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Locating the politics of disasters

*A qualitative exploration of disaster, risk, and gender in
post-tsunami Sri Lanka*

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Abstract

This thesis is a critical exploration of disaster, risk, and gender, using Sri Lanka as a case for to address broader questions related to relief and reconstruction phases in post-disaster settings. Part of the main objective of the thesis is to investigate the intersection between humanitarianism, disaster, and development, of which constitutes an important conceptual, political, and practical focus for agencies involved in relief and aid practices.

The analytical framework is grounded in the discursive ways disasters are understood. The thesis goes on to argue that to understand who is at *risk*, we must first understand how disasters are conceptualized and operationalized. This is done by analyzing how *vulnerability* can be part of constructing disaster discourses of *victims*. Lastly, I argue that not only are discourses of disasters connected to relief and reconstruction processes, but that they also manifest in how aid is delivered. More specifically, the study problematizes how humanitarians are seen as *neutral, independent* actors in the post-disaster landscape whereas their actions are the results of negotiated, contested spaces between politics and local governments. Locating the *politics of disasters*, then, becomes the overall aim of the thesis.

Ultimately, the thesis argues that disaster risk policies require greater attention at how spaces are politicized, especially in relation to relief and reconstruction phases, and furthermore, how these spaces manifest within the *everyday* practices of aid. As such, the thesis does not only discuss the challenges in the post-tsunami setting of Sri Lanka, but also advocates the need for further engagement within the processes and outcomes of different discourses within disaster scholarship. Future research must not only continue to study how disasters are constructed, but also how vulnerability is understood.

Preface

During my stay in Sri Lanka for my bachelor's thesis I visited several tsunami-affected communities located in the southern part of Sri Lanka, more specifically in the district of Galle. These villages were commonly referred to as *tsunami villages*; houses built for the displaced and homeless, funded by international aid. Typically, local government would provide the land and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) would fund the houses. At that time, I was mostly concerned about how implementation of disaster risk reduction (DRR) measures had manifested in the everyday lives of people. It was however during conversations with these communities as they were showing me around their new homes that I would come across something that spiked my curiosity. Several of the beneficiaries I visited complained about the lack of kitchens, which at the time felt oddly absurd. Surely, one cannot build houses without kitchens? Dubious if I had understood the conversation fully, I asked my translator to elaborate. He shrugged and said: 'Westerners don't cook that much; they mostly eat take-away'.

I never really figured out why the tsunami villages of Galle were missing kitchens. Most had solved the problem by adding an extension to their house, typically in their backyard. It was however still something that never really left my mind. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic stopped me from traveling back to Sri Lanka in search for more answers. Despite that, my curiosity of the missing kitchens of Galle started what eventually would become this thesis, albeit somewhat more theoretically grounded than what I first envisioned. The missing kitchens should not merely be mistaken as simply implementation gone wrong, but rather as implementation without the necessary local understanding of specific place and space. Indeed, the role of the kitchen in South-Asian households held a different meaning than in the West; it is evident in the layout of the houses which did not give any meaning to the beneficiaries. It is within these nuanced understandings that I critique the Western hegemony of post-disaster relief and reconstruction in the global south; shifting my attention to how disaster scholarship at large has been developed in the West for western institutions to apply in crises in the global south.

There are several people I would like thanking for helping me. First and foremost; thank you to my supervisor Andrea Nightingale. I am extremely grateful for your guidance and advice throughout this process! I think it is safe to say I would not be writing this without you. Your patience, knowledge and advice has been of tremendous help. Thank you for always believing in me, and for making me believe in myself.

Thank you to all of those that have shared their knowledge and expertise with me, both in-person and through the *digital field*. I am grateful you found the time to talk and interact with me, I never imagined it would be possible to conduct a field study from my own room; you made me believe it could happen. Thanks to my all my fellow students at Human Geography. It has been quite the journey! And, quite different than what we originally envisioned. I cannot even start to count how many hours we have spent together on Zoom the last year. I will remember our late nights at the reading hall and our (too long) coffee breaks and our meet-up outside when Oslo was closed; I do not think I would have made it without you.

Thank you to all of you that have been hearing me endlessly ranting about Sri Lanka and feminist theory for the last two years. Mom and dad, thanks for always listening, and for always supporting me. Vilde, thanks for always picking up (even when I am calling when are about to sleep). Ola, thanks for always finding time for our evening walks/pep-talks. Hannah and Ida; thank you for stepping up when I needed that extra push, and for helping me pull this thesis together.

And lastly, thanks to Ingvild for persuading me to travel to Sri Lanka in the first place.

All mistakes are entirely my own.

Kristine Th. L. Hansen, Oslo

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Acronyms and abbreviations

CBDRR Community-based approaches to disaster risk reduction

CERF Central Emergency Response Fund

DM Disaster Management

DRG Disaster Risk Governance

DRM Disaster Risk Management

DRR Disaster Risk Reduction

GoSL Government of Sri Lanka

HFA Hyogo Framework for Action

INGOs International Non-Governmental Organizations

IUCN International Union for Conservation of Nature

LTTE Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

NGIs Non-Governmental Individuals

OCHA Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

SFDRR The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction

UNISDR United Nations Strategy for Disaster Reduction

UNDP United Nations Development Programme

UNDRR UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

The tsunami devastated coastal areas across the Indian Ocean, killing approximately 230,000 people and causing some 1,7 million people to be displaced (Oxfam, 2009:7). In Sri Lanka, 35,300 people died and over 100,000 homes were destroyed or badly damaged, leaving over half a million people homeless (Oxfam, 2005:3). Nothing undermines sustainable development like a disaster. In a matter of seconds, decades of progress can be destroyed. An essential part of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is thus linked to understanding and managing disasters, as stated in the recent Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction (GAR, 2022). But to understand who is at risk, implies a specific understanding of disasters as social phenomenon's, with socio-economic and political dimensions to it. As Hyndman (2011:3) remarks: "disasters do not occur in a political or economic vacuum" arguing how geographies of inequality, gender relations, and ethnicity also are part of shaping the response and recovery for those who survive disasters.

The thesis examines how international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) interact with local governance during relief and reconstruction phases, paying special attention to how aid distributions became contentious in the post-disaster setting of Sri Lanka. The overwhelming response to help the relief and reconstruction phases attracted unprecedented levels of international aid. The UN central relief fund (today, CERF) raised over 6.25 billion US dollars to assist the 14 countries most affected, 651.6 million US dollars went to Sri Lanka (Reddy, 2018:6). In total, "The way the international community responded to the tsunami raised the bar on what was possible for humanitarians to do" commented Jan Egeland, then UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator (OCHA), (The New Humanitarian, 2004). However, as hundreds of agencies arrived at the scene of destruction, those that had not been caught by the initial two waves of the tsunami were soon struck by a 'third wave' (Silva, 2009) a 'second tsunami' (Reddy, 2018:1) or 'the tsunami after the tsunami' (Korf, 2007:367) of aid money. The global aid wave that hit the island attempted to translate Western generosity into practices of support, however managing aid appropriately and effectively is a challenging task.

To begin to address the specific challenges and complexities the above section raises, I argue that seeing the *political* and the social structures within what are commonly considered to be apolitical spaces of humanitarianism has often been left unexplored in post-disaster analysis. One

notable exception being Eriksen et, al. (2017). For humanitarian response to avoid undermining longer term transformation, they call for new thinking around the links between short-term responses to emergencies and longer-term transformation (Eriksen et, al. 2017:116). The way different institutions in humanitarian response are connected are part of this political landscape in determining which voices and problems is heard (Eriksen et, al. 2017:118).

The story of the missing kitchens in Galle I recounted in the preface inspired me empirically to better understand what happens when short-term relief projects encounter the complex environment of development. Theoretically, the paper draws inspiration from the initiative behind the ‘Disaster Studies Manifesto’ (see appendix 1) in which concerns over how disaster studies are not always informed by local realities is expressed. Transitioning from acute crises, back to a state of normalcy, then, is closely linked to relief, rehabilitation, and development. By placing disasters within the context of the *everyday*, the overall aim of the thesis is to contribute towards a more political, locally grounded, and de-colonial framework for understanding disasters. Moving forward, the thesis will explore these claims with reference to the post-tsunami relief and reconstruction site in Sri Lanka by turning the frame of analysis back upon the spaces and practices INGOs and local governments operate within.

This thesis engages with current debates within the disaster scholarship, which have turned to reconstructing the conceptual understanding of disasters. This turn has been linked to a more significant paradigm shift, in which greater emphasis has been placed on critically analyzing the response- and relief processes in post-disaster settings (Gaillard, 2019:8). My perspective is critical, but the criticism is not directed towards those working in aid, but rather asking whether aid goes far enough in making good on its promises. In turn, several analytical frameworks now aim to translate policy into practice. As such, there is growing attention to how *gender* and *vulnerability* are being conceptualized and operationalized. The concept of vulnerability has become a mainstay within disaster scholarship; however, critics claim that vulnerability has been ‘emptied of its political and social essence’ (Gaillard, 2019:10).

1.1 Research objectives and questions

There are two specific research objectives to the thesis. The first objective is aimed at understanding what disasters are, and how aid agencies interpret these understandings in relief- and reconstruction phases. This also represents an opportunity to engage in broader debates about disaster risk and disaster management in general. The second objective is concerned with how vulnerability is produced and maintained in the post-disaster setting.

I approach these research objectives by proposing an interdisciplinary approach to the understandings of risk and vulnerability by synthesizing epistemological stances and theoretical perspectives within these realms of thought and applying them to real-world disasters. As such, the thesis is anchored in geographical thought, but engages with literature related to humanitarianism, disasters, and development studies.

The following research questions has been developed:

1. How can humanitarian aid maintain and reproduce vulnerability?

The question is investigated by studying the following, more specific sub-questions:

1.1. Who do we understand as victims of disasters?

It is by unfolding these everyday realities which are the main aims of the thesis, that it becomes pertinent to also understand that well-intentioned humanitarian responses have led to various unintended consequences (Reddy, 2018:9). I utilize geographical thought, and more specifically feminist geography, as a spatial lens for my study. By engaging with the everyday, the thesis aims at providing a grounded analysis on how the impact, and the following relief and reconstruction after 2004-Indian Ocean tsunami, disproportionately affected different groups within society. The aim as such is therefore to move beyond a simple dichotomy of opposing powerful external actors and victimized recipients of aid. The thesis follows feminist critiques in their approach, in which they argue that gender has lost its meaning and rather becomes a catchphrase at the expense of a more differential understanding of the multiple and changing situations of both women and men in crises (Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead 2004; El-Bushra 2000). This is done by moving beyond narratives of disasters resulting in either peace or conflict, and instead, engaging with the political space where the two realms interact through the perspective of the disaster researcher. This is part of the first step towards thinking about a more political, locally grounded, and decolonized

framework for understanding disasters, and the various ways in which they interact with conflict (Siddiqi, 2018:1665). By *locating* the politics of disasters then, the contestation of the apolitical scene in which INGOs operate is contested.

1.2 Scope and limitations

It should be noted the thesis specifically addresses the relief and reconstruction phases in Sri Lanka, the potential of generalizability is thus limited to the specific case in question. That does not however rule out alternative sites to *locating* the politics of disasters. Aceh, Indonesia for instance had some of the similar pre-conditions as Sri Lanka prior to the 2004-tsunami. However, due to the time restrictions imposed on this research, any comparative studies would have been too extensive, and beyond the scope and resources available.

Similarly, studying the case from a distance through a '*digital fieldwork*' has its limitations. I was never able to visit Sri Lanka due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which substantially limits the degree of knowledge, and my understanding of the complex events and processes taking place on the ground. While fundamentally a conceptual thesis, the study is informed by engaging with the disaster research community through digital means and supported by empirical data from Sri Lanka, mostly from secondary sources. The constraints applied by COVID-19 forced me to conceptualize alternatives for collecting data, but it also led me to engage with broader ethical questions related to data collection and disaster research, as well as the transformative capacity of fieldwork as a method. As a result, my thesis is at large built upon secondary literature, and will not read as a typical case study as such.

Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic also affected me personally. Throughout the last year, Oslo has been in and out of multiple lockdowns, and while it was my choice to stay in the city, I did not fully consider the physical, nor emotional toll it had on me. It is only now, by looking back on the last year, that I have started to fully grasp the extent the pandemic has had on my body and mind. These reflections and the subsequent changes that had to be made to the research design are further addressed in the methodological chapter.

1.3 Situating Sri Lanka

The impact of the tsunami was catastrophic. In Sri Lanka alone, more than 36,000 people lost their lives and another 800,000 were displaced (Hyndman, 2009:880). It is, however, the specific

political context of conflict which makes Sri Lanka an interesting case for this thesis. Caught in a decades long civil war, the government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) suddenly found itself side by side with the rebel group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in delivering relief and helping those affected by the tsunami. Initial domestic and international responses were optimistic, it was hoped that the LTTE controlled territories in the North and East could create new incentives between the two parties to collaborate, instead the INGOs arriving found themselves in a highly politicized conflict (Kleinfeld, 2007:171). Whereas the immediate response after the tsunami was motivated by the humanitarian imperative of helping ‘save lives’, the spontaneous ‘*humanitarian peace*’ which emerged did not, however, succeed in bringing the GoSL and LTTE closer together towards a permanent peace agreement. Rather, the tsunami and following re-construction processes was instead accused of discriminate towards LTTE-controlled areas (Thamilmaren, 2018:57-60).

1.4 Content structure

The thesis is divided into 7 chapters. After the introduction, **Chapter 2** approaches disasters theoretically by questioning *what disasters are, and how to connect them to the everyday*. By claiming disasters as social constructions, the purpose is to understand how actors give specific meaning to disasters and further how these perceptions manifest in the political space(s) after disasters. **Chapter 3** discusses and justifies the methodological choices and methods applied to answer my research question. In addition, the chapters describe any changes made to the research design due to COVID-19. **Chapter 4** is the first of three empirical chapters grounding the tsunami response to the case of Sri Lanka. The chapter and the following two chapter draw on data collected to explore *how can humanitarian aid maintain and reproduce vulnerability?* In **Chapter 5** the concept of the ‘*Tyranny of the urgent*’ as a critique to how international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) operate in the post-disaster landscape is explored. **Chapter 6** In **Chapter 7** I summarize and conclude by returning to the main objectives of the thesis and research questions. Finally, I close **chapter 7** by suggesting further research areas for DRR and geography.

CHAPTER 2: Theoretical approach

The theoretical foundation of the thesis answers the question: *How can humanitarian aid maintain and reproduce vulnerability?* The purpose of this thesis is therefore to identify *the everyday politics and practices of aid agencies in crisis affected areas* by drawing on Sri Lanka as an empirical case. First, I will provide a definition of what *disasters* are and how *disasters* are understood in this thesis. I will then argue that an inclusive understanding of DRR and DM is best captured by claiming disasters as social constructions. I thus follow Gaillard's (2021) quest to deconstruct disasters by adding a critical perspective in exploring knowledge and power structures within disaster scholarship and DRR.

