 2010, p.1). In terms of the resiliency of women, social capital is an important factor to consider. Although social capital also has a variety of definitions, it is most simply used to “explicate some of the key reasons why certain communities thrive politically, socially and economically while others languish” (Murphy, 2007, p. 298). For example, according to Ganapati (2012), “the emergent civic networks not only helped women overcome the psychological impacts of the disaster but also empowered them and helped them overcome the stigma of public assistance” (p. 425).

Discussion

The overarching theme of vulnerability and resilience is critical to the development of gender-sensitive disaster policy. Although evidence produced by the literature helps guide the argument that Public Administration needs to develop a broader definition of both vulnerability and resilience; it is clear that this is a worthwhile effort to undertake. However, to achieve the goal of implementing gender-sensitive disaster policy, Public Administrators must understand how the composition of their communities and why types of policies are necessary.

First, it is critical to develop a method to measure the factors that contribute to the vulnerability and resilience of women within a specific area. A micro view of the population is critical, as it would be easy to overlook a small “pocket” of vulnerability in a given county or larger area of land. This concept of vulnerability mapping is presented throughout the literature (Weischselgartner, 2001; Morrow, 1999). However, once the populations of need are located, policy makers must take the time to focus on specific areas of need and consult research on appropriate policy remedies. In terms of resilience, an understanding of the formal and informal networks that women are a part of is tremendously helpful, and governments can play a pivotal role in supporting them through “enabling face-to-face interaction, creating leadership-building programs, and putting in place institutions that facilitate collective action” (Ganapati, 2012, p. 425).

The role of Public Administration academics is to gather this research and create theoretical frameworks that are able to be put into practice and implemented for each stage of the disaster cycle. This brief overview only touches upon the many gendered aspects of disaster; this fact alone should signal a grave need for research to be conducted from a public administration standpoint.

Conclusion

It is clear that disasters affect women in different ways than men; however, public administration has the opportunity to play a role in performing research that has practical implications for reducing this. Through recognition that current disaster policy is not promoting the tenet of social equity, research on the gendered dimension of disaster should be embraced by the field of public administration. Development and implementation of gender-sensitive disaster policy will have a significant impact on the factors that contribute to the vulnerability and resiliency of women. With a dedication to the tenet of social equity, the field of public administration is poised to contribute valuable research that will help cities and states avoid exacerbating social inequalities through mindful and carefully planned policies.

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