Gender, Disaster and Stories from Popoki: Learning from Women Survivors in Northeast Japan

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Abstract

This paper critically explores the question of gender and disaster, suggesting that much of the current thinking and practice serves to reproduce understandings of gender rather than transform them. The first half of the paper looks at issues of gender and disaster, providing a short introduction to some of the issues involved followed by a discussion of the meaning of gender and resilience in the context of peace. The second half introduces the stories of four women who experienced the Great Northeast Japan Earthquake. These stories were compiled through interviews and conversations occurring between 2011 and 2018 in the context of the Popoki Friendship Story Project, a support project organized shortly after the 2011 disaster. The stories illustrate women's involvement with community after disaster and speak to the range of women's responses and challenges. While in some ways they can be said to have been empowered, their stories suggest that they do not necessarily want empowerment, and that inclusion does not necessarily lead to transformation. The paper concludes with a reflection on theory and practice, stressing the importance of gender equity and equality as a prerequisite to transformative practices in disaster support. Working to foster peace before crises occur is therefore important for making societies more resilient and for greater inclusion and diversity during and after disaster.

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　　In recent years, the world has seen a major increase in both the number and severity of natural disasters. Between 2005 and 2015, more than 1.8 billion people were affected by over 2,400 natural disasters in 196 countries (IEP 2017:49). In addition to earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic eruptions, extreme climate events such as hurricanes, major storms, wild fires and heat waves are occurring worldwide, often in places that have never before had experience with such weather. In the face of such events, the international community has drawn together in an effort to reduce risk and increase resilience. One aspect of this is the general awareness that sustainable development plays an important role in disaster risk reduction (DRR), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reflect that position. Similarly, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 reflects the need for sustainable development. In addition, both the Sendai Framework and the SDGs recognize the importance of making policy sensitive to the needs of women and marginalized people. Of particular relevance here is Priority 4 of the Sendai Framework, which calls for learning from past disasters in order to "Build Back Better" and stresses that "Empowering women and persons with disabilities to publicly lead and promote gender equitable and universally accessible response, recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction approaches is key" (Sendai Framework: 32). In addition, "a gender, age, disability and cultural perspective should be integrated in all policies and practices, and women and youth leadership should be promoted" (19-d). The participation of women in disaster preparedness and disaster response is seen as being essential for the reduction of disaster risk. [1]

　　The purpose of this paper is to critically explore the question of gender and disaster, suggesting that much of the current thinking and practice serves to reproduce understandings of gender rather than transform them. The first part of the paper will look at issues of gender and disaster, giving a short introduction to some of the issues involved followed by a discussion of the meaning of gender and resilience in the context of peace. The second part will introduce the stories of four women who experienced the Great Northeast Japan Earthquake. These stories have been compiled through interviews and conversations occurring between 2011 and 2018 in the context of the Popoki Friendship Story Project, a support project organized shortly after the 2011 disaster (See Alexander 2018[a]). The stories illustrate women's

involvement with community after disaster and speak to the range of women's responses and challenges. While in some ways the women can be said to have been empowered, their stories suggest that they do not necessarily want empowerment, and that inclusion does not necessarily lead to transformation. The paper concludes with a reflection on theory and practice, stressing the importance of gender equity and equality as a prerequisite to transformative practices in DRR. Working to foster peace before crises occur is therefore important for making societies more resilient and for greater inclusion and diversity during and after disaster.

Why gender and disaster?

Disaster affects everyone but if affects women and men differently. Generally speaking, women are thought to be more likely than men to die in disaster and women who belong to marginalized groups are even more at risk. [2] For example, more than 70% of the victims of the 2004 Asian 'Boxing Day' tsunami were women. There are many reasons for this discrepancy. A few of the most often cited causes include, for example, the fact that women often have lower levels of education and less understanding of disaster risk and disaster preparedness than men, and that women are often with young children, making running away more difficult (See for example Ciampi et. al. 2011, International Recovery Platform, Ariyabandu 2009, Pincha 2008, Endo 2012，Yamaji 2013). While differences between female and male physiology might affect a person's ability to escape, the social relations of gender are far more important in determining the likelihood of survival for women and for men.