I focus on two conventional views of disasters: *disasters as a technical problem* and *disasters as a social problem*. To understand who is affected by disasters, then, we need to turn our attention to how *vulnerability* is conceptualized and operationalized. To be more specific, we need to understand *who* we understand as vulnerable and why we do so. In this chapter, I will provide a conceptual framework for how vulnerability is used to construct victims of disasters. I start by claiming that disasters are a social phenomenon; this entails a critique on how conventional views of disasters at large have been too focused on the 'natural' component of disasters.

I apply the analytical lens of 'the everyday' to discuss the gendered aspects of political power, and how feminist political geographers have influenced the way in which gender politics are understood spatially, relationally and across multiple scales (Dowler and Sharp, 2001). Together, these insights from both disaster scholarship and feminist geography provide a theoretical base for how women have become constructed as vulnerable subjects in and through disaster scholarship and DRR policies. I begin the next section by taking a step back to deconstruct disasters as a phenomenon. My interrogation focuses on the ontological, epistemological, and ideological foundations that underpin disaster scholarship, DRR, and policy practices.

2.1 Defining disasters

This section will start by firstly outlining current discussions of disaster studies before linking these to the wider debate of disaster relief and reconstruction. The thesis will draw on the discussion on *what disasters are* in the subsequent chapters, as different understandings of drivers, impacts and responses to disasters are explored. In the following sections, I describe

two dominant discourses within disaster scholarship. These discourses are not meant to be comprehensive, nor fixed. However, by approaching disasters through these two discourses, my intention is to illustrate their power to demonstrate how disasters and disaster risk are understood and what outcomes they may produce.

Conventional views of disasters often focus on the ‘trigger’ role of geo-tectonics, climate or biological factors stemming from nature (Wisner et al. 2004:10). This has led disasters to be understood as sudden, external events caused by natural force; specific hazards, such as a tsunami or an earthquake, might be over in a matter of minutes. The disaster I speak of in this thesis is not merely constrained to physical hazards, rather, the term *disaster* is used here to capture both the *impact* but also the immediate *aftermath* of the hazard.

2.1.1 What are disasters?

What then are disasters? Attempts to answer this question are immediately met with a wide range of different technical definitions. However, typically, disasters are seen as “a harmful physical process or event” (Wisner, 2020:241). Similarly, in the policy domain, the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR, 2017) refers to disaster as:

“a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability, and capacity, leading to one or more of the following: human, material, economic or environmental losses and impacts”.

In this perspective, disasters are seen as disastrous events linked to an environmental phenomenon, such as a tsunami or an earthquake. This notion is part of the most prevalent discourse on disasters, known as the ‘hazard discourse’, which is linked to the hazard paradigm within disaster scholarship. Within the hazard paradigm, focus has been placed on the hazardous event itself, rather than the underlying social structures creating inequalities and vulnerability to natural hazards. The definition of hazard is provided by the UNDRR (2017) as: “a process, phenomenon or human activity that may cause loss of life, injury or other health impacts, property damage, social and economic disrupting or environmental degradation”. Overall, hazard discourse has a firm belief that societies can “take steps to avoid disasters through applying the appropriate technocratic measures properly carried out by bureaucratically organized and centrally controlled institutions” (Bankoff, 2001:24).

Disaster studies tend to focus on large, destructive events that overwhelm local communities who often rely on professional and charitable help. However, failed preparedness mainly comes from organizations and people in power cynically ignoring those at risk (Hewitt, 2016). Within critical disaster studies, attention is paid to the ways powerful people often use claims of technocratic expertise to maintain power. In this sense, being the source of *relief* in crisis situations can be seen as one way of staying in power. As such, disasters should not be segregated from people's everyday lives as it reveals how the risks involved in disasters must relate to the vulnerability created for many people through their normal existence (Wisner, et al. 2004:4). In this chapter, the evolution of thought on disasters is traced and placed within the wider conceptual debate about how we understand disasters and crises in the social sciences.

These embedded discourses in disaster research are not problematic, but when they emerge as the conventional framing in research communities and policy-making spaces, it becomes an issue as the researcher or practitioner enters the field with an already 'clear' understanding of the specific disaster without considering the knowledge situated to each place and space. To understand what disasters are, then, requires the exploration of knowledge and power structures in disaster scholarship and DRR. Conversely, asking what a disaster *is* is more than merely a definitional question. Ultimately, we need to move further and ask how disaster scholarship and DRR initiatives have come to be, and furthermore how they sustain broader ideologies that are part of shaping the world (Gaillard, 2021:2). Within disaster scholarship, part of answering this question lies in confronting the dominant Western ontological and epistemological heritage. Indeed, as Bankoff and Hilhorst (2009) shows, as different actors 'see' and understand disasters as different types of events, they also subsequently prepare for and manage them in very different ways.

As Gaillard (2021) illustrates, the attention of disaster scholarship has moved from the nature-hazard binary to the culture-vulnerability binary; this paradigm shift has been seen as a major step forward in understanding disasters and to reduce disaster risk by recognizing that disaster results from unequal distribution of power and resources between those who are more vulnerable and those who are less (Gaillard, 2021:44).

In the next section, the evolution of thought on disasters is situated within the wider conceptual debate about how disasters and crises have been understood. The thesis argues that

interpretations of disasters represent political choices, which in turn have political impacts on relief, recovery, and rehabilitation phases in post-disaster situations. The way actors frame and conceptualize disasters differently affects how they in turn prepare for, and manage disasters once they happen, and further, shows how different discourses in understanding disasters manifests in relief and development in post-disaster situations. Disaster situations reflect the structures already embedded within society; systems such as the economy, the government bureaucracy, and the legal system. However, as Fordham and Meyreles (2014:25) states, the management of disasters is still determined and governed by patriarchal structures and processes in which, despite the advances of recent years, continues to be resistant, or at the very least, dismissive of gender issues and thus failing to recognize the necessary participation of *all social* groups in DRR. Following this section, I therefore turn to how the linkages between disasters, politics and gender can be understood from a feminist geographical point of view.

A brief epistemology of a paradigm shift in the historical development of disasters

From the hazard paradigm of the 1970's, the view that disasters were natural was challenged (O'Keefe et al., 1976). Critiques of the hazard paradigm was that it focused on an external agent (namely *nature*) acting on impassive victims, through which a scientific and technical response was necessary. Hewitt (1983:9-12) argues that this technocratic approach has permitted hazard to be treated as a specialized problem for the advanced research of scientists, engineers, and bureaucrats, and so be appropriated within a discourse of expertise that quarantines disaster in thought as well as in practice. It also renders culpable such populations (or at least their governments) which are blamed for their lack of adequate knowledge and preparedness, that had the opportunity to reduce risk but failed to do so (Varley, 1994: 3). The reality, however, is somewhat more complex. The idea that disasters are simply unavoidable extreme physical events that require purely technocratic solutions remains the dominant paradigm within the UN and multilateral funding agencies such as the World Bank. Far from being discredited, such views have proven surprisingly enduring and are very influential at the highest levels of national and international decision-making. (Cannon, 1994: 16–17).

The *radical paradigm shift of the 1980's* saw the vulnerability turn that focused on the social dimensions of disasters. It highlighted the interplay between forces that lock the vulnerable into disaster prone areas such as failed development. While most within disaster scholarship are starting

to recognize that disasters are the result of unequal distribution of power and resources between those who are *vulnerable* and those who are less so, highlighting how even the most marginalized people in society are not ‘helpless’ victims’ when dealing with disasters (Gaillard, 2019:8).

In the 1990’s, vulnerability was incorporated into the emerging international disaster reduction framework. In the 2000’s, the idea of vulnerability was better integrated, showing how it stems from both natural hazards and socio-economic causes in efforts to prevent, mitigate, adapt, and reduce the risk of disasters. Recognizing the complex interplay of natural, political, and structural causes of disasters, interdisciplinary scholarship has framed disasters as risks that can be reduced, which in turn has become central to a state’s collective efforts to address disasters, as evidenced by the UN Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015-2030) (SFDRR).

2.2.1 Key concepts and definitions

Two concepts are central to disaster scholarship: 1) disaster management (DM), and 2) disaster risk reduction (DRR). Disaster management “is the application of disaster risk reduction policies and strategies to prevent new disaster risk, reduce existing disaster risk and manage residual risk, contributing to the strengthening of resilience and reduction of disaster losses” (UNDRR, 2017). From a technocratic point of view, disaster management can be analyzed as a need for improving protocols, mechanism, and logistics to mitigate the impacts from disaster. The concept of Disaster Risk Reduction is defined by the UNDRR (2017) as “aimed at preventing new and reducing existing disaster risk and managing residual risk, all of which contribute to strengthening resilience and therefore to the achievement of sustainable development”.

By drawing attention to the ways disasters are conceptualized, we see how different approaches to understanding disaster risk and disasters are rooted in particular ways of making sense of the world. Better awareness about what causes natural hazards is part of understanding what causes disasters and its impact upon society, it is also a fundamental part of DRR. Nonetheless, such hazard analysis is insufficient for reducing the effect of disasters if it is not also translated into understanding of the socio-economic environments situated to that specific place. Therefore, this thesis calls for a vulnerability analysis, rather than a hazard-oriented analysis, in post-disaster settings.

I apply the analytical lens of ‘the everyday’ to discuss the gendered aspects of political power, and how feminist political geographers have influenced the way in which politics are understood

spatially and relationally (Dowler and Sharp, 2001). Together, these insights build a theoretical basis for how women have become constructed as vulnerable subjects in and through disaster scholarship and policies. The analysis will return to this by looking at how implementation by aid agencies have impacted the lived realities of gender relations in relief and reconstruction phases of the disaster site in Sri Lanka.

2.2 Everyday politics of disasters

The notion of the *everyday politics of* disaster is part of identifying the political dimension and implications of everyday practice in the post-disaster setting (Hilhorst, 2013:2). To place the focus on the everyday, then, is to showcase understandings of who is at risk; the task of identifying risk reduction measures is integral to negotiated and political spaces. As such, the thesis views aid as an integrated part of the everyday realities of crisis and post-crisis situations by claiming that aid can strongly affect local power relations. *Whose crisis, is it? And who has the capacity to act?* These questions, which are part of constituting the everyday politics of disaster, leads to the notion that the very way disasters are defined and understood can impact and influence DRR measures and DRM (Hilhorst, 2013:2-3).

To showcase how discourses of disasters are part of contested political processes, the thesis places the conceptual turn within disaster scholarship in relation to my empirical case. By further exploring the spatial processes related to place and power this thesis will examine the everyday politics of disaster and the political dimensions of everyday life. By approaching everyday practices, it becomes apparent how the logics of actors in post-disaster settings are renegotiated in their local context, working upon one another to allow different narratives of actor perception, interests, and concerns to surface. As the feminist geographical lens of the ‘everyday’ focus on local embodied and situated subjectivities, this thesis builds upon critiques of how the delivery of disaster aid are disconnected from the ways disasters are experienced, enacted and contested by gender relations. It is in the everyday understanding of disaster politics that embodied subjects can be identified, distinguishing between who are framed as passive victims of disasters and who are not.

Current trends in disaster scholarship aims at reconstructing the wording and framing of disasters, most notably, by not using the phrase ‘natural’ disasters. The conventional and common-sense notion of a ‘natural’ disaster, argues Wisner (2020:241), is wrong and at the very least, misleading. The term ‘natural disaster’ has undergone a conceptual shift, from understanding

disasters in terms of the *hazard paradigm*, to the addition of a human dimension to disaster, and disasters that moves beyond hazards by including *vulnerability*, constituting a point of departure for further research. This framing confirms that disasters are more a product of historical patterns of vulnerability rather than merely natural phenomena beyond our control.

2.3 Discursive approach to disasters

By establishing an analytical framework grounded in discourse analysis, the thesis will advocate the relevance of a discursive approach to studies on disasters. Through discourse analysis, the thesis examines how ‘disasters’ and ‘disaster risk’ can be interpreted in different ways, and furthermore how it affects the *everyday politics* of tsunami-aid. Discourse in this sense does not only interpret what the concepts mean, they also control how they are used and what questions are asked; all ultimately have implications for strategies and policies enacted to address hazards and risk (Forsyth 2003; referenced in Leichenko and O’Brien, 2008:14).

Foucault (1977) employs the concept of discourse to critically explore what, and how we produce knowledge about the world. This is considered a *constructionist* approach, in that it asks questions about the ways distinct social realities become normative ways of thinking by attributing meaning to how actors frame and understand the world around them (Waitt, 2016:289). Discourse in this context is seen as a social construction in that they are neither static nor extensive but works as a lens through which we observe, interpret and act upon our world. It is then relevant to understand how actors in conflict areas manufacture representations of ‘reality’ and use discourse s to articulate political grievances to mobilize support for armed struggles to legitimize their claims (Frerks, 2013:20). It is through discourses that actors interpret and reinterpret the past, define the image of the enemy, and reshape social identities and boundaries (Frerks, 2013:20). Through discourse analysis, the underlying power structures within society emerge, as discourses themselves carry political weight.

These embedded discourses in disaster scholarship are not problematic, but when they emerge as the conventional framing in research communities and policy-making spaces. The challenge is therefore to see behind how these ways of thinking by understanding how they have come to be. In the next section, I point to how *power* is a part of this puzzle by trying to understand how the concept situates to disasters.

2.3.1 Power and disasters

Power is considered a ‘fuzzy’ concept, making it difficult to study due to its elusiveness (Orjuela, 2010; Hyndman and de Alwis, 2004). It is nonetheless a crucial component in understanding how disaster risks are operationalized. As disasters become more frequent, sites of reconstruction become an increasingly prominent aspect of the international development discourse. This raises further questions of not only responsibility, but the right to intervene in conflict ridden places and countries that construct themselves as ethical international actors; “their tragic significance and the globalization of relief and reconstruction effects following major ‘natural’ disasters” (Desai and Potter, 2006:138). Disasters are the outcome of social vulnerabilities, as they are differently understood, they trigger different responses among local people, bureaucrats, politicians, and disaster managers (Hilhorst, 2013:2). Therefore, any inquiry into disaster and crises should start with questions of *who* defined the crises and *how* its responses came about.

Disasters should be seen as social processes which generate unequal exposure to risks by making some people more prone to disaster than others, where these inequalities are largely a function of the power relations operative in every society (Hilhorst, 2013:3). The proclamation of disasters, or the threat of disasters, can offer opportunities for military response, unauthorized interventions, and the suspension civil rights and DRR projects (Warner, 2013:89). The latent power dynamics of declaring a situation a *crisis*, a *catastrophe*, or a *disaster* is often masked behind crisis responses. Kelman furthers this point by claiming that “the process of unrolling disaster is based on the long-term choices of people who have the power, resources, knowledge, and ability to make essential and intrinsic changes, but apparently not the wisdom, or principles to do so” (2020:14-15). It is by focusing on the ‘everyday’ politics of disasters that these underlying structures emerge, illustrating how the spaces of disasters and disaster risk are an integral part of negotiated and political processes. As I move forward, I will mobilize the concept of *vulnerability* as a theoretical lens to conceptualize the effects of power in disaster scholarship.

