# The epistemological non-sense of disaster studies and some more sensible prospects

**JC Gaillard**

The University of Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand

North-West University, South Africa

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*Terms such as 'masculine' and 'feminine' are notoriously changeable; there are social histories for each term; their meanings change radically depending upon geopolitical boundaries and cultural constraints on who is imagining whom, and for what purpose.* J. Butler[1]

There is a puzzling paradox in disaster studies. Many, if not most of its proponents, claim that disasters are social constructs. However, we, in our vast majority, also resort to concepts, methodologies and broader epistemologies that we take for universal. For instance, we use and apply concepts such as 'disaster', 'vulnerability', 'resilience' and 'risk', which share a Latin etymology, in all sorts of contexts around the world, assuming that they help us understand how people across very diverse cultures and societies make sense of what we call 'natural hazards'. This is antithetical; an epistemological non-sense.

This tension between, on the one hand, our theoretical claims, and, on the other hand, our actual epistemological approaches reflects the hegemony of Western, Eurocentric discourses on disaster. So hegemonic that they have become common sense in Gramsci's lingo.[2] According to feminist scholar Ferguson[3]:

> *...the questions we can ask about the world are enabled, and other questions disabled, by the frame that orders the questioning. When we are busy arguing about the questions that appear within a certain frame, the frame itself becomes invisible; we become enframed within it.*

In disaster studies, this frame is a Western one and reflects a scholarly legacy that dates back to the Enlightenment ages. Contemporary disaster studies can be tracked to Europe in the 18th Century when disasters were explicitly positioned at the interface of nature and society, or hazard and vulnerability in the jargon of the field. It is then that the project of modernity made it a priority to free people from the hazards of nature so they could live a prosperous life.[4] Since then, the nature/hazard-society/vulnerability binary, celebrated in the famous mnemonic 'disaster = hazard x vulnerability' (or any iteration of this), has polarised disaster studies. This is true in the West, where the binary makes sense, but beyond, its relevance is rather dubious. Nonetheless, the binary between hazard and vulnerability and the different paradigms it sustains have been considered as the only relevant truth wherever in the world; the 'imperial truth of the West' in Eboussi-Boulaga's words.[5]

The study of gender in disasters reflects the same Western legacy. It is predominantly framed through the dialectical lens of the categories of man and woman in a binary interpretation of the world that some have brought under an overarching polarisation of nature and society/culture akin to the dominant understanding of disasters.[6,7] Furthermore, the dominant view that both gender and disasters are intertwined social constructs is at odds with the near-universal prominence given to biological dimorphism in underpinning gender identities. It becomes hard to disagree with Nigerian gender scholar Oyěwùmí[8] that:

> *...if gender is socially constructed, then gender cannot behave in the same way across time and space. (...) From a cross-cultural perspective, the significance of this observation is that one cannot assume the social organization of one culture (the dominant West included) as universal or the interpretations of the experiences of one culture as explaining another one.*

The hegemony of such Western discourses on both gender and disaster results from unequal power relationships between researchers around the world; a legacy of centuries of colonialism and imperialism on the side of Europe. Disaster studies

are dominated by scholars from the West, for whom advantageous political and material conditions make it easy to conduct fieldwork in Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Pacific. This is a privilege seldom returned to scholars from these regions. It is through this colonial and imperialist agenda that Western ontologies and epistemologies have been imposed as common sense, including in the studies of gender and disaster. Indian historian Chakrabarty[9] stated that:

> *…'they' [Western historians] produce their work in relative ignorance of non-Western histories, and this does not seem to affect the quality of their work. This is a gesture, however, that 'we' [Indian historians] cannot return. We cannot even afford an equality or symmetry of ignorance at this level without taking the risk of appearing 'old fashioned' or 'outdated'.*

This holds true for the study of gender in disaster and for disaster scholarship in general. This needs to change so that there is enough space for non-Western perspectives to emerge. These alternative perspectives are crucial to reflect the realities of millions of people around the world, including *Fa'afafine, Hijra* and *Berdache* whose identity does not conform to the man-woman binary, and to better support their own desires and address their unique concerns. This agenda does not mean throwing Western concepts, categories, theories and methodologies out of the window. It rather means limiting their application to contexts where they make sense, which is, simply, the places where they emerged. As disaster pioneer scholar Wisner[10] argued that it is about taking 'a holiday from the research protocols, methods, tools – the bag of tricks that disasterologists carry'.

Gender is probably a very good 'place' to start in view of reconsidering broader approaches to studying disaster. Asymmetrical power relationships between men and women are obviously essential to comprehending people's experiences of natural hazards wherever these 2 categories make sense and mirror a cultural reality. Nonetheless, these categories and unequal power relations as rightly studied in the West, cannot be taken as universal. Wittig[11], Lazreg[12], Oyěwùmí[8] and Lugones[13] reveal that these categories are irrelevant in other regions of the world. Wittig suggests they are 'myths' while Lugones speaks of 'fictions' and Oyěwùmí of 'inventions'. Gender identities mirror social and cultural relationships unique to local contexts rather than the alleged universal materiality of biological differences and dimorphism. As such, gender should be considered a context-specific issue—very much as should what we call disasters.

This is exactly the path that the disaster studies manifesto Power, Prestige and Forgotten Values[14] encourages us to take. One that fosters grounded, relevant, fair and genuine research on disaster. One that requires local researchers and/or those who are deeply grounded in the places they study to initiate in framing, conducting and sharing research. One that builds on local ontologies and epistemologies and maximises local resources. One that ultimately encourages locals to think, be and act by themselves and for themselves to paraphrase Senghor[15] and Salazar[16], in an organic and indigenous search for authenticity.[5] Searching for authenticity will allow us to look forward rather than backward, to reimagine a future away from the West and its colonial legacy.

This radical turn in the way disasters are studied is not to exclude outside researchers, including those from the West. In today's research environment, Western scholars are often those who have access to resources. They can help leverage power relations with other stakeholders of disaster risk reduction. The agenda in the manifesto is therefore one of dialogue. It builds on trust and rapport. However, as Chakrabarty[9] indicates, 'a dialogue can be genuinely open only under one condition: that no party puts itself in a position where it can unilaterally decide the final outcomes of the conversation'.

Following this path suggests a long but essential journey. One that is challenging and rewarding. As Spivak[17] writes:

> *…if we want to start something, we must ignore that our starting point is shaky. If we want to get something done, we must ignore that the end will be inconclusive.*

Finally, as Delphy[18], another pioneer feminist scholar, noted, 'having the courage to confront the unknown is a precondition for imagination, and the capacity to imagine another world is an essential element in scientific progress'.

## Endnotes


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