Gender continues to be an important factor throughout the recovery process because it not only affects access to social, economic and political resources, but also shapes the ways individuals, organizations and institutions respond to disaster and their expectations for recovery (Alway et. al. 1998, Enarson 2009). When lives and livelihoods are destroyed by disaster, gender affects the ways people respond, the opportunities available to them, and what they understand as their options. After disaster, there is often an increase in gender based violence, including, in some circumstances, increased trafficking in women and girls. When homes are destroyed, the number of people living in remaining structures grows, increasing the burden on women in their capacity as caregivers. Disaster might make some people in need

of special assistance more visible, but the needs of others, particularly women and marginalized groups often go unnoticed. Rebuilding destroyed communities offers some women new opportunities for work and social engagement, but for others, men and women alike, the loss from destruction might lead to desperation and even suicide.

As in other fields, initially the needs of women in disaster were assumed to be the same as, or to be subsumed in, those of men. However, beginning in the 1990's, the international community began to look at gender when facing ever increasing numbers of disasters. Initially this meant emphasis on the special needs of women. Today the focus tends to be on women's vulnerability. Capacity is given less emphasis, and strategies often fail to acknowledge the intra-sectional differences that make particular women more vulnerable than others (Ryder: in press, Ariyabandu 2009). [3] A list of such vulnerabilities might include, for example, highly vulnerable women; poor or low-income women; refugee women; homeless women; senior women; women with cognitive or physical disabilities; women heading households; widows and frail elderly women; indigenous women; recent migrants; women with language barriers; women in subordinated cultural groups; socially isolated women; caregivers with numerous dependents; women in shelters/homeless women subject to assault or abuse; women living alone; chronically ill women; undocumented women; and malnourished women and girls (Enarson 2000:6. See also Enarson 2009). Transwomen and other sexual minorities who identify as women should also be included in this list.

Disaster can have different implications for women and for men, particularly where legal and social systems do not incorporate gender equality. Women in general and vulnerable women such as those above in particular might face violence and other problems during or after disaster and have more difficulty returning their lives back to normal. For example, regardless of the type of disaster, debris, flooding, toxins or other pollutants, as well as damage to important infrastructure can have severe implications for agriculture capability and livelihoods.

Women are generally expected to be responsible for food preparation and caring for families. After disaster, nutritional needs might be given less priority than those of men. In their capacity as caregivers, women might have to find and prepare

food for more people than usual because of having been joined by displaced relatives or friends but at the same time will likely face difficulties and dangers in finding food, safe drinking water, fuel and tools for food preparation. Similarly, living arrangements tend to be crowded with little privacy. Under such circumstances, women and sexual minorities are often subject to sexual violence and abuse.

Disasters also affect employment, and result in lost jobs. Women are more likely than men to be fired or laid off, and are also more apt to have been involved in small-scale enterprises that are disproportionately affected by disaster. As mentioned above, women have increased reproductive responsibilities that might make them less able to fulfill their economic responsibilities or access funding for recovery. This is made more difficult by the fact that often, international investment, capacity-building, and civil society support recovery hiring and/or training/re-training programs are established along stereotypical gender lines. Even if they do not intentionally target men, they do not necessarily give priority to gender equality. Rather, women are encouraged to engage in more traditional women's jobs such as making and selling handicrafts. In places where land and other rights are patriarchal, there may also be legal barriers that hinder women's economic independence and recovery.

Differences might also be evident in terms of medical care; women are frequently expected to provide care, but not given opportunities for their own healing. They might be also be less willing to request medical care or have limited access to sanitary arrangements and assistance with regard to reproductive health. Women, men and sexual minorities might also have differing needs for psycho-social support and grief care. Women, men and young people can all suffer from PTSD after disaster, but symptoms such as violence or substance abuse may be more visible in men than women. Often the psycho-social needs of children and youth are left to their mothers, who may themselves be in need of assistance. For young people, disaster might cause an interruption in schooling, robbing them of chances for education and for psycho-social support. After schools are re-established, the immediate needs of the family can impede attendance, and crowded temporary housing can make concentration and studying difficult. While this is true for both young women and men, the burden of family duties tends to fall on girls and women, while expectations for

the resumption of study and work are generally higher for boys and men. One of the most troubling problems for women and girls during and after disaster is the increase in violence against women. Perpetrators might be partners, friends, volunteers or strangers. In some instances, the increase in poverty and desperation brought on by disaster leads women and girls to fall victim to traffickers or resort to sex work for survival (Le Masson et. al. 2016).