2.4 Vulnerability

To understand who is affected by disasters, then, we need to turn our attention to *vulnerability*. In this section, a conceptual framework for understanding vulnerability and the creation of vulnerable people will be presented. Using vulnerability as an analytical concept, this thesis aims to capture the differential exposure to risks and the capacity to cope with risk systematically across space and time that combines intersectional analysis where attributes such as ethnicity (or class) are often functions of an individual’s gender in the social impacts of disasters.

A critical approach to understanding vulnerability is embedded in the way *vulnerability* is born out of a particular Western political and historical context. This thesis reflects on the ways vulnerability can be used as both, 1) a political measure, and to 2) to derive nations and individuals of autonomy. While a vulnerability discourse might provide justification for Western interference and intervention. Western intervention can also be seen as masked by ‘relief’ (Bankoff, 2001:27), which highlights the apolitical paradox of disasters and humanitarian relief. Hilhorst and Jansen (2013:198) who conducted fieldwork between 2004 and 2010 in Sri Lanka; notes that “(...) towards the end of 2005, every agency we interviewed based its program on collaboration with local civil society groups; tsunami-affected people were overwhelmed by requests for their participation, often my multiple agencies working in the same community”.

“Disasters are not supposed to be ‘over here’ in the North, but ‘out there’ in the South, in ‘the are of otherness... unsafe for westerners’ (Bankoff, 2004). It is telling claim Bankoff (2004) that the differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ are applied often in strategic ways. ‘Our’ generosity found its way to those suffering, ‘them’ the distant others (Korf, 2007:369). Hattori (2001; referenced in Korf, 2007:368) suggests that the lack of reciprocity in aid relations reinvigorates the symbolic domination of the West towers the ‘developing’ world. To decolonize our approach on how to research disasters is to challenge this assumption of *vulnerability* as a wholly Westernized concept. Thus, in Western cultures there is more discussion about the management and control of the environment; these forms of state behavior, whereby hegemonic forms of masculinity involving power, physical strength, courage, and toughness, are institutionalized into state-based disciplines and policies (Pease, 2016:27).

The political origin of poverty and vulnerability to disasters receives no direct or explicit mention, rather it is claimed that “limited articulation is given for such realities or depth of those realities” (Lewis and Kelman, 2012); the focus on why and who is at risk is subsequently left out. Lewis and Kelman (2012) suggest that perhaps the greatest failing of top-down institutionalized disaster risk reduction is that it has been, and continues to be, separated from the reality of its context, whereas it is these specific contexts that actively contribute to the causes of disasters. In general, there is a common misconception in the risk assessment field that many disaster managers tend to believe that disaster risk assessment is synonymous with scientifically generated ‘hazard mapping’ which stems from a technocratic conception of risks. Wisner et al. (2004:333) claims that “it is also likely that perception of officials is that hazard mapping is a

politically neutral process in sharp contrast to all the sensitives of vulnerability assessment; officials may fear being identified or vilified by a hostile media or political opponents if vulnerability analysis reveals past policies that have consciously or unconsciously placed specific groups of people at risk.

Applying risk through a '*strong constructionist approach*' suggests that nothing is a risk, but a contingent product of historically, socially, and politically created 'ways of seeing' (Lupton, 1999:35, referenced in Wisner et al. (2004:19). This thesis takes a constructionist, and at times a weak realist approach to understanding risk. By framing disasters as social constructions, vulnerability, resilience, and risk can be seen to shape and be shaped by power contestations; how disasters are managed often heralds the goals of disaster response and recovery as objective and quantifiable. It follows that if disasters as framed as a problem of technical advances, then gender and the social dimensions of disasters are hard to conceptualize, and furthermore disconnected from the everyday realities of disaster politics in which the goals are subjective, and usually contested.

The everyday politics of disaster *seeks to connect the risks people face and their reasons for their* vulnerability with hazards. It is by understanding how disasters can be perceived within the broader patterns of society that *disaster risk reduction measures* and mitigation strategies can be discussed most fruitfully (Wisner et al. 2004:4). By questioning the concept of disasters, itself, the everyday politics of disasters reveals the stakes of defining people or places as vulnerable, resilient or at risk. s Within this context, I will challenge the ways disasters can be used as a tool of governance and politics.

Drawing on Bankoff (2001) understanding of vulnerability as a way of framing the Global South as dangerous and vulnerable that is in need of help from the Global North, subsequently provides justification for Western interference and intervention. This is recognized as a Western epistemology of disasters which have led to critiques that disasters studies sometimes operate from a 'cultural deficit'. The Disaster Manifesto (2021) launched by disaster researchers to strengthen the relationship between 'local' and 'external' researchers in disaster studies suggest how the everyday risks that people experience is ultimately inappropriately articulated. They suggest "rethinking our research agendas, our methods and our allocations of resources" (Disaster Manifesto, 2021) to counteract structural inequalities of 'Western experts' researching 'vulnerable others' in the Global South.

Conversely, proponents of vulnerability as a conceptual explanation take the position that while hazards may be natural, disasters are generally not. Instead, emphasis is placed on what renders a community unsafe—a condition that depends primarily on a society’s social order and the relative position of advantage or disadvantage that a particular group occupies within it (Hewitt, 1997: 141). Vulnerable populations are those most at risk, not simply because they are exposed to hazard, but because of marginality that makes of their lives a ‘permanent emergency’ where populations are rendered powerless by particular social orders that are often modified by those experiences to make some people even more vulnerable in the future (Blaikie et al., 1994: 5–6).

The step from the *hazard paradigm* to the *vulnerability paradigm* in disaster scholarship entails, first and foremost, a different perspective to how *vulnerability* is conceptualized and operationalized. Vulnerable people are made vulnerable by deeply rooted social processes, argues Wisner (2020:241). He points to the fact that “people with power in society, and the institutions that wield and channel that power, can reduce or increase the burden of vulnerability or shift it from one group to another through policy decisions”. It is within this framing that disasters are created from the result of specific *choices*.

Vulnerability is the main concept by which the social construction of disasters is explained, where it functions to measure the degree and type of exposure to risk generated by different societies in relation to hazards (Cannon, 1994:16). Vulnerability is conventionally viewed in terms of people’s capacity to cope with hazards. Wisner et al. (2004:11) defines vulnerability as the “characteristics of a person or groups, and their situations that influence their capacity to anticipate, cope with, rest and recover from the impact of a natural hazard”. In disaster literature, vulnerability is considered a long-term, deep-rooted process embedded within society. Kelman (2018:173) further describes vulnerability as “rooted in political, cultural, and historical processes leading to individuals and groups having different levels of power, resources, abilities, and options to their situations”. Hilhorst and Bankoff explains the political nature of vulnerability in two ways, first, that “the material production and distribution of vulnerability is the result of political processes”, and second, that “the labelling of vulnerable people is also a political act” (2006, 7). As such, the tendency among humanitarian actors to focus on the universal category of ‘vulnerable women’ is part of the construction of women as passive victims of disasters, which is also a political act. Humanitarian agencies need *vulnerable* people in their work, as such, the language of vulnerability can be seen as

vital to the humanitarian discourse (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2013:197). Thus, one can ask *are we creating vulnerable people in disasters?* Indeed, as Korf (2007:370) points out, “by degrading those people affected by the tsunami to bare victims, we derail them from their political rights of being (equal) compatriots, as fellow human being”.

There are, however, some humanitarian actors that are gradually shifting the focus from just addressing the immediate effects of disasters to dealing with the *root causes* of vulnerability. Implicitly or explicitly, they embrace problems such as poverty reduction, recovery, and long-term development (Khasalamwa, (2009:75). This nexus between humanitarianism and development is further addressed in the analysis where I follow up by asking *what lies ahead for humanitarianism?*

As will be discussed further in the analysis, understandings of disasters and following crises manifests in post-disaster relief and reconstruction. In this understanding, it is crucial to acknowledge that knowledge and perceptions are not static features. As Kelman (2019:3) points out, the key is to produce understanding and acceptance of the causes of vulnerability which in turn, creates disasters. In other words, the key to disaster risk reduction is to understand and properly tackle the root causes of vulnerability. Although the social, economic, and political origins of disasters are increasingly recognized as the factors contributing to people’s *vulnerability*, they are still largely ignored in practice.

In sum, the preceding sections have presented some of the key theoretical debates within disaster risk studies; 1) the turn from the *hazard paradigm* to the *vulnerability paradigm*, 2) the entry of vulnerability analysis to understand the root causes of risk, and lastly, 3) the critiques towards creating a ‘western’ humanitarian expert to disaster scholarship in the global south.

2.5 Gender and disasters

Whereas a growing body of literature has led to extensive research on hazards and disasters, few have focused on the gendering effects of disasters. Theoretically this thesis aims to contribute and expand the ways *gender* is a means to ‘see’ certain groups of society as more vulnerable than others, more specifically how women are often referred to as *vulnerable*. The thesis therefore assumes that existing ways of understanding women in disaster management and disaster risk reduction contributes to the creation of vulnerable women. This stems from the idea that women are passive victims of disasters. As vulnerability is considered the key to understanding risk, it is seen

as an attempt to break from the all-too technocratic approach in which the relationship between human societies and nature has been confined to. Disaster *risk* is best understood as a function of social and physical vulnerabilities in the face of exposure to environmental, technological, biological, and human-induced or purposive hazards both are modified by people's capacity to mitigate, anticipate, adapt, resist, and recover from disasters (Wisner et al. 2004).

In other words, if the objective goal is to help women during crises, we need to understand their experiences in disasters. Typically, analysis of humanitarian assistance is focused on the emergency itself. "Popular humanitarian narratives, such as reporting and fundraising, are typically framed as urgent need in a locale and do not attend to needs beyond the immediate disaster zone or internal political struggles that maybe caused or influenced by disaster relief" (Kleinfeld, 2007:170)

As Hyndman and Froude (2015:177) highlights, women who survived a 'natural' disaster were subjected to post-disaster obstacles such as reconstruction and development in the context of violence and inequity; it follows whether *nature* shapes these social relations and aid disbursements that resulted. Clearly, the 'agency' of natural forces and their intersection with human relations at multiple scales in and beyond disaster zones needs to be further studied (Hyndman, 2009:881). It is within this context of conflict and disasters that 'embroiled' women in a social patriarchy laid the foundation for serious risk factors to become present before the tsunami occurred (Hyndman and Froude, 2015:176).

As a concept 'vulnerability' is recognized as 'dynamic' and which 'varies across temporal and spatial scales' (Forino, Meding and Brever, 2015:378). The focus has instead been placed on the humanitarian imperative of saving lives. Similarly, numerous reports and documents are full of numbers and percentages to measure the success of the recovery processes. However, this process is part of constructing a single category of people who suffered from the tsunami as merely victims, as if the prevailing social structures within society does not affect disasters at all (Bastian, 2010:120). Risk can be understood as a problem of time, even though the perception of risk is concluded in a short time measure, the reality in post-tsunami Sri Lanka is that people ended up living in temporary shelters for longer than what is considered ideal. Hence, women's needs such as basic facilities (are often left out of the sense of *temporality*) — for example lack designated washing areas for sanitary menstruation cloth. due to cultural taboos against washing them in public (Oxfam, 2005:10). The analysis will further discuss what consequences this applies to in relief and reconstruction phases of the disaster site in Sri Lanka. By building on feminist epistemology of

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situated knowledge, the thesis situates the disaster responses in the interest of the people that arises from their social location.

To understand *who* is affected by disasters, we need to turn our attention to *vulnerability*. In this next section, a conceptual framework for understanding vulnerability, and the creation of vulnerable people, will be laid out. By approaching disasters using vulnerability as an analytical concept, this thesis aims to capture the differential exposure to risks, and capacities to systematically cope with risk across space and time; an intersectional analysis of disasters in which attributes such as ethnicity (or class) are often function of an individual's gender to the social impacts of disasters.

This view has however received criticism for not going “far enough in considering the social, economic, and political structures that drive vulnerability” (O’Keefe et al., 1976). By framing disasters as social constructions, we see how vulnerability, resilience and risk shape and are shaped by contestations over power, and how the ways disasters are managed often heralds the goals of disaster response and recovery as objective and quantifiable. The everyday politics of disaster seeks to make connections between the risks people face and their reasons behind their vulnerability to hazards. It is by understanding how disasters can be perceived within the broader patterns of society that disaster risk reduction measures and mitigation strategies can be discussed most fruitfully (Wisner et al. 2004:4). By questioning the concept of disaster, itself, the everyday politics of disasters can reveal the stakes of defining people or places as vulnerable, resilient or at risk. It is within this backdrop that I challenge the ways that disasters can be used as a tool of governance and politics in the analysis chapter.

Subsequently, following O’Keefe’s (1976) critique, the 1970s saw a shift in paradigm in disaster scholarship by introducing what is now known as the *vulnerability paradigm*. This way of understanding disasters aligns with a growing need to understand the components of *risk* and *vulnerability* in crises and disasters. These are, however, not straightforward concepts, and their meanings are situated to how actors view and understand disasters, and which futures are manifested in DRR and DM.

Whereas hazard discourse conceptualizes disasters as sudden, external events caused by nature, the vulnerability paradigm views disasters as a matter related to processes and underdevelopment. By highlighting the interplay between forces that lock the vulnerable into disaster prone areas such as failed development, the recognition that disasters are the result of unequal distribution of power and

resources between those who are *vulnerable* and those who are less so, started to emerge (Gaillard, 2019:8). This paradigm shift was followed by an analytical shift from the ‘naturalness’ of disasters and toward other scales — such as the local — in analyses of community responses by bringing in the everyday perspective to disasters scholarship.

Similarly, Kelman (2019, 1-2) argues that *disaster* is about society; if humans nor society are not unduly affected, then per definition, it is not a disaster. The key is that disasters are defined by their societal impact, and not by the degree or scope of any influence from nature (Kelman, 2020:16). Following this definition, the *level* of impacts constitutes those “that are too great for the affected area and people to deal with properly on their own”. This refers to a political momentum in defining a disastrous event. The proclamation of disasters, or the threat of disasters, open windows of opportunity for military response, unauthorized interventions, blank checks, suspending civil rights, and justification for implementing measures towards disaster risk reduction (Warner, 2013:89). In this way of understanding disasters, we see how there is also a political perspective to disasters (Warner, 2013). Even though there is a tendency among local governments and NGOs to hide the political aspects of disasters behind the humanitarian mandate of *saving lives*, it is evident that the different ways we frame and understand disasters have implications for how we understand risk and apply DRR measures prior to, and in post-disaster situations. By drawing attention to the ways disasters are conceptualized, we see that the different approaches to understanding disaster risk and disasters are rooted in certain ways of making sense of the world.

By placing the politics of disaster in the everyday life, this thesis builds upon feminist theory and methodologies to understand the intersection between gender, place, and space. It aims to challenge the gendered division of disasters in society, as these divisions constitute differences in experiences of place. There is a non-arguable political perspective to disasters, even though there is a tendency among local governments and NGOs to place the political aspects in the background hidden below the humanitarian imperative of crises response.

2.6 Engaging with the *everyday*

The ‘everyday’ has been a focal point of further exploration to understand the local level of inquiry within feminist theory. In particular, the ‘everyday’ is utilized as a way of understanding the structural and spatial relations in the case of Sri Lanka. As illustrated by Cannon (1994:17), “Whereas it is fairly easy to identify war and civil unrest as relevant to economic and political processes, it is far more difficult, but nevertheless essential to identify the process and conflict

which generate and maintain vulnerability to disaster in more general sense”. Hilhorst (2013:2) argues that in everyday disasters, conflict, crises, and crises response are socially constituted as much as they affect society, thus they can never be understood as separate from the societies in which they occur.

The ways that different aid delivery drivers interact and influence each other can be explored through research into its everyday practice. The notion of *humanitarian space* conveys an image of agencies seeking access to people in need. However, aid recipients do not passively wait until aid arrives, but strategize to reach agencies to become eligible for their services. My focus on everyday practices emphasizes that phenomena acquire meaning in their everyday realities, and by studying the way actors shape their reality in each context, the working of principles and policies in practice can be explored.

Feminist geographers have long been aware of the importance of spatial structures; indeed it is the mundane world of routine which is the realm of women’s social life in masculinist society (Rose, 1993:22). To place focus on the *everyday* is to showcase how interpretations and the task of identifying risk reduction measures are very much a part of negotiated and political spaces. Within this backdrop, the thesis conceives aid as an integrated part of the everyday realities of disasters and post-disaster situations throughout relief and reconstruction processes. Following this line of inquiry, the thesis will base its arguments on how aid and humanitarian relief can affect local power relations in post-disaster situations, focusing on the reshaping of governable spaces following such events.

I will further elaborate on how disaster and risk are framed and understood among local actors and INGOs that contribute to a conceptual understanding of disaster risk situated in Sri Lanka. By approaching the everyday practices in this manner, it becomes apparent how the logics of actors in post-disaster situations are constituted by negotiated and re-negotiated spaces situated in their local context in which different narratives of an actor’s perception, interests, and concerns surfaces. As this thesis will argue, the different ways of understanding how disasters contribute to include and exclude groups in decision and policy making are proof of how disasters usually are imagined.

2.7 ‘Othering’ of women

Interpretations of disasters represent political choices, which in turn have political impacts on relief, recovery, and rehabilitation phases in post-disaster settings. The way actors frame and conceptualize disasters differently, affect how they in turn prepare for, and manage disasters once they happen, and further shows how different discourses to understanding disasters manifests in relief and development in post-disaster situations. Disaster situations reflect the structures already embedded within society; systems such as the economy, government bureaucracy, and the legal system. However, as Fordham and Meyreles (2014:25) states, the management of disasters is still determined and governed by patriarchal structures and processes in which, despite the advances of recent years, continues to be resistant, or at the very least, dismissive of gender issues, thus failing to recognize the necessity of participations from *all social* groups to be included in DRR.

Fossum Evertsen (2021:1) illustrates how women, as an analytical category, become the victim of epistemic ignorance through her fieldwork in Bangladesh. The argument, launched by feminist and postcolonial scholars, is that such ignorance is not a mere accident, rather it should be considered the consequence of a more complex set of power dynamics (Fossum Evertsten, 2021:6). Feminist research has made significant contributions to the discussions on the role and reflectivity of the researcher, and the (power) relationship between the researcher and the research subject. Likewise, feminist epistemologies typically bestow great importance on the perspectives of participants. A substantial number of articles within disaster scholarship also focus on women as research objects and further problematizes the *masculine* tradition within disaster scholarship: “a lack of attention to women’s needs in disaster context may also be traced back to biases embedded within the social and political fields governing disaster preparedness and response” (Rushton et al., 2020:1). Rushton et al. (2020:1) further argues that the marginalization of women’s disaster needs and exclusion of women’s voices in public spheres pertaining to disasters also reflect the influences of the politics of bodies.

The concept of epistemic ignorance addresses what we do and do not know and why this is. While ignorance can appear as simple ignorance in knowledge that can be corrected once discovered, an awareness of such ignorance can (and should) be utilized as a tool in fieldwork, argues Fossum Evertsen (2021:1). It is only by being sensitive to such gaps that we can be aware of whom we include and exclude as knowers in our research. As Hyndman (2000:64) contends: “despite the groundbreaking work of feminists and other scholars in development circles to deconstruct dominant discourses and recover the voiceless subjects of these discourses, the still universal

humanist subject of multicultural United Nations remains intact”. Hyndman (2000:64) argues that the UN ‘family of man’ and ‘international community’ are unavoidable concepts for feminists concerned with deconstructing the universal subject and its attendant constellations of social power.

The need for integrating a gender analysis in disaster risk reduction policies were highlighted in the joint publication of UNDP, IUCN and UNISDR in 2009 in the ‘*Making Disaster Risk Reduction Gender Sensitive: Policy and Practical Guidance*’ in which promoting gender equality is considered a “shared mandate and responsibility of all UN agencies”, and the recognition that gender mainstreaming is “central to the achievement of peace and sustainable development” Indeed, as (Dyck, 2005:236) claims, “we need close attention to the spaces of everyday life to keep women visible in rapidly changing world conditions, where their activities tend to slip into the shadows of dominant models in the literature”. It is deemed an essential part of the construction of the ‘local’, by wider processes and relations of power. Hence, attention to the local proves to be a methodological entry point to theorizing processes at various scales, from the body to the global (Dyck, 2005:234).

To ‘think geography’ as grounded in masculine experiences and masculine realities the gendered experiences of disasters may be lost. The critique from feminist geography follows those masculine experiences are generalized and universalized, presented as the experience of *all*. This notion has received criticism as it renders the experiences of women *invisible*, in essence, everyone who is not encompassed by the categories of white, male, heterosexual, middle class, able bodied (Gregson et al., 1997:56). As disaster scholarship identifies that vulnerability emerges from particular social conditions and not the physical elements of disaster, focus has been placed upon how inequality, poverty, and the individual’s relative status in society can be affected by disasters.

It is problematic, notes Hopper (2018:102), that while gender analysis is now built into international development agencies, men continue to dominate the positions of power within these bodies. It proves the claims of Yadav et al. (2021), who questions the transformative change that gender analysis has in disaster risk reduction, that for many, ‘gender’ largely equates to ‘women’ Moreover, they critique disaster risk policies for not challenge the existing, male-dominated, and unequal social- and institutional structures, but rather accommodates gender through *gender mainstreaming*. Part of this, they claim, is that disaster risk reduction is still a male-dominated field in which women’s representation is minimal (Yadav et al. 2021).

As the previous sections have traced the debate on how disasters are understood, and how these different discourses are inherently linked to understandings of *risk* and *vulnerability*, it follows that the gender dimension in disasters is also anchored to the understanding of disasters as social problems. Within the hazard paradigm, disasters are understood as a technical problem; derived from this discourse is also the notion that disasters are emerging from nature itself, and as such, can do little to mitigate the effects from disasters. This thesis takes the perspective that disasters, and the responses they trigger, are a socially constructed phenomenon. By understanding disasters as a social construction, the argument of the thesis relies on a conceptual meaning of how disasters themselves are fashioned by and selected through social order, to challenge the gender context. In other words, if a pre-disaster society is inherently biased against women, it will not be any less biased against women in post-disaster situations; as such, a gender responsive approach to DRR is already set up for failure in a gender equality context.

There is a small, but powerful collection of literature on gender and disasters (Dominelli, 2020:1). Increasingly, gender and disasters have emerged as part of understanding the social impact of disasters. Additionally, there is an emergent literature addressing the specific vulnerabilities of women in disasters (Bradshaw, 2004; Enarson and Meyreles, 2004). Looking at disasters of the everyday suggests a need to understand how power operates, as gender has been one of the key forms of social difference that appears in disasters studies. Feminist political geographers have worked at addressing the invisibility of women as research subjects, exposing the gendered aspects of political power. This research has influenced the way in which politics is understood spatially, relationally and at multiple scales. Feminist scholarship does not simply include gender as a category, but rather, explicates the narrow analyses associated with masculinist approaches to critical geopolitical scholarship (Dowler and Sharp, 2001). They asked *where is the women? Whose knowledge counts, and whose knowledge gets to be heard?* They claimed that local knowledge is often ignored and that local perspectives often go unheard. Scientific debates within disaster scholarship often fail to include a diverse set of perspectives that would reflect the communities who experience the negative impacts from disasters — including women. It is a well-established fact that disasters do not impact people equally, and that marginalized groups (or so-called *vulnerable groups*) will be disproportionately impacted by disasters. As Hilhortst (2013:3) puts it, “social processes generate unequal exposure to risk by making some people more prone to disaster than others and these inequalities are largely a function of the power relations operative in every society”. Likewise, as Bradshaw (2014:56) states, “being a woman does not in itself lead to greater vulnerability, but women may be more vulnerable to hazards than men, given the unequal gendered

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power relations that limit women's access to and control over resources"., Vulnerability to a disaster is therefore not confined in the biological differences between men and women., but rather in how society constructs *men* and *women*. It follows that "If gender is socially constructed, then gender cannot behave in the same way across time and space". Meaning 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" (Oyewumi, 1997, referenced in Gaillard, 2021).

It is important to note, however, that hegemonic understanding of gender norms *also* endangers boys and men in the face of hazards and disasters (Enarson, 2016:22). Rydström (2020:358) highlights, for instance, how men are under pressure to conform to certain ideas about men and maleness, and as such become more prone to disasters as they are fulfilling the expectations of society's definition of masculinity. Likewise, it is also important to note, argues Gregson et al. (1997:52) that it is not just the case that male, and females are gendered differently, they are gendered differently and as a result '*valued differently*'. The social construction of gender moves beyond purely descriptive roles; their roles are related to each other in a way that works to the general advantage of men and to the general disadvantage of women. It is with this backdrop; the *passive women* victim is made.

To deconstruct the binary distinctions between male/female (nature); Masculinity/femininity (as socially constructed subjects' positions for men and women), the distinction needs to be made between *sex* and *gender*. The analysis supports the claim that how gender is theorized makes a difference in public policy and practical approaches to disaster risk management (Enarson and Meyreles, 2004:1)

By placing recent debates within the disaster scholarship community in a critical geographical perspective, I hope to show the potential of human geography in gaining new insights into the construction of disasters, (one area that has —so far— received less attention, is the gender impact of the tsunami, and in particular its impact on women, (Oxfam, 2005:1). This thesis draws on the argument from Wisner et al (2014) that the vulnerability of women is not incidental to a disaster, rather risk factors must be understood as deeply embedded into the conditions of everyday life, including gender differences in socioeconomic status, domestic responsibilities and power which is further exacerbated in crises. Whether from a dramatic tsunami or floods, the already disadvantaged status of women is likely to be accentuated and become more visible. As it

is important to look at capacities, skills and resilience of people and communities in disaster situations, the thesis argues that it is just as important to examine how risk and vulnerabilities are created and understood.

Adams-Hutchseon (2018) argues that disaster scholarship has adopted masculinist modes of analysis, in which a dualist framing of the masculinist mind and the feminized body is presented (Longhurst, 1997; Rose, 1993). This dualism, argues Rushton et al., (2021:4), is further embedded in Western culture, which regards the mind as neutral and the only credible knowledge source. This is a paradox as it perpetuates dominant disaster discourses that are constituted by predominantly narratives by Western able-bodied, white men that, reflects masculine body politics (Rushton et al., 2020) that distress and marginalizes men's experiences of disasters. A situated approach therefore means to be aware of *both* constructed accounts of the world; that is the understanding of the construction of knowledge, taken under consideration that the dominant groups (versus the marginalized groups) can not have to see anyone else's 'truth' *and* that the deconstructed accounts, that it the understanding (knowledge) is derived from their own material experience (Fordham, 2004). It almost becomes a sort of paradox how male-dominated managed and universalized experiences of disasters have stimulated most gender research to focus on women specifically, instead of women *and* men because of their relative invisibility and their presumed greater *vulnerability* to disasters (Fordham, 2004). Subsequently, the way gender has been used to refer to (only) women reflects the desire of feminist geographers to challenge geography's tradition of embedding focus in the lives of men. By interpretation, a gender perspective involves understanding the impacts of *both* men and women which requires seeing how disaster affects women and men *differently*; thus, disaster vulnerability analysis has moved the field substantially toward understanding the impact of structural differences and inequalities to hazards. Enarson (2016:220) notes that the default 'avatar' within disaster management; the white, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class men, sometimes referred to as the 'default male' calls for seeing the connection between knowledge, language, and power. Likewise, "*The conservative white male effect*" refers to those in power who also have greater motivation and are more vested in supporting existing power relations and social priorities. Men generally hold more economic and political power, thus, Pease (2016:23) argues, men are more prepared to accept environmental risks compared with others (women), especially when addressing risk may involve economic and political change that threatens their interests.

Placing focus on how gender is theorized makes a difference in policy and practical approaches to disaster risk management. The dominant theoretical perspectives and research, strategies in disaster scholarship have been determinedly male-oriented, if not male-dominated, argues (Enarson and Meyreles, 2004). There is subsequently a need for understanding women and men as embodied in a ‘gendered’ world (Enarson and Meyreles, 2004). Despite the growing literature produced on gender, a focus on the gendered impacts of disasters is necessary because of the continuing prevalence of inequalities between men and women, boys, and girls (Sen, 2001: referenced in Fordham and Meyreles, 2014:24).

Summary

In sum, disaster studies increasingly show how preexisting societal conditions expose, vulnerability, protections, and recovery chances; in turn, they depend socioeconomic and political order more than geophysical extremes and are responsible for most causalities and large parts of the damage; for that reason, disasters are largely preventable, disaster as it seems, are by choices.

By placing the politics of disaster in the *everyday life* this thesis builds upon feminist theory and methodologies to understand the intersection between gender, place, and space. Its aim to challenge the gendered division of disasters in society, as these divisions are having difference experiences of place. There is a non-arguable a political perspective to disasters, even though there is a tendency among local governments and NGOs to place the political aspects in the background hidden below the humanitarian imperative of crises response and *saving lives*.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology and methods

Approaches to social inquiry as described by Blake (2007:5) are concerned both with *how* knowledge is produced, and what specific *techniques* are applied to generate and analyze data. The purpose of this chapter is therefore two-fold; I start by giving an account of what methodological choices I have made, and the reasoning behind them, I then present and discuss what research methods I have applied to collect and analyze the data. Lastly, I present what ethical problems and challenges I encountered, including other cross cutting issues that have been present throughout the research process. I place emphasis on what problems arose from the COVID-19 pandemic, and what changes I had to make to my research design.