　　　Of course, not all women will face the above problems. Not all women and all men are the same; categories of 'women' or 'men' are cross-cut by other social categories such as age, class or ethnicity and all social categories include women, men and/or other genders. Being aware that gender is important for all groups, and being sensitive to the needs of all genders is essential in order to save lives and help people to move on after disaster. According to UN Assistant Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction Margareta Wahlström, "Disaster risk reduction that delivers gender equality is a cost-effective win-win option for reducing vulnerability and sustaining the livelihoods of whole communities" (Wahlström in Ferris 2013: 71). This does not mean just noticing women at times of emergency. Rather, it requires adopting an approach that begins with aiming for social inclusion and gender equality under normal conditions, but also takes into account the factors that might make women and other marginalized genders vulnerable at times of disaster and providing long-term support for groups and networks of women and marginalized genders as they move toward recovery. These networks can evolve into powerful community organizations.

　　　The Sendai Framework, SDGs and other documents all demonstrate that the international community recognizes the importance of including women at all levels of disaster response. But in spite of these efforts, if you are a woman, it is still likely that, in comparison with men in the same situation, your chances of survival will be lower and you will have more difficulty putting your life back together afterwards (Le Masson et. al. 2016). One reason for this may be that while the relationship between resilience to disaster and sustainable development has been generally acknowledged, gender and resilience are not often discussed in the context of peace. Accordingly, the next section provides a brief look at peace and resilience, followed by a discussion of gender as being important for both.

Peace, resilience and gender

In the field of peace studies, peace is generally defined as an absence of violence and avoidable harm (Galtung 1990). To this negative definition I would add the stipulation that peace means that all living things are able to develop to the full extent of their abilities, and stress positive peace including justice, equity, equality and the full application of all human rights to all human beings (Reardon and Snauwaert 2015, Alexander 2018[d], UNGA 2017). In peaceful societies, social relations incorporate values and practices of social inclusion and diversity, meaning that more peaceful societies are likely to have more numerous and effective ways of communicating among disparate groups than less peaceful ones. In the ideal peaceful society, discrimination and prejudice would be replaced by strong, diverse communities linked in multiple ways. This understanding of peace assumes that multiple voices provide a range of opinions, some of which may be conflicting, and that more peaceful societies have developed the capacity to communicate differences and resolve conflicts in non-violent ways.

The degree to which a society is peaceful is related to resilience, or the ability of an individual, group or society to withstand and/or recover quickly from shocks, stress, disturbance and setbacks. Countries with higher levels of positive peace have attitudes, institutions and structures that create and sustain peace, measured in terms of resource distribution, governance, rights, etc. (IEP 2017: 7). These societies are more likely to be able to respond to shocks, including those resulting from natural disasters (51ff). [4] The Positive Peace Report 2017 states that while the number of natural disasters is similar, more people are killed in countries with lower positive peace due to lower levels of social cohesion, economic stability and infrastructure, suggesting that positive peace enhanced resilience through higher levels of such factors as adaptability, education and economic stability (49-52).

Most definitions of resilience concern the ability to bounce back in the face of adversity and assume resilience to be a good and desirable quality. However, this is not always the case. For example, patriarchy and gender hierarchies have proven to be extremely resilient, adapting and changing in the face of pressure for gender equality, but not going away (Alway 1998, Enloe 2017, Enarson 2018). Most

definitions focus on adaptability and response. Fran Norris suggests that resilience is a "process through which, after a disturbance, a set of adaptive capacities is linked to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation" (Planning Committee 2012). Norris focuses on community resilience, but her thinking can also apply to institutions and/or individuals. She emphasizes processes of adaptation and change, suggesting that communication is an essential factor in both successful adaptation and intervention. Barnett takes a different approach, suggesting that humans are innately resilient. Social bonds and norms of reciprocity persist during and after a disaster and serve to prevent panic. Rather than taking a technical approach, the removal of social obstacles that interfere with the expression of these bonds can enhance resilience (Mason 2006). The emphasis on process and on social relations and networks underscores the importance of peace in disaster mitigation. Because more peaceful societies have more numerous and complex networks for interaction and are generally better at communication and conflict resolution than less peaceful ones, they are more capable of finding ways for adaptation and intervention at times of shock or disturbance. For this reason we can conclude that more peaceful societies tend to have higher levels of resilience than less peaceful ones. [5]