3.1 Research Strategy

Since emphasis is placed on understanding the everyday realities of aid and politics situated in post-tsunami Sri Lanka, an abductive research strategy is utilized. The idea of an abductive research strategy, as explained by Blake (2007:89), is based on “processes of constructing theories or typologies from actors” language, meaning and accounts in the actor everyday activities, hence, the task of the abductive researcher is to dig into “(...) the meanings and interpretations created and maintained by social actors that constitute social reality for them” (Blaike, 2007:17). I have mainly done this by two accounts; 1) conducting interviews with research subjects relevant to my case and, 2) by gathering data through secondary sources.

3.2 Epistemological and ontological assumptions

I start this section by positioning my research methodologically by introducing the theoretical and methodological implications of entering this field through the lens of feminist geography. I do so by presenting the gendered perspectives that this case study explores, and to present the ideas of embodied and situated knowledge as powers of knowledge. I then address the overall research design, and the changes I undertook due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and the concrete data collection tools and techniques utilized in the project. I then outline the strategies for analyzing and synthesizing the data collected. Lastly, I present ethical considerations and challenges that arose during the research process, placing emphasis on the ethics surrounding data collection *on* disasters *in* a disaster itself. Here, I reflect on the rigor of the data, the research and my positionality. I conclude with some summarizing thoughts on my overall experience throughout this research project.

As previously stated, my theory of knowledge draws inspiration from feminist geographical thinking. Feminist geography entails a critical review of how knowledge is produced by questioning how social reality can be known. Moreover, as much as this thesis is concerned with knowledge production in itself, the thesis is equally interested in how some individuals are constituted as ‘knowers’ whereas others are not. This is very much linked to what Evertsen (2021) refers to as ‘epistemic ignorance’ or the process of ‘othering’ as presented in the theoretical approach. To enrichen our understanding of the production of knowledge, one need to investigate the different ways of “not knowing” writes feminist philosopher Nancy Tuana (2006:3). She continues with claiming that: “ignorance, like knowledge, is situated” Tuana,

(2006:3). The point Tuana (2006) brings forth, is that ignorance, as well as knowledge, on a specific topic are not a mere coincidence “(...) scientists do not aimlessly chase truth” (Tuana, 2006:4). Rather, this must be seen within how scientific knowledge is produced. Making women’s experiences ‘visible’, then, by understanding the gender ramifications of disasters through the delivery of aid is thus part of the overall objective of the thesis.

I have brought a postcolonial feminist geography perspective to the literature on disasters and DRR to theorize how disasters are constructed and perceived by different actors, by drawing on feminist geographical thinking. The lens of the ‘everyday’ is utilized as a tool to place attention to how the local, embodied and situated subjectivity is created and maintained. The thesis lays out the theoretical framework by claiming that gender is disconnected to the ways disasters are experienced, enacted and contested. It is in the everyday understanding of disaster politics, that the embodied subjects as passive victims of disasters can be explained. Thus, the thesis aims to move beyond a simple dichotomy of opposing powerful external actors and victimized recipients of aid. Furthermore, the thesis follows feminist critiques of development scholarship in which gender has “lost its meaning” and become a yet another “catchword” at the expense of a more differential understandings of the multiple and changing situations of women and men in crises (Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead 2007; El-Bushra 2000).

3.1.1 Conducting feminist research

Feminist research therefore takes the standpoint that the very construction of social science is based on a masculine way of ‘seeing’ the world, thereby, dismissing women’s experiences. This has created a ‘blindness’ in geographical thinking, both about women’s role in society as well as the lack of women doing geographical research or being the topic of research. I therefore intend to bring a transformative vision of women’s conditions of the everyday to this research project, following Yadav et al. (2021:2) calls to imagine a different future; one that allows us to see the biases and problems within current DRR policies and practices. Indeed, when women are being presented as a universal disaster victim, they are also deprived of their agency. In the same way, men are also perceived in specific ways in disasters. Rydström (2020:352) addresses this notion when she points gaps in the way crises interconnects with specific types of constructed masculinities and femininities. From this point of view, it is evident how the potential of a transformative gender responsive approach to DRR is part of overall imperative of humanitarianism in crises; to save lives, we need to have the knowledge of how to.

Power and knowledge: a situated approach

The very cornerstone of feminist epistemologies has aimed to incorporate a situated approach to knowing, by recognizing situated knowledge as “knowledge explicit about their positioning, sensitive to the structures of power that construct these multiple positions and committed to making visible the claims of the less powerful” (McDowell, 1992:413). A situated approach to disaster scholarship thus seeks to discuss how these ways of ‘seeing’ social reality become embedded as explanatory factors to understand how power, agency, and gender in DRR are contextualized across different spaces.

Haraway (1988) first coined the term *situated knowledge* by referring to the idea that one’s positionality both are part of limiting and shaping one’s knowing. Shaping is understood by considering the lines of power that differentiate our social positions. In this way, all knowledge is to be understood as situated. This perspective is part of why this thesis asks: *who’s crises is it? And how has the capacity to act?* The point made is that research subjects are always situated in specific historical, social, and embodied contexts.

To think as a feminist researcher, then, is to be aware of how these underlying power structures are part of producing a specific type of knowledge. Moss (2000:7) claims that geography as a discipline has privileged a masculine subject position. Similarly, Cope (2016) states that: “women’s active participation in what ‘counts’ as knowledge has historically been seen as less significant than men’s through the mechanisms of power-based gender relations”. Similarly, Rose (1993:4) critiques masculinist science which claims to “be exhaustive, and therefore thinks that no one else can add to its knowledge”. Thereby, it is inevitable that as a research paradigm, early feminism tended to be defensive as it had to challenge the masculinist underpinnings of science by objecting to the claims of a ‘value-free’ or ‘neutral’ science (Blaike, 2007:197).

I see the need to spec the dimensions of disaster relief, and how INGOs understand the specific context that they are working in. My interest lies not only in the presence of differential degrees of understanding disasters and disaster risk reduction, but rather how we are to understand what constitutes ‘good’ or rather ‘valid’ knowledge. Are women being asked or consulted about what needs they have by aid operators? By integrating a feminist perspectives and ideas to this research project, the thesis aims at creating spaces in which the perpetuated masculine mainstream is

challenged. Our understanding, and by extension, knowledge, of disasters manifests in relief and reconstruction phases. Within this perspective, it is crucial to acknowledge that knowledge and perceptions are not static features, but rather part of what perpetuates contested and negotiated spaces.

When I say I identify as a feminist researcher, it means I want to challenge how gender politics affects society. As an epistemological principle, ‘situated knowledge’ emphasizes the researcher’s embodied location in the research context by arguing that knowledge is embodied, and produced within a body, rather than being the product of a “pure mind” (Cresswell, 2013:157). In sum, conducting feminist research is part of recognizing that epistemology is embedded in the different ways knowledge is produced.

3.3 Research design

Originally, this research project was envisioned as a qualitative research project with an associated fieldwork. However, as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, it soon became evident that overseas travel was off limits. This section presents my research design and what adjustments I had to make to accommodate the state of the world.

3.3.1 Case study

I approach my thesis question with a case study of how the post-disaster relief and reconstruction phases affected gendered relations in Sri Lanka. A case study is deemed suitable for my research project as it aims to understand the concrete and practical aspects of a specific place situated at a specific time.

Some scholars argue that case study research is not a methodology, but rather a choice of what is to be studied (Stake, 2005; referenced in Creswell, 2013:97). In this research project however, case study is understood as a type of methodology, drawing on Creswell’s (2013:87) understanding of case studies as a “type of design in qualitative research that may be an object of study, as well as a product of the inquiry”. If done well, “case studies can produce a deep, concrete explanation of a specific social phenomena” (Baxter, 2016:144). The case of Sri Lanka is thus utilized to understand broader political dynamics of disasters and DRR.

Research participants

Preliminary research led me to develop two types of subgroups of informant that I wished to reach:

- 1) Official actors working with DRR, and
- 2) INGOs working with relief and reconstruction situated to the post-disaster landscape

However, as the COVID-19 pandemic evolved, I realized that my aim to understand the ‘everydayness’ of disasters in Sri Lanka might be beyond my reach. From my computer screen in Norway, Sri Lanka felt awfully far away. Instead, I had to approach my research from a different angle. In the next section, I describe the changes I had to make to my research design, and similarly which challenges I encountered collecting data.

3.3.2 Changes in research design

The COVID-19 pandemic shocked the world, but as the initial reactions wore off, I started longing for my fieldwork. Once things settled in Norway, I began reaching out to the contacts I made during my previous fieldwork in Sri Lanka. In the initial stages of the pandemic, there was a lot of uncertainty. How was the virus spreading in Sri Lanka? Where the borders open? The practicality of things was what where my biggest concern. Would my health insurance cover COVID in Sri Lanka? It was only after I started contemplating the ethics on my attempt to travel, during a global pandemic, that I started feeling conflicted.

To travel or not to travel

Whereas I In the beginning approached the question of whether to travel or not to travel in practical terms; would my insurance be valid? Would I need to quarantine? Would I need to quarantine on my way back to Norway? Once the rush for vaccines started, I assumed I would be able to go. As received the first, and second doses of the vaccine, I started again looking for ways to travel to Sri Lanka. However, I merely saw the physical constraints on traveling and I did not understand what a lucky position I was in. This notion of privilege is part of a long withstanding critique within the disaster research community where the implications of the external ‘expert’ researching ‘vulnerable’ ‘others’ has been highly debated (Disaster Research Manifesto, 2021). Looking back, I can see how naive I was in

believing I could travel overseas at all. There is an irony in being all too focused on traveling, while being unable to see beyond the pandemic itself as a researcher researching disasters. And, at the time of writing these paragraphs (May, 2022) I have almost forgotten that the pandemic ever existed, as life in Oslo has (almost) returned back to normal.

Could I justify traveling to Sri Lanka fully vaccinated, and potentially exposing my informants to the virus? Did I *need* to travel to Sri Lanka to answer my research questions? I eventually decided that I did not. There is a double-standard suggest Kelman (2020:14) on how perceptions of disasters as short-term events make us blind of the underlying causes of disaster which are part of long-term choices by those in power.

3.3.3 Data collection

In a way, the pandemic could be considered both limiting and opportunistic for data collection. The door to ethnographic fieldwork was perhaps locked, but in the span of a few weeks *everyone* it seems was online. The number of webinars, online lectures and events literally exploded! As the pandemic unfolded, it became natural to turn to digital platforms for collecting data. For me, this resulted in a significantly extended data collection period. Partly, because in some sense, I never left the field as I never got to travel *back*. When I struggled to recruit informants, it became tempting to continue to source for more, even *better data*. Whereas had I been able to travel to the field, no data would have been considered a finding, behind my screen in Oslo it felt more like a failure.

Looking back, I might have approached my informants too cautiously; if I did not hear back from possible informants straight away, I waited patiently. Could I have tried harder? Maybe. However, I felt somewhat disconnected to my proposed field. I was not jumping out of the way of tuk-tuks along Galle-road, nor was I able to pick up informal chit-chat about how the impact of the pandemic felt on the body. It is the researcher's responsibility to protect their informants, and part of doing research is to understand that our engagement potentially can cause harm (Dowling, 2016:29-30). At the height of the pandemic, I questioned whether conducting interviews was reasonable, or even ethically sound.

I therefore moved on to focus on sourcing informants geographically closer to me, as I could better imagine their situation. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews from key informants who I identified as experts within their respective fields. An indication of a good qualitative case study is that it presents an *in-depth understanding* of the case in question. Therefore “conducting in-depth interviews with a small number of ‘right’ people will provide significant insights into a research issue” (Stratford and Bradshaw, 2016:123). I wanted to reach academics, policymakers and humanitarian workers working with either Sri Lanka, gender or DRR.

My list of informants is listed below:

Figure 1: List of informants

Informant 1, humanitarian worker 19.01.21, follow up interview 21.04.21

Informant 2, practitioner, 19.03.21

Informant 3, researcher, 14.04.21

Informant 4, researcher, 13.04.22

I choose to keep my informants anonymous in order to protect their privacy.

In addition, three informal conversations were held with researchers who study disasters. These interviews were not part of the formal data collection, but they helped shape and frame my case. The purpose of these conversations was to gain a better understanding of the research area I was about to submerge myself in. They also provided me, as a novel researcher, valuable training in conducting semi-structured interviews.

However, relying on one source of data is typically not enough to develop that ‘in-depth understanding’ Stratford and Bradshaw (2016:123) refers to. I therefore turned to secondary sources such as journal articles, governmental publications, local and international news websites, publications, and websites from relevant NGOs and INGOs to gain a wider contextual understanding of the social and scientific phenomenon that I wanted to explore.

Four empirical studies were chosen for my analysis to understand how aid is delivered by INGOs affected by gender-relations. These four studies were all conducted after the tsunami, focusing on women/and or gender-relations in Eastern and Southern Sri Lanka.

Figure 2: Empirical studies

Thurnheet, K. (2009). “A house for a daughter? Constraints and opportunities in post-tsunami Eastern Sri Lanka” *Contemporary South Asia*. (17:1). (pp. 79-91).

Ethnographic fieldwork in Batticaloa, (Ampara District, Eastern province) over a period of 21 months between 2004 to 2007. The research subjects consisted of Tamil families who lived in camps and transitional shelters awaiting the construction of a new home within a post-tsunami relocation scheme.

Domineli, L. (2020). “Rethinking masculinity in disaster situations: Men’s reflections of the 2004 tsunami in southern Sri Lanka”. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*. (48).

Qualitative research conducted in 12 southern Sri Lankan villages. Data was collected between 2009 and 2012 by local researchers employed by the research project. The collected data was then transcribed by the local researchers and sent to the researcher conducting the project.

Mubarak-Perera, N. K. (2013). “Positive responses, uneven experiences: intersections of gender, ethnicity, and location in post-tsunami Sri Lanka” *Gender, Place, & Culture*. (20:5). (pp. 664-684).

Ethnographic field research conducted in two tsunami-affected villages in Hambantota District (Southern Province). The data was collected on two visits, 1) May 2008-January 2009, and 2) June to September 2009

Ruwanapura, K. (2008). “Temporality of disasters: The politics of women’s livelihoods ‘after’ the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka”. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*. (29:3) (pp. 325-340).

Research sites Hikkaduwa (Southern Province) and Batticaloa (Eastern Province).

Data were collected between July 2005 and January 2006.

3.3.4 Semi-structured interviews

The most common method for data collection in qualitative research is interviewing. The specific premises of the COVID-19 pandemic led all my interviews to be conducted digitally. The benefits and (or) disadvantages of using digital platforms for data collection are further discussed in the next section. I chose semi-structured interviews to allow me a degree of flexibility to pursue topics and discussions of interests to my research objectives. This can highlight gaps or new perspectives which I would perhaps not have considered prior to the interview, but it could also potentially lead me astray from my research topic. The key is to be vague, by not placing limitations on informants, but still precise enough to collect relevant data that reveals the knowledge base an informant has of a topic or experience relevant to my research project.

I built my interview guide so that the understandings of the concepts I will use in the analytical chapters are theoretically embedded. I constructed my interview guide using a funnel strategy, starting with general and broad questions before narrowing down to be more personal and opinionated questions. This technique, as described by Dunn (2016:153), is applied to construct a safe environment for the research subject. It can, however, be tiresome for the informant, especially if they are restricted with time, as extra time spent ‘warming up’ could instead have been used more fruitfully. One of my interviews with a researcher on gender and Sri Lanka was especially taken aback by my strategy to obtain information. It led them to believe I did not have any, or very little, knowledge about their research. They became frustrated when I asked ‘simple’ questions, whereas I was easing them into the themes by creating a ‘safe space’ for us to converse.

Conducting digital interviews

The shift to web-based technologies for data collection entailed some obvious disadvantages. For instance, a ‘head shot’ which is typically the case when using a webcam creates obstacles in observing all a participant’s body language (Janghorban, Roudsari and Taghipour, 2014:1). I feared that I would not be able to pick up social cues and intonations that I would have in a

‘normal’ face-to-face interaction, especially as my research project includes questions that might trigger an emotional response; this is especially relevant for my informants in Sri Lanka who might have been subjected to disasters themselves, or close to someone who may have. Emotions and grievances surrounding the civil war might also be a sensitive topic to some. The key as a researcher is to be conscious about these spatial conditions and construct research questions that fit within these frames.

One issue that I did not foresee was that several informants did not turn on their camera. One said that they had broken their camera and asked if we still could conduct the interview without it; I conducted the interview without the video. The other incident happened due to a technical error where the informant’s camera would not connect. After several attempts, we decided to continue with the interview without the camera. I however found myself somewhat restricted as I knew that this informant had been part of humanitarian relief efforts after a disaster in the Global South. As the interview guide had been sent to the informant beforehand, I knew they approved of my questions, however when asking follow-up questions, I felt uneasy when I could not assess their body language.

3.3.5 Digitalization of fieldwork

Fieldwork in the traditional sense requires the researcher to be present at the site. But as the COVID-19 pandemic distorted my plans of travel abroad, I started to ponder how I could otherwise collect data. In particular, I reflected on *what data is collected through fieldwork?* I began thinking I wanted to dig deeper into the field of disasters and disaster risk. I chose to enter the ‘*digital field*’ by engaging with researchers and institutions in the digital sphere.

Soon thereafter, I started identifying key stakeholders relevant for my thesis. The term ‘digital’ community is a term used loosely to describe the group of people and institutions I purposively sourced. The chosen accounts and hashtags are listed below in table 3. I created a Twitter account with my own name and picture where I identified myself as a master student in ‘Human Geography @UniOslo’ who is ‘Writing my thesis on disasters and gender in Sri Lanka’. From January to April of 2021, I would engage with researchers and institutions by liking and sharing their tweets and otherwise engage with the conversations that followed. My aim was to identify topics and perspectives of disasters to dig deeper into my case.

By following #hashtags, usually a short keyword with the hash symbol '#', used to identify content on a specific topic and relevant accounts, I built a small *ad hoc* community that discusses relevant issues by expressing emotions, feelings, and opinions (Artieri, Greco and Rocca, 2021:263). I viewed #hashtags as a 'cultural object that perpetuates at the phenomenon's political agenda in the digital public sphere and bridges personal and collective experiences as the #hashtag transformation' (Artieri, Greco and Rocca, 2021:265).

Table 3: Digital fieldwork

@NoNatDisasters, #NoNaturalDisasters,

Online campaign aimed at targeting the term 'natural' disasters.

@UNDRR,

The official Twitter account for United Nations Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR).

#OnlyTogether8,

A United Nations global campaign to support global vaccine equity. The hashtag quickly became popular within interdisciplinary approaches to climate change and disaster risk reduction.

@PreventionWeb,

Managed by the United Nations Disaster Risk Reduction (@UNDRR). A collaborative knowledge sharing platform on disaster and disaster risk.

#PreventionSavesLives,

A United Nations campaign targeting partners across scales to work for increased disaster prevention.

@ReliefWeb,

Provided by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (@UNOCHA).

@WIN_DRR,

The Women's International Network for Disaster Risk Reduction.

@Globalnetworkdr,

GNDR, the largest global network for organizations working to strengthen the resilience of people most at risk

@GFDRR,

The Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery

@UCLIRDR,

UCL Institute for Risk and Disaster Reduction, University College London

@IJDRS,

International Journal of Disaster Risk

I did not include individual researchers in my list as it is common to use social media both to promote their research and research interests, but also to tweet personal statements and opinions. Most are careful about what they publish online as it is widely regarded as a public space, but it nonetheless raises further ethical concerns on how to separate personal and public figures. As the digital space is still a novel site for qualitative collection and qualitative data ethical guidelines are still being debated and constructed. Their tweets are therefore neither used directly in the analysis as such, but they have been part of building my case in guiding me to relevant articles, journals, or policy briefs.

3.3.6 Conducting digital interviews

Although digital interviews increased during the pandemic, it is not a new feature in quality research per se. Overall, the digital age has created new opportunities for social researchers. However, there are differences to be aware of, for instance, Bampton and Cowton (2017) implicates the displacement of time and space in creating a sense of ‘dislocation’ between respondents and researchers. Likewise, remote, or ‘digital’ fieldwork obliges us to reappraise the established understandings of what the ‘field’ consists of. The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly made researchers working on projects across international borders think alternatively.

Certainly, traditional fieldwork has become a site of considerable discussion (Dubow and Erdal, 2021). Most prominently perhaps is the topic of decolonization of knowledge, a debate which the disaster research community also has adopted. The critique is especially central to the western ‘expert’ researching the ‘vulnerable’ ‘others’. A comprehensive list of the concerns proclaimed by the disaster researchers behind the ‘Disasters Studies Manifesto’ are listed in the **Appendix 1**.

In hindsight, I question if I should have changed my methodology for easier access to the field, or perhaps changed my case to a place with *less* disturbance by disasters. However, where

should that be? If anything, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that disasters do not respect borders. Still, it felt better to reach out to informants that I knew were closer to me geographically as I had a better idea how the pandemic affected their life situation. Whereas challenges in gaining access to the field were frustrating, it can also be interpreted as a central part of the data collection process. To illustrate, one incident stands out: As I was waiting for my gatekeeper to connect me with possible informants in Sri Lanka, I grew impatient and decided to try myself. I sent 2-3 emails to local practitioners on DRR, of which I had a vague idea of whom they were based upon previous fieldwork. I never received a response, but shortly, after my gatekeeper reached out assuring me that he was still on it. I did not try to bypass him again. However, when my gatekeeper seemed hesitant, or did not deliver as promised, I found it difficult to push further. Even though we had conversed about COVID-19, I could not help but to think that our situations were quite different.

It is then a delicate balance between prioritizing the research methodology and prioritizing the research subject that becomes crucial for disaster researchers; our mandate to negotiate these nuances becomes even more apparent during fieldwork (Chetia, 2020). It is ultimately I, as the researcher, who determines the research design, site selection, selecting which populations to study, and the methodology. It essentially places me in a position of power and privilege over the research population I have chosen to study (Chetia, 2020).

In sum, many aspects of the field are beyond a researcher's control. The 'field' in this situation, refers to the sites for data collection that I have utilized both online and offline. What is in a researcher's capacity to do, however, is to take care of our own research, the research subjects that we engage with, and our own selves. I believed that collecting data during the height of the corona pandemic was not only demanding for my research subjects, but also as the researcher as I too felt the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic as Oslo entered yet another lockdown. Such reflexivity helped me reshape aspects of my methodology in tune with the dynamic external environment.

By applying this mixed-methods approach to my research project, I intend to construct a rigorous research project. Triangulation is used as a control mechanism, and helps constitute reliable data (Stratford and Bradshaw, 2016:127). Previous fieldwork, and current 'digital fieldwork', textual and digital data, combined with semi-structured interviews, and

secondary data from previous conducting ethnographic fieldwork left me with rich and varied data material.

3.3.7 Data analysis strategy

To interpret and make sense of the data I collected, I used descriptive coding as my main data analysis strategy. Coding serves three purposes; 1) to reduce the amount of data, 2) to organize the data, and 3) to be a process of data exploration, analysis, and theory building (Cope, 2016:377). As semi-structured interviews were part of my data collection method, I have chosen to use *in vivo coding* to structure my data. This coding strategy rely on utilizing the language and terminology used by the research participants, creating descriptive codes that emerge directly from the statements of the research subjects. For my secondary data, I intended to develop an analytic code for text, to reflect the themes that I am interested in exploring or are important for the overall research project (Cope, 2016:379). Subsequently, in the presentation of the findings, the statements and themes identified during the coding process were interpreted and discussed using the theoretical framework.

3.4 Ethical and practical consideration

Conducting research on disasters *during* a global pandemic raises several ethical considerations. “Doing no harm” (Dowling, 2016:32) became a great concern as I engaged with the disaster research community and throughout the data collection. As geographers engage in social research, it is our responsibility to constantly consider the ethical implications of our activities. especially as a feminist researcher, it became paramount to “take responsibility for the implications for our research and put the welfare of researched group and its members before that of the research objectives” (Hyndman, 2000:62).

3.4.1 Data and privacy

Before I could start collecting any data categorized as ‘sensitive’, my research project had to be approved by the Norwegian Data Protection Service (NSD), any research conducted in conjunction with the University of Oslo must obtain this approval. All participants received information about the research project prior to their interviews (see attached *information letter* in **Appendix 2**). The information letter included the purpose of the research project, and how and where their data would be used and saved. Most importantly, the information letter included a consent form where participants confirmed that their informed consent was obtained prior to participation.

3.5 Critical reflexivity, rigor, and positionality

By operating within a feminist ethic, I strive to be *reflexive* as a way of approaching the different ways in which one's worldview and knowledge are being created and influential (Hyndman and Froude, 2015:180). Likewise, my position and my own Western heritage, I hope, contribute some legitimacy to my critique. As Gaillard (2021) contends that it is his very identity as an 'insider' to the Western world that gives him an advantage in research in deconstructing the meaning by disasters and DRR. However, that does not mean I am not conscious of the fact that this thesis reflects (yet again) another external 'expert' approach to understanding knowledge structured after Western standards in a different place than here own.

I adopted critical reflexivity as an approach throughout the research process in order to be transparent about my research practices I was attentive to three important issues: power, subjectivity and intersubjectivity. I followed Dowling's (2016:35) suggestion of keeping a research diary where I noted my reflexive observations. This was especially utilized during the pandemic when public transportation in Oslo was discouraged. I resorted to walk back and forth in the reading halls at the university; during this walk I broke down any reflections made that day. I spent 5-10 minutes after arriving home to write these reflections in my field diary.

I used critical reflexivity to acknowledge my own social position, by assessing how my research interactions, and the information I collected, is socially conditioned. Positionality and reflexivity are key terms related to methodological and philosophical issues, especially in relation to feminist geographical research. When writing this thesis as a reflective piece, it allowed me to shed light on aspects that are often overlooked in qualitative research, for example how the field itself influences the researcher (Indah, 2018). This reflection became apparent to me as my data collection fell through due to the circumstances of COVID-19. In sum, any research project that includes reflexivity suggests the reader that the same set of data can be interpreted differently by others.

As a novice researcher, the responsibility of interpreting and representing others' realities is not something I take lightly. To address any ethical dilemmas that emerged, I made sure to check for rigor by triangulate between multiple sources, methods, investigators, and theories (Stratford and Bradshaw, 2016:126-127). Also, by circulating between the interpretive community, the participant community, and my entries in my research diary, I aimed to implement strategies to ensure trustworthiness by documenting every step of my research carefully, and opening my

research to further scrutiny by my peers and supervisor. This process is referred to as the *Hermeneutic Research Circle* (Stratford and Bradshaw, 2016:126).

As a researcher trained in a predominantly Western environment, I will always be an outsider when conducting social research in the Global South. But as Dowling (2016:40) comments: “one is never simply either an insider or outsider”, he suggests that overlapping racial, socio-economic, gender, ethnic, and other characteristics, may be part of creating points of similarity and dissimilarity between ourselves and our research objects. My positionality as a researcher opens spaces for engagements with informants, but on the very same premise, also closes off access to others. Specifically, as a white, cis women I am aware of how the “gender dimension” (kjønnsdimensjon) positions me (Wikan, 2011:28. *My translation*). It goes without saying that my background and social positions have “shaped interactions, conversations, and responses in the field to varying degrees” (Ruwanpura, 2008:328). One can argue that the same conditions apply to the research process, even without an *on-site* field study. What articles I chose, who I interview, what analytical concepts and theoretical framework I chose are also subjected to who I am as a person, and subsequently, researcher. This paper chooses to focus on the gender binary of women and men, it is however important to acknowledge the research gaps on transgender and genderqueer individuals which troubles dualistic understandings of gender. Additionally, this thesis might lay in its own ‘trap’ by mainly considering the binary male/female objectives. Why did I choose to mainly focus on women’s experiences of disaster? The trap reveals itself; researchers (at large) study subjects and topics they feel closest too. Enarson and Meyreles (2004) illustrate this by pointing to how gender and disasters studies typically ‘are written primarily by women’ and ‘are predominantly *about* women’

Summary

This chapter has outlined the main characteristics of my methodological assumption and research design. Emphasize has been placed on the challenges of the data collection and sourcing of informants due to COVID-19. Furthermore, the chapter has commented on how to conduct feminist research, the gains of thinking as a feminist researcher, and how it has contributed to enlightening my case study and exploration of the connections between disasters, risk, and vulnerability. As a feminist researcher, I strive to be *reflexive, rigorous*, and wary of my *positionality* as a researcher in the hope of ensuring trustworthiness.

CHAPTER 4: Locating the politics of disasters

This chapter begins with the immediate aftermath of the 2004-tsunami in Sri Lanka. The purpose is to give an account of the relief and reconstruction processes. Subsequently, this chapter ‘sets the frame’ for further discussions on the connections between humanitarians and development workers in disaster settings, by looking at how institutions involved in humanitarian responses are connected. What follows is a critical exploration on how societies manage risk, and furthermore, how disaster response can be shaped by the local political context. Walch (2018:439) comments on how “very few studies have examined how conflict affects DRR”, which he claims is surprising given that disasters and armed conflicts often collide. By claiming to ‘locate’ the politics of disasters, this chapter turns to how the post-disaster setting of Sri Lanka became a contentious space for aid.