One important pillar of positive peace is gender equality and equity. Gender is often defined as difference or in terms of norms for behavior, as in the UNESCO definition that reads, "Gender refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women that are created in our families, our societies and our cultures" (UNESCO 2003). Judith Butler takes a dynamic view, suggesting that gender is a norm and that it "operates within social practices as the implicit standard of *normalization*" (italics in the original, Butler 2004: 41). According to Butler, one cannot exactly "be" or "have" gender. Rather, it is the "apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes. To assume that gender always and exclusively means the matrix of the 'masculine' and 'feminine' is precisely to miss the critical point that the production of that coherent binary is contingent, that it comes at a cost, and that those permutations of gender which do not fit the binary are as much a part of gender as its most normative instance" (42). Thus gender can be both the mechanism that produces and naturalizes ideas of masculine

and feminine, but also the tool with which those ideas are deconstructed and denaturalized. Insisting on the gender binary as the only way to understand gender "performs a *regulatory* operation of power that naturalizes the hegemonic instance and forecloses the thinkability of its disruption" (43). The practical implication of this idea is that programs and projects that are sensitive to women's needs and aim to promote gender empowerment can, and often do, serve to re-create and/or reinforce not only the division of men and women into two opposing categories but in so doing they also reinforce the prioritization of men and masculinity.

Language is one area where ideas of masculine and feminine are naturalized and this in turn affects the ways we describe and understand such concepts as peace, resilience and disaster. Gender is important not only because it affects expectations for behavior but because it underlies all of our social institutions and understandings. Gender normalizes understandings of masculine and feminine based on a biological male/female binary, making other understandings appear 'abnormal'. Challenges to this gender binary often call for the establishment or naturalization of additional categories such as homosexual or transgender. What is being suggested here, however, is not that we should create new categories and by association new binaries, but rather that gender is flexible and dynamic. The importance of gender in the context of this paper is its power to naturalize and normalize particular behaviors and to make others invisible. So for example, the idea of 'gender and disaster' is most often understood as paying attention to women in situations of disaster rather than as considering the social relations that make some people more vulnerable than others. As a result, some marginalized people, sexual minorities for instance, become even more invisible.

Similarly, strategies for gender mainstreaming and/or women's empowerment that merely increase the number of women in leadership positions can also serve to reproduce gender binaries even as they may change or enlarge the boundaries of expectations for masculine and feminine behavior. Understanding gender simply as social expectations or ways of being and knowing emphasizes the category, e.g. women, while at the same time often making differences within that category hard to see. In order to understand why women tend to fare more poorly than men during and after disaster, we need take an intersectional approach that recognizes differences

among women such as class, race, age, or where they were and what they were doing when the disaster occurred, and also address the root causes of what made them vulnerable to begin with (See for example Enarson 2009, 2018, Ryder: in press).

In practical terms, understanding gender to include a spectrum of behaviors and expectations allows us to avoid a number of misconceptions when working in disaster or post-disaster situations. Some common assumptions might be that all women survivors are passive victims or that all women have similar needs. Often ideas about family go unquestioned so that women over a certain age are assumed to be mothers, married and to live with men or that women-led households are the poorest or most vulnerable. Another common assumption is that gender norms put women and girls at risk, but not men and boys. When assumptions about gender combine with those regarding class or ethnicity, they can impede consideration of perspectives of marginalized women such as undocumented workers, indigenous people or sex workers. In order to avoid these pitfalls, it is important to stress the need for transformational approaches to gender equality and the importance of positive peace.

Lessons from women in Northeast Japan

Several weeks after the 11 March 2011 earthquake disaster, I began what was to become known as the Popoki Friendship Story Project. [6] The project initially involved drawing freely on a long (500cm x 45cm) cloth, and slowly evolved to also include drawing, story-making and storytelling about being and feeling safe. In the current vocabulary of disaster assistance, this could be classified as psycho-social support. The project has focused primarily on communities affected by the 2011 tsunami, but activities have been conducted in Fukushima City and with people affected by the nuclear meltdowns, as well as in other communities around the world. Today, the project is continuing to evolve, changing focus and activities to accommodate changing needs as people move from temporary to regular housing and towns are rebuilt.

The following pages briefly introduce the stories of four women I met through the Popoki Friendship Story Project. Their stories are based on interviews and continuing conversations over the course of five or more years. The purpose of these

stories is not to draw broad outlines of what does or does not happen after disaster. Rather, taking each voice as unique and important in its uniqueness, the purpose is to illustrate a range of experiences that might help in thinking about how gender relations can be reproduced after disaster and how gender intersects with resilience and peace.

The stories were chosen because they reflect recurring themes in the stories collected through drawing and storytelling in the Popoki Friendship Story Project. One story was chosen to represent each of four themes: disaster creates new categories; disaster means having to adjust to new circumstances and lifestyles; relocation has far-reaching implications; and even those who are empowered by disaster do not necessarily seek to change gender norms. These themes are not meant to represent distinct categories, but rather important elements in the stories told by women survivors. Each story is preceded by a short introduction. A discussion of the stories appears after the fourth story.

Disaster creates new categories

Gender is always present, whatever the category or classification. The story of A. illustrates new categories and social divisions resulting from disaster, and shows how gender plays a role in the ways people react to, and understand their position with respect to those new social borders.

A. is a middle aged woman with grown children who experienced the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Her house and family were spared serious harm, but her town was completely destroyed. She explains that in the days right after the disaster she was busy trying to help others in any way possible. But gradually as outside help became available and things became more under control, she began to hesitate. She recalls that when people moved from evacuation centers to temporary housing, an unspoken border developed between those who had lost their homes and those who had not. It became difficult for A. to talk with people in temporary housing, even those who had been classmates and/or friends. But what was even more troubling for A. was the unspoken line drawn between those who had lost family and those who had not. In 2016, five years after the disaster, she shared that when she meets people she has not seen in a while on the street or in the market, she cannot not

say "hello". Instead she just bows her head. She does not even smile. The reason, she says, is that there is no way to know whether or not they are grieving. Saying "hello" in a tone that is too boisterous might be disrespectful of their grief and hurtful to them. She feels sad and disconnected from her former community but sees no immediate solution. She also shared that she was upset due to a controversy over a newly erected flower shop that was painted bright yellow. Some people thought that although an unusual color, it was cheerful and nice, but others thought it was disrespectful of those who were grieving. "It's harder for women," she says, because their connections are with the people in their neighborhoods and community spaces. It's not that they are no longer your friends, but that you can't be friendly" (A. 2016). A. is active in a community group made up primarily of women and now actively participates in Popoki's activities. At first, about three years after the disaster, she began to share her own story and try hard to convey the horror of the tsunami. Sometimes she is not up to seeing people at all. Recently, she has become part of Popoki's team, inviting others from her town to share their stories. She is engaging in activities that are new for her and represent adaptability and a willingness and desire to engage with her community in new and different ways.

Disaster means needing to adjust to new circumstances and lifestyles

Disaster destroys lives and livelihoods. People lose their jobs and homes, and often there are no immediate or similar replacements. For some, this is an opportunity to move in new directions, and gender can be a factor in what women and men understand to be their alternatives. Different opportunities are open to women and to men, although sometimes disaster is a chance for women to engage in work that they would have never before considered possible. [7] B.'s story illustrates that while disaster might change circumstances, it does not necessarily change values nor does it change gendered relations and/or gender performativity.