The immediate response in the relief process was motivated by helping those who had not been affected by the waves. Combatants from either side were witnessed participating together in the immediate relief work (Thamilmaran, 2018:52). However, as the initial shock wore off, competition for humanitarian space ensued. Humanitarian aid is typically short-term based, delivered in disaster zones and focused on saving lives, whereas development aid has a comparatively longer long-term perspective in its implementation, response to systematic problems, and focus on economic, social, and political development. ‘Humanitarian space’ within this setting is referred to as the physical and symbolic space in which aid agencies deliver their services (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010:117). The ongoing intra-state conflict between the GoSL of Sri Lanka and the rebel group LTTE severely affected the recovery and reconstruction efforts. As Kleinfeld (2007) argues, the GoSL and the LTTE used the language of humanitarian space strategically, in line with their own political goals.

Most of the funding was channeled through INGOs and other humanitarian agencies (Khasalamwa, 2009:80), making the efficiency of aid dependent on how well these actors worked together. The large number of INGOs arriving in Sri Lanka to assist in the humanitarian response led to competition among agencies for territory, beneficiaries, and recognition (de Silva, 2005; McGilvray, 2006). The missing perspective, Thurnheer (2009:80) claims, relates to how recipients themselves perceived the influx of aid. She further suggests that there is an asymmetrical power-relationship inevitable at work by pointing to how the framings of ‘victims’ also can be used to execute power (Thurnheer, 2009:81).

The Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS) was to be a joint mechanism to distribute global aid which poured into Sri Lanka, a proposed partnership between the GoSL and LTTE to collaborate in delivering aid to tsunami-affected areas, and furthermore, to provide relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction to the affected sites. However, P-TOMS met with political resistance, most notably as Mahinda Rajapakse won the presidential election running on a mostly anti P-TOMS platform (Stokke, 2006). The joint mechanism was not favored by the Sinhalese led government, as Kleinfeld (2007:178) points out, “in addition to its imagined role as fracturing Sri Lanka’s political space, P-TOMS was also feared because of its potential to enhance the legitimacy of the LTTE as a territorial authority and moral agent engaged in humanitarian action”

P-TOMS was created with the intention to enable more efficient aid disbursement in the North and East; it was a mechanism designed to allow both parties of the civil war, the government, and the LTTE to access and distribute aid. However, little thought was given to the lack of unity in the state, the complex bureaucratic system, and other obstacles such as the complex and volatile ground situation in post-tsunami Sri Lanka. Institutions do not cease to exist during crises, (Hilhorst (2013: 9-10), where states are weak or operate in so-called *neo-patrimonial* fashion, state functions are impersonalized and used for enabling and maintaining power bases around social networks Hilhorst (2013:10). Contrary to the widely held belief that conflict-affected states are characterized by a lack of institutions, current scholarship reveals that multiple normative systems prevail, and hybrid institutions evolve. Post-conflict societies often feature intense forms of institutional multiplicity (DiJohn, 2008) in which state-endorsed institutions figure in a complex and fragmented landscape. The danger, argues Harrell-Bond (1986:17), is in assuming that it is possible to separate politics from humanitarianism. Some aid agencies take pride in their political neutrality and believe that this is actively demonstrated by the fact that they can work on *both* sides of a border in conflict zones. However, within such agencies, there are contentious debates as to whether it is right to give legitimacy to whichever regime is thought to be the more oppressive (Harrell-Bond, 1986:18).

The failure of the P-TOMS can be attributed to the effects of ‘southern politics’ argues Rainford and Satkunanathan (2011:115), whereas the structure was established as a joint mechanism between the government and the LTTE to disburse aid and speed up reconstruction and rehabilitation in the six North-Eastern districts most affected by the 2004-tsunami, the setting up of the P-TOMS mechanism downplayed the political nature of structures established in collaboration with the LTTE (Rainford and Satkunanathan, 2011:115). This led to confusion as to what extent the mechanism was part of the peace process itself or linked to the conflict more generally. In other words, the level

of doubt towards the P-TOMS as a mechanism purely to administer humanitarian aid was high (the creation of the National Disaster Management Council Act [the legislative framework for DRM] later made the P-TOMS redundant). The failure of the joint mechanism between the GoSL and LTTE is thus seen as a “A striking blind spot in the reading of Sri Lanka’s political landscape and the potential of humanitarian assistance to depoliticize a long-running conflict” (Kleinfeld, 2007:169).

Working in such an environment, then, involves navigating “a highly charged political scene, shaped by sovereignty, nationalism, and struggles for legitimacy” (Goodhand, 2010:346). After the immediate relief efforts had been performed, the picture became more complex. Rigg et al. claims that “While the immediate impacts of the 2004 tsunami may have been indiscriminate, patterns of recovery are often thought to discriminate”; fatalities were distributed equally among all those people living in the affected zones while recovery and rehabilitation is patterned by wealth, class, caste, power, influence, and ethnicity (Rigg, et al., 2008:141).

The misreading of the political landscape in Sri Lanka is thus framed by two key spatial assumptions: 1) that humanitarian space can be identified, and 2) the idea that humanitarian space can be represented and maintained separately from the political space in which humanitarian relations are confined to the places where disasters have occurred and chiefly serve its victims.

4.1 Disaster Governance

This misreading of the post disaster space has significant consequences for governance not only of the post disaster landscape, but also in the transition from humanitarian to development aid.

“Disaster risk governance’ refers to: ‘the systems of institutions, mechanisms, policy and legal framework and other arrangements to guide, coordinate and oversee disaster risk reduction and related areas of policy” (UNDRR, 2017). There is evidence that some political and territorial autonomy has been ceded to global institutions, e.g UN, efforts to address potentially catastrophic changes through global governance remains fragmented (Biermann et a., 2009; referenced in Park, 2021:2). Conversely, disaster risk reduction has been identified as a way of bridging the gap between the short-term workings of humanitarianism and the long-term impacts of development.

Shortcomings in DRR are increasingly being regarded as a sign of weak governance structures, or a lack of political will (Williams, 2011; Wisner, 2020). Despite this, however, little attention has been given to the different processes of governance in DRR (Jones, et al. 2014). Rather, the literature tends to focus on government activities such as legislation, regulation, and planning (Tierney, 2012). For this thesis, Sri Lanka, as a post-conflict country with a weak system of governance offers an interesting case study on the governance struggles and policy processes following the 2004-tsunami.

4.2 Root causes of vulnerability

To understand the lessons learned from the 2004-tsunami one must understand the government of Sri Lanka as a reflection of a neoliberal state with a particular history and background. It is often described as ‘fragile’ or as a ‘transition’ state. ‘Weak governance’ (Stokke, 2006) within this context refers to the incapability of domestic institutions to promote sustainable development. However, many have queried whether this narrow understanding of governance is adequate. The political character of disasters and disaster-related governance is well documented; disaster risk has ‘political roots’, notable (unequal) power relations, and (under) development processes, as Pelling (2003) illustrates. The re-conceptualizing of disasters has contributed to the understanding that *risk* is both constructed and manageable, where this new outlook and understanding plays an important role in creating or minimizing disaster risk.

The absence of links between policy realms creates a further challenge; reconstruction efforts in post-tsunami Sri Lanka indicates that policymakers are not viewing the reconstruction phase as an opportunity to consider the potential adverse effects of future climate change-induced sea-level rise in their plans, even if the Sri Lankan Coastal Conservation Department supports integration of these concerns. This is unsurprising, argues Schipper and Pelling (2006:30), as scholarly debates on these kinds of issues are not frequently linked.

In integrating these realms, one potential problem centers on the role played by humanitarian assistance in addressing disaster relief as part of disaster risk management. DDR has been associated with dependency and short-term strategies that fail to generate autonomy incentives, and ultimately depletes the resource base, meaning that it does not set up a good foundation for future development. Indeed, DDR can lead to faulty development and increased vulnerability to risk which is in direct conflict with development and sustainable responses to vulnerability reduction.

Likewise, as Cannon (1994:18) argues, the level of scientific knowledge of both hazards

themselves, their impacts, and allocation of the resulting technologies as a means for intervening to reduce hazard intensity or impact is normally determined by the power of private companies and government agencies; these are driven by their own criteria for success, which need not correspond with the need of people.

Parts of the root causes of disaster vulnerability in Sri Lanka, therefore, lie in the unstable political situation and resulting conflict. The causes of disasters are nevertheless often misidentified as emerging from the hazard component, and thereby draws attention away from how vulnerability is created and maintained (Kelman, 2015:1). The challenge, argues Wisner (2020:244), is to put knowledge into action at the correct scale. Kelman (2019:3) states that when claiming to know how to prevent disasters, and possessing the knowhow, skills, and resources to do so does not necessarily prevent the failure of DRR (that is disasters); they are “not indicative of a problematic environment, but rather a problematic society,” implying that a merely technocratic understanding of disasters is not fruitful to implementations of DRR.

However, DRR is also marked by processes of continuity and re-ordering the creation of new institutions and linkages. During crises situations, institutions may become more in flux because of different factors that can include changing conditions because of violence and displacement, emerging new problems that cannot be resolved with existing mechanisms, a lack of legitimate state institutions, or rivalry between different sources of power. The desire to depoliticize spaces and provide equitable humanitarian assistance may become embroiled in indigenous spatial politics, as the Sri Lanka case demonstrates (Kleinfeld, 2007:170). The P-TOMS became unsuccessful as the GoSL were not willing to accept the LTTE as a legitimate actor as their recognition by the GoSL would entail recognising them as a de facto separatist movement (Rainford and Satkunanathan. 2011:114).

Summary

In sum, can political differences be set aside during disasters? Whereas the highly dynamic political landscape in the first few months after the tsunami demonstrated that humanitarian action always takes place within a political space, and although dominant humanitarian discourse imagines that humanitarian and political space can be identified, represented, and maintained separately, the post-tsunami situation in Sri Lanka suggested that in attempting to do so, important political realities will be overlooked. Kleinfeld (2007:180) notes that the spatial is political through and through, even when that space is imagined transcending the political, arguing that depoliticized and humanitarian

spaces cannot be created. She suggests that if those affected by disasters are engaged in armed struggle or other political contests, and their interests can be advanced through a humanitarian response or its representation, relations beyond the immediate disaster area should be included in an examination of the effects of aid (2007:180).

CHAPTER 5: The tyranny of the urgent

The previous chapter discussed the construction of disaster in Sri Lanka, showing how DDR becomes bound up in conflict dynamics, perpetuating problematic power dynamics and failing to create a stable ground for post-disaster development. This chapter turns to the imperative of urgency and how that shapes the way aid plays out and, the kinds of exclusions it engenders. By approaching humanitarian spaces as a socially negotiated arena in which actors employ the *concept* of humanitarianism to support their own contestation for political legitimacy, humanitarian arenas can be seen to be constantly shaped and reshaped. Agents of both relief and development are working in crisis situations in accordance with several policies and guidelines, such as the core principles of humanitarian action: neutrality, impartiality, and independence. However, although not often discussed, the obstacles of realizing these principles in ‘the real world’ is hidden behind the urgency to respond.

International humanitarian aid has grown tremendously in terms of volume and number of organizations. *Humanitarian aid has become very effective in saving lives*, and nowadays, a combination of DRR measures and humanitarian response have led to a sharp reduction in the number of fatalities caused by humanitarian crises (Hillhorst, 2013:6). Criticisms of humanitarian interventions are not about this core function of *saving lives*, but rather about the way that humanitarian aid is politicized, how transitions to development continue to be complicated, and how humanitarian organizations let organizational politics and competition interfere with their humanitarian principles (Hilhortst, 2013:6).

This notion is referred to as the ‘*tyranny of urgency*’ which was problematized in the BRIDGE report of 1996. Emergency responses, the report argues, are characterized by the ‘tyranny of the urgent’ which puts aside structural issues in favor of addressing immediate needs. The report goes on to ask: “How can constraints to integrating gender in relief be overcome?” There is no cut-clear answer to this question, but this chapter will showcase and discuss some

cases in which failure to address gender, and furthermore the failure of addressing gender assumptions and to incorporate gender as a priority at the global, national, and local level of analyzes can impacts the affected place.

Humanitarianism is constructed around helping ‘victims’ (Reddy, 2018:3). The humanitarians space in which these agencies operates in are seen as environment where humanitarians can work without hindrance, following the principles of neutrality, impartiality and humanity (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010:xx) As INGOs only arrive at disaster sites *after* the disaster has happened, it is justified to place the state under further scrutiny, as the responsibility for implementing DRR measures is usually placed upon local governments. However, humanitarian organizations can still work proactively if they participate in policy dialogues on empowering vulnerable groups (Eriksen et al., 2013:122). Additionally, even in cases when practitioners arrive at disaster sites with an understanding of gender issues, it is not always clear how to address these in programme implementation (BRIDGE, 1996:3).

This gap is problematic, as it calls for a Western expertise, even though we *know* the importance of local knowledges. As Scharffscher (2020:115) suggest in her finding from Batticaloa, Sri Lanka, relief work failed to cooperate with local women organizations; the disconnection can be linked to ‘us’ and ‘them’ undercurrents of international relief work; the lingering remnants of a colonial heritage. As our understanding of the nature of disaster has broadened, it is evident how development, or more precisely, problems of development, are part of the drivers in emergencies and humanitarian action. Indeed, it is increasingly becoming clearer how development, climate change, and disaster, are highly interconnected problems and should be treated as such. In integrating these realms, one potential problem centers on the role played by humanitarian assistance in addressing disaster relief as part of disaster risk management. This has been associated with dependency and short-term strategies that fail to generate autonomy incentives and ultimately, deplete the resource base, leading to faulty development, and increased vulnerability to risk, in conflict with development and sustainable responses to vulnerability reduction.

As such, in an emergency, the arrival of trained professionals with experience managing the logistics of relief should be an opportunity for host governments to strengthen its capacity to manage their own programs after the humanitarians leave (Harrell-Bond, 1986:67). The everyday provides us with the lens in which the local impact of relief and reconstruction are explored. “Many of the aid organizations clearly indicate in their mission statements to the commitment to improving

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lives and reducing the *vulnerability* of marginalized groups” (Khasalamwa, 2009:80. *My emphasis*). While it is obvious that humanitarian agencies have played a critical role in delivering relief, from building emergency shelters, to providing medical attention, it is also evident that there is a need to focus on the broader developmental perspectives. The question however is, what state of *normalcy* are we returning to after humanitarian relief is implemented? By attributing disasters to forces of nature, it denies the wider historical and social dimensions of hazards, focusing attention largely on technocratic solutions (Bankoff, 2001:24). It also establishes a conviction that societies can take the correct steps to avoid or ameliorate disasters through the application of appropriate technocratic measures properly carried out by bureaucratically organized and centrally controlled institutions.

In Eriksen et al. (2013): To reduce vulnerability, then, often entail addressing deeply embedded social differences or political and economic conditions that favor elites (referenced in Eriksen and Lind, 2009). Thus, humanitarian assistance should also consider the root causes of vulnerability.

5.1 The quest for *Humanitarian Space*

The goal of any humanitarian or humanitarian organizations is to reduce human suffering through emergency responses in disasters and crises (Hopper, 2018:252). Typically, INGOs will provide essentials such as food, water, health care and shelter; their interventions are time sensitive, in contrast to development organizations that are oriented towards longer-term goals. However, the divide between what is considered humanitarianism and development is *blurry*. The type of disasters determines what type of help is needed.