Before the tsunami, B. owned and ran a small restaurant and bar in a coastal town. She lost not only her home and business, but also two siblings in the disaster. She had been living alone in her house for a number of years, but it turned out that she was not the legal owner. When town officials offered her the opportunity to file a claim for assistance, she refused. She said that they made that offer because it was

a small town and they knew her situation; she was a single, older woman and they thought they were being kind. But, she said, it would be dishonest of her to accept. She wondered how could she live with herself or stay in that town where everyone knew everything, if she said "yes". She claims to have no interest in gender and says that it did not affect her decision, but confessed that she sometimes wonders if the same offer might have been made if she had been a man.

B. lived along what became the dividing line between where resettlement is considered to be safe and where it is prohibited. Her house was on the safe side of the line, but she says she is afraid to live there. She was offered a small apartment by a relative where she has lived since 2011. Her primary occupation and concern is to record was has happened in the town she knows and loves. An amateur photographer since childhood, she is photographing the progress of recovery. She says, "Everyone will forget that there was a town here. I am recording it so they will know" (B. 2016). If asked, she is happy to display her photographs and shares generously with people who are interested in what happened, but just the suggestion that she is doing it for money, even to support herself after the loss of her restaurant, is met with anger. Probably B. has been fiercely independent since her youth, but she finds the idea that it might be difficult for her to manage very offensive. Offers of special assistance and/or services designed especially for women would undoubtedly be met with resistance, but B. has adapted to her new situation and is doing valuable work in disaster awareness, even traveling abroad to do so.

Relocation has far-reaching implications

Disaster brings disruption and dislocation. While some people are able to return to where they lived before the disaster, others do not, or cannot do so. Many factors affect decisions about relocation, and gender is one of them. This is particularly visible with respect to relocation after the nuclear meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.[8]

I first met C. in 2014, three years after the disaster. C. was born and raised in a town inside the exclusion zone established after the nuclear explosions, and had been subject to forced evacuation. She was living with her husband in subsidized housing some distance away. She and her husband agreed to take me into the

exclusion zone and show me their former town. Inside the zone, we were given protective clothing and dosimeters, but she confessed to me that after so much initial exposure (before they were told about the situation and told to evacuate), she wondered if it really made a difference. She expressed concern about her husband's safety because his work took him into the forests, exposing him to radiation, but ambivalence about herself. C. told me that when they were first relocated, she had worked hard at trying to re-establish their life and ensure everyone's safety, but now she was just too tired to do anything. She missed having her grandchildren come to visit. She had never had to shop for vegetables; everyone had grown something and if she needed something she didn't have, she would trade with her neighbors. And for seasonal treats, she would go into the mountains and help herself to whatever was growing and looking delicious. She said that spending money for vegetables meant she had to calculate their living expenses in new ways. She added that she was having to learn how to cook all over again because the vegetables available in the stores were not fresh, and the varieties were sometimes different. Finally she said that since she tried not to go outside, she was growing fat and lazy. Asked if that was because of the radiation, she said "No." The reason, she said, was that those who were forced to evacuate were getting large compensation payments from the power company and her neighbors looked at her with mistrust. "They think we are using municipal services like trash collection but not paying taxes, and that we are getting rich without having to work. When I take out the garbage, my neighbors glare at me." The accusation of avoiding taxes was in fact incorrect, but C. felt that not only was she cut off from her old community, but that it was impossible to create a new one in her present location. In 2015, she began taking medication for depression, and in 2016 moved away from Fukushima Prefecture altogether.

Even those who are empowered by disaster do not necessarily seek to change gender norms

The disruption caused by disaster can be seen as an opportunity for empowerment that enables women to take new challenges and move in new directions. Documents like the Sendai Framework envision this in the call for gender mainstreaming, women's empowerment and women's social and political

participation. D.'s story helps us to think about whether the opportunities for women's empowerment after disaster serve to transform gendered assumptions and understandings or to re-create them, perhaps in different settings.

D. left her small town in northeastern Japan as a young woman, seeking education, employment and adventure in other parts of Japan and abroad. By 2011 she had returned to northeastern Japan to work in a town several hours from her hometown. Soon after the earthquake and tsunami struck, she found herself helping to support relief and recovery efforts in her hometown, a place that had suffered severe damage. That work there eventually led her to found an NPO focusing on community-building and recovery. D. works with women and with men, but most of those involved on a regular basis are women. She coordinates a wide range of activities, lending support for outside groups offering relief/recovery activities and fostering programs for residents with a variety of special needs and/or interests. The NPO receives public funding and D. is kept busy with a seemingly endless list of activities.

At first glance, D. is a good example of someone who saw an opportunity after disaster and was able to use it to enrich her life. In this sense, her experience can be called one of personal empowerment. At the same time, regardless of what her personal beliefs about gender may be, the content of the programs she offers and coordinates build on conventionally held ideas about gender rather than challenging them. When asked about disaster and women's empowerment, D. tends to roll her eyes and remain silent. And, while she does important work and is very good at it, the work itself is care work; it does not necessarily challenge gender as a norm, although the self-made position as coordinator of the organization in and of itself may be seen as such a challenge.

Each of these four stories is unique, but they all tell a story of the disruption of community relations and, in different ways, illustrate women responding to disaster in their roles as care givers and community members. Each of the women is, or has been, engaged in community work and played a role in raising disaster awareness; each of them has adapted and found new ways to engage with the world. In this sense, they can be said to have been empowered. At the same time, while they do

not necessarily ask for it, each of the women appreciates and uses Popoki's long-term support.

A., finding herself unable to reach out to her former community, focused on creating a new one, of which Popoki is a part. Rather than challenging gender roles or understandings, she uses them to establish new lines of communication and to maintain a bare minimum of connection with her former community. A.'s story provides a good example of how women can take on new roles and perform a proactive role in building disaster awareness and community resilience. At the same time, her story underscores the time, energy and willpower necessary for moving ahead. She may manipulate and work around gender norms to accomplish goals, but does not appear to have any desire to change them.

B. is contributing to building resilience in her community and beyond, and she has become a strong Popoki supporter. The content and scope of her activities is different from what it was before the disaster. Her activities are now focused on preserving what is left of the memory of her town and preventing similar tragedies in the future. She has demonstrated adaptability and flexibility in rebuilding her life, and is engaging with the public in new ways so in that sense, she has been empowered. But the personal changes that B. has experienced do not seem to translate into transformation of her personal understanding of gender or the understandings of her community. Probably, if she had a choice, she would prefer to return to her former life, even if it means giving up the network of friends, supporters and empowerment she has gained since the disaster.

C. is an example of someone who, in the end, has rejected the idea of empowerment in favor of returning to something that resembles her former life. In this she is typical of many disaster survivors who at first are active but as time goes on and things do not improve, grow tired and feel overworked and overburdened. It is hard to be both an evacuee and an activist or supporter, particularly in a situation like the nuclear disaster where the future is very unclear, the stakes very high and the situation extremely politicized. C. would just as soon leave politics to her husband. Some women, especially those with young children, learned about radiation and how to protect themselves, going on to become activists and to play leading roles in campaigns for safe food, medical care and in opposition to nuclear power.

C. is not necessarily less concerned than these women, but she has taken a much more passive approach. Although C. adapted to a new lifestyle and did play a role in promoting disaster awareness, the disaster did not change her understanding of gender nor has it been empowering.

Of the four stories, D.'s story is the one that most resembles the model of empowerment envisioned in most discussions of gender and disaster. Not only did she establish an organization with the objective of rebuilding the community, but she chose to return to her hometown, a decision that meant returning to family and community obligations and expectations from which she had sought to escape. As director of an NPO, her responsibilities include negotiating with government officials as well as other private and public organizations. Her work no doubt extends beyond the borders of conventional gender expectations, even though the work itself is very much in line with most understandings of gender roles. D. has been empowered, or perhaps has empowered herself, but rather than transforming gender relations in her community she is building on them and utilizing them in her work. At the same time, her leadership may provide an opportunity that over time leads to more visible social change.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to think critically about gender and disaster. The first part illustrated the ways in which women are said to be more vulnerable than men during and after disasters. The importance of an intersectional approach and of understanding gender as not only the roles the women and men play in their societies but in the context of social relations and power was stressed along with the need to challenge gender binaries and to recognize multiple genders.

The paper then looked briefly at peace and resilience, suggesting that societies with high levels of positive peace are more able to respond to shocks from natural disasters than less peaceful societies because they have more numerous and diverse networks for communication and for solving problems in non-violent ways. Because peaceful societies are more inclusive and respectful of diversity, gender relations are more equal and equitable. In practice, societies that begin with greater gender equality are more likely to respond to disaster in gender sensitive ways.

Disaster strategies that call for gender empowerment through increasing women's participation after disaster and focus primarily on gender roles and numbers of women run the risk of reproducing the gender binaries and hierarchies they are seeking to overcome. If disaster is to serve as an opportunity for transforming understandings of gender that transformation has to have begun before the disaster occurs. Gender-sensitive disaster strategies are important, but if they come without consideration having been given to the root causes of gender inequality, they may not bring about very much change. In fact, it is more likely that those strategies will be used to manipulate normalized understandings of the gender binary and roles of women and men, although that might happen in some new and perhaps progressive ways.

The introduction of four stories from northeastern Japan followed this discussion of gender, resilience and peace. The stories were not intended to represent a universal view of women engaging with disaster, but to illustrate the need to think critically about the meaning of "gender and disaster" and to question the kind of gender empowerment it is meant to produce. The stories were illustrative of four different, but overlapping themes: disaster creates new categories; disaster means having to adjust to new circumstances and lifestyles; relocation has far-reaching implications; and even those who are empowered do not necessarily challenge gender norms. The themes all relate to women's roles and involvement with their communities and the stories show the struggles these women have had since their communities were destroyed. For these four women, empowerment was not at the top of their post-disaster priority list; in fact their stories seem more to illustrate the resilience of normalized gender roles and hierarchies and the ways women can use gender norms to accomplish their own goals.

If disaster is to be a window of opportunity for "building back better", we need to clarify what "better" means, and avoid gender sensitive approaches and empowerment strategies that reproduce gender binaries. Recognition of marginalized genders is essential, as is long-term support for women in leadership positions and also for those trying to re-establish their own communities. What is perhaps most important, however, is to recognize and work to eliminate the root causes of gender inequality before disaster happens. In order to accomplish this, strategies

for DRR must be situated in the context of building peaceful societies, and disaster preparedness linked with not only sustainable development but also with peace.

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Endnotes

1　In terms of recognition of gender, the Sendai Framework is an improvement over the Hyogo Framework for Action, but methodologies for implementation and measurement of success as well as funding issues are not clearly identified (Blanchard 2015).

2　Men have been found more likely to be killed or injured in floods due to disregard for warnings, overestimation of their driving skills or the capacity of their cars, concern to protect their families and land, etc. and can be disproportionately exposed to toxic hazards, as in the case of response teams during the Fukushima nuclear disaster (Enarson 2018).

3　Enarson (2018) points out that the current emphasis on vulnerability rather than on special needs has made structural differences and inequalities visible.

4　The positive peace approach is a systems approach. While the factors necessary to build resilience are different from those needed to stop conflict, positive peace contributes to thriving economies, better inclusion, high levels of resilience and societies that are more capable of adapting to change, allowing for adaptability and providing incentives for non-violent conflict resolution. These are all important in responding to disaster (IEP 2017).

5　Highly authoritarian regimes can be very effective at rescue and reconstruction efforts after disaster, often suppressing opposition during the recovery phases. This may give the appearance of very high levels of resilience. Here, however, resilience is linked to respect for human rights and freedoms and to peace.

6　See Alexander 2018[a] and Popoki Peace Project http://popoki.cruisejapan.com/, including monthly activity reports in English and Japanese in the Archives.

7　An interesting example from Northeast Japan is that a number of women, after seeing men working hard to clear rubble and reconstruct destroyed towns, decided to get licenses for earth movers and other heavy

machinery (Nikkan Iwate Kensetsu Kogyou Shimbun 2016).

8　No discussion of relocation after the nuclear disaster is complete without mentioning the so-called "voluntary" evacuation of women who have left their communities and often their husbands in order to protect the health of their children. Some of these women have become active in law suits and social movements, others remain isolated and alone (See Alexander 2018[b], 2018[c]).