The immediate response after the 2004-tsunami is said to have disclosed a rare manifestation of humanitarianism. Amid the prolonged civil war, a “short-lived bubble of spirited humanitarianism” emerged “irrespective of ethnicity, religion, caste or creed” (Thamilmaran, 2018:52). Medical aid was given within hours, dead bodies buried, and relief aid was mobilized within a day (Frerks, 2006). A tsunami typically does not leave many injured behind, those lucky enough to have survived the waves are often minimally injured. Shelter and permanent housing became one of the ‘paramount’ humanitarian needs, as an estimated 100,000 homes were destroyed and damaged (Khasalamwa, 2009:80)

Gaining access to targeted recipients became a struggle in the case of the tsunami response. Part of this struggle is related to the question of who constitutes ‘*real humanitarians*. The sheer magnitude of the tsunami meant that an enormous amount of aid was already accumulated,

however, an emerging new category of humanitarian actors soon emerged; Non-Governmental Individuals (NGIs). The NGIs constitute a diverse group, many coming from the Sri Lankan diaspora (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2013:197). This was especially true for the Tamil-diaspora who had been established due to the ongoing civil war. Other NGIs had no relation to the island other than as tourists who wanted to help. The NGIs shared a growing dissatisfaction with the established agencies that were in control of the disbursements. In their view official agencies spent too much money on offices and bureaucracies (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2013:197). Just like the NGOs, NGIs represent a variety of good and not-so-good humanitarians. Their legitimacy, cast in the language of humanitarian professionalism versus the humanitarian spirit, must therefore be understood as a competition over access to the humanitarian arena, argues Hilhorst and Jansen (2013:197).

What happens if local government is not invited *in*?

The GoSL, has often claimed in the past that NGOs appropriate resources which shall have been made available to the government; underlying these criticism; suggests Hilhorst and Jansen (2013:196) was the government's sense of marginalization from the humanitarian arena; as a result, political lobbying against INGOs became one of the drivers of people's discontent; the narrative that the INGOs 'did nothing for us' became embedded, which severely restricted the potential of the INGOs to interact with local authorities and people.

The idea of a humanitarian arena is founded in an actor-oriented approach; their practices are driven by different motives, and decisions are taken in response to actor's interpretation of the need of the situations. It became clear that the different ways of seeing disaster; that language plays an important role, it is therefore necessary to add attention to the analysis of different discourses that actors draw on to advance their ideas and activities. An important feat of the arena approach is that recognizes that humanitarian action is based on a range of driving forces besides a purely humanitarian ethic; as Hilhorst and Jansen (2013:190) argues, political motives may partly inspire humanitarian action. How different drivers of aid delivery interact and influences each other can be explored through research into its everyday practice. The notion of *humanitarian space* conveys an image of agencies seeking access to people in need; however, aid recipient does not passively hang about until aid arrives but strategize to reach agencies and to become eligible for their services. My focus on the everyday practices emphasizes that phenomena acquire meaning in their everyday realities, and by studying the way actors shape the reality of mind in each context; the working of principles and policies in practice can be explored.

The government and the humanitarians ascribed political motives to one another in attempts to exclude the other from the humanitarian arena. This is also important to note according to Hilhorst and Jansen (2013:199), that INGOs and local NGOs are also a part of this competition, competing over access to humanitarian budgets, programs, and target groups. Likewise, “it is extremely difficult, *if not impossible*, for a humanitarian agency that receives substantial amounts of government money to act as an advocate for an oppressed group whose interests contradict those of either donors or hosts” (Harrell-Bond, 1986:17). The danger argues Harrell-Bond (1986:17), of assuming that it is possible to separate politics from humanitarianism is that it prevents an examination of the effects of local, national, and international politics on policy. Some agencies take pride in their political neutrality which is actively demonstrated by the fact that they can work on *both* sides of a border. However, in truth, within such agencies, there are contentious debates as to whether it is right to give legitimacy to whichever regime is thought to be the more oppressive (Harrell-Bond, 1986:18). The relationship between the Sri Lankan State and the international humanitarian community has often been fraught with competing ethno-nationalist identities that have been part of the driving forces of the civil war. Subsequently, these dynamics have also impacted the spaces in which humanitarians have been able to operate and perform their services (Harris, 2010:1).

The physical space of humanitarian action refers to refugee camps, humanitarian corridors during ceasefires, or safe havens where peacekeepers and humanitarians provide physical protection and basic services. It also refers to the maneuvering of space for humanitarians to work without fear of attacks in dangerous situations alongside other actors.; drawing on the notion of humanitarian space as rooted in the fundamental policies of the Red Cross. The International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) thus advocates for the total separation of humanitarian work from political influence and has sought to institutionalize the separation of these spheres. Although most practitioners and researchers involved in humanitarian activities do not deny the highly politicized environments within which they operate (Kleinfeld, 2007:174), they are not blind to the state of the field; humanitarian headquarters claim political neutrality when applying universal normative values negotiated through the micro-physics of power in humanitarian arenas (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2013:201).

Considering international aid organizations and their interventions are part of understanding the local institutional landscape. Contrary to the widely held belief that conflict-affected states are

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characterized by a lack of institutions, instead, current insights reveal that the “poor development of state-monopolized institutions leads to situations where multiple normative systems prevail and hybrid institutions evolve” (Hilhorst, 2013:10). Similarly, as Dijohn (2008) stresses: post-conflict societies are characterized by an intense form of institutional multiplicity. The key then in understanding the everyday notion of politics is to not look for specific political activities as such, but rather, to turn the gaze to identify the political dimension and implications of everyday practices (Hilhorst, 2013:1). Following Rose (1993:30) who stresses that the cultural meanings of bodies legitimate certain power relations, the construction of different kinds of bodies, how women are ‘naturally’ less rational than men, for example legitimizes their ‘naturalized’ exclusion from the academy as well.

Despite an initial consensus for cooperation at the local level between the Sri Lankan President and the LTTE, party politics and nationalist agendas quickly challenged the exclusive sovereignty of both parties (Le Billion and Waizenegger, 2007:423). Similarly, Kleinfeld (2007:174-175) argues that spaces identified as non-political, and humanitarian are powerful precisely because they are used to reclassify political action and actors as non-political. The contestation between the GoSL and LTTE over the distribution of tsunami aid put these political benefits at play. Indeed, the tsunami delayed the resumption of warfare between the GoSL and LTTE but the parties nonetheless failed to use the disaster as an opportunity for negotiating peace (Stokke and Peiris, 2010:53). On the contrary, the failed attempt to establish a joint mechanism for managing aid to the affected areas was instead considered as a victory for Sinhalese nationalism and state sovereignty (Stokke and Peiris, 2010:53).

Kleinfeld (2007:174-175) argues that spaces identified as non-political, and humanitarian are powerful precisely because they are used to reclassify political action and actors as non-political; the contest between the GoSL and LTTE over the distribution of tsunami aid put these political benefits in play. For the GoSL and essential to state sovereignty and territorial integrity; Territory stalemate between the two; GoSL and LTTE: intensified after the tsunami, as both parties insisted on their right to govern areas requiring humanitarian assistance.

The theoretical approach to examining the political effects of disaster relief, has often focused on representations and analysis of humanitarian assistance of the emergency itself; that is, fatalities, displacement, property damage and loss of livelihood. Subsequently, political, and other relations that traverse borders and work at multiple scales, are often ignored (Kleinfeld, 2007:175).

5.2 Paving the way for a new humanitarianism?

The humanitarian response after the 2004-tsunami was distributed disproportionately, not because of the event itself, but because of the context of how the disaster took place. Responding to humanitarian emergencies then is fraught with difficulties from the outset. It involves communication among speakers of several languages, interpretations across cultural divides, and the negotiations of political agreement at every step (Hyndman, 2000:61). The shortcomings of humanitarian aid and its delivery in particular situations are generally outweighed by a political consensus that action must be taken (Hyndman, 2000:61). The BRIDGE (1996) argues that “new ways of thinking and working are needed to overcome the dichotomy between relief and development”, they further argue that gender analysis can provide a “common frame of reference” and are an essential tool for relief workers to inform programme responses and overcome the tyranny of the urgent.

The implication for aid agencies in disaster situations is that they should invest time and efforts to identify who cooperates and who opposes particular risk reduction measures and why. Heijmans (2013:226) further suggests dealing with power plays in such a way that marginal groups can succeed in their demands for protection and safety. This notion illustrates that defining disaster: the power to define disasters. In most circumstances, certain groups within society make choices for other groups, assigning whether they are vulnerable or not. Individual and societal characteristics then appear to create vulnerability, yielding a false impression of its underlying causes. This recognizes that vulnerability arises from a balance between options for oneself and imposing opinions on others (Kelman, 2020:96). Delving into the nature and causes of vulnerability makes it clear that people are not inherently vulnerable to hazards, they are *made* vulnerable by society.

5.3 The ‘development=disaster reduction» cliché

As noted by Wisner (2001:261): «it is also obvious that whether development leads to disaster risk reduction depends on what kind of ‘development’ and further notes that: “if it is exclusively ‘economic’ development (...) then the consequences are likely to be increased disaster risk” (2001:262). In their analyses of post-disaster political space, Pelling and Dill (2009) shows that disaster shocks can be *tipping points* to open political space. This results in the contestation of political power, but more often, leads to the opposite; a newer consolidation of the powers-that be.

In this sense, where states are contested, disaster events can become a platform for contesting parties to gain legitimation and constituency overpower politics, argues Hilhorst (2013:3). The 2004-tsunami could have acted as a “window of opportunity” for conflict transformation in Sri Lanka (Le Billion and Waizenegger, 2007:422) However, nationalist interpretations and calculations around the tsunami further undermined an already failing peace process, as the GoSL and LTTE reasserted ‘exclusive’ sovereignties over contested territories, thereby accelerating a return to war. In practical terms, the LTTE leveraged its territorial control to consolidate claims of ‘sovereignty’ over Tamil Eelam by demanding a direct channeling of international aid through its administration.

How different drivers of aid delivery interact and influence each other can be explored through research into its everyday practice. The notion of *humanitarian space* conveys an image of agencies seeking access to people in need; however, aid recipients do not passively wait for aid to arrive, rather, they strategize to reach agencies to become eligible for their services. My focus on the everyday practices emphasizes that phenomena acquire meaning in their everyday realities. By studying the way actors shape reality in each context, the working of principles and policies can be explored in practice.

Even though disasters and development studies have followed parallel tracks for many years, there are few exchanges of ideas or experience between the two fields. This is changing, as the two fields are beginning to converge around recurring themes such as vulnerability and sustainability. Nonetheless, there is a ‘danger’, claims Eriksen et al. (2013:117), that humanitarian actors are being left to “pick up the pieces” by development failures that have generated vulnerability. For humanitarianism, changing the social order of societies is a secondary concern (Hopper, 2018:252). The New Humanitarian (2016) reported that the Doctors Without Borders opposed the idea of bridging the gap between relief and development work prior to the 2016 Humanitarian Summit. As a former senior staff member at Doctors Without Borders reported to the New Humanitarian: “You can ask firefighters to put out a fire. Don’t ask them to build affordable housing” (2016).

There is an inherent tension between the political nature of development and the humanitarian imperatives of saving lives, therefore, these two spheres should be held separate. This notion aligns with the statement made by my informant who described how humanitarians inhabited a sort of pride by being the first to arrive at the disaster site. “It is *they* that are stopping people

from dying” (Informant, 2. *My emphasis*). Development as such is seen as more ‘dirty’ (skittent) as one must engage with the political realities of that place, whereas the humanitarians’ motivations are seen as “*pure*” (ren) (Informant, 2. *My translation*)

Moreover, as Hopper (2018:252) notes; “even within organizations that contain both humanitarian and development sectors, there are often claims that the different parts are not working together effectively or coordinating their activity”. When I was in the field around Galle among the tsunami-built houses, I would often inquire as to who had built the houses. While some houses had small plates nailed to the wall, others were standing anonymously. However, it became clear to me that from the perspective of the beneficiaries, the INGO behind these kitchen-less houses were not a big concern. Similarly, we can understand that debates about the nature of the relationships between humanitarianism and development is not a concern (Hopper, 2018:253).

In short, development, can be an effective form of disaster risk reduction claims Hopper (2018:256). Development approaches can be the key to «build back better» and to make resilient communities for the future crises.

Summary

In short, development, can be an effective form of disaster risk reduction claims Hopper (2018:256). Development approaches can be the key to «build back better» and to make resilient communities for the future crises. While many emphasize either geopolitics, capitalism, or ethics in their investigations of humanitarianism, I have emphasized how these three combined shape the global environment in which humanitarians operate. The Sri Lankan case showcases political conflict and disasters construct uneven social processes and geographical spaces that differentially structure everyday life. Within this backdrop, the next chapter will unpack the gendered experiences of disasters.

CHAPTER 6: Framing gender as political

In this chapter, I start by returning to the core of disaster scholarship; if disasters are not natural, what are they? To a large extent, social sciences has embraced the idea that ‘natural’ disasters do not exist. As the vulnerability discourse has illustrated, there is a need to re-think how disasters are understood “the *naturalness* of disasters — or the perceived naturalness of disaster is misleading” (Kelman, 2020:10).

This argument has “been going on for over 200 years. This is not a new discussion, it has sort of been going on for ever (...)” (Informant, 1). Current trends in disaster scholarship aims at challenging this hegemony by erasing the ‘natural’ from the discourse itself. Rather, it is “where we built, how we built, and our cultural beliefs that evidently turn a hazard into a disaster” (Informant, 1). This realization contends that disasters should be understood as a product of historical patterns of vulnerability, instead of a natural phenomenon beyond our control. As such, the current debate within disaster scholarship is aimed at turning the discussion towards reflecting the structures embedded within the societies where they occur (Fordham and Meyreles, 2014:24). *But why is it so hard to change?*

For feminist scholars, this is linked with how the world is understood, that is how different discourses of disasters are part of deciding how we look at risk and who is at risk. The prevalence of the ‘natural’ terminology is part of what constitutes a core element of the politics of disasters, and integral to this notion is the dominant Western hegemony. As Gaillard (2021:xiv) theorizes, “the concept of disaster has been fabricated by the West on the basis of its own interpretation of the world”, he continues, c: “it reflects one cultural reality rather than a universal truth”. The point that Gaillard (2021) is making is that a *disaster culture* has emerged, or rather a *culture* of ways of thinking of disasters which in turn affects how relief and reconstruction has been constituted.

The prevalence of ‘natural’ disasters as ‘natural’ is such a core part of the terminology, both within the sectors that are working (with disasters) and the public. As my Informant (1) elaborates, “We are talking about phrases, and terminologies — and there are people dying from the actual effects of disasters on the ground” but “If we stopped using ‘natural’ — if we kind of understood the very core of disaster being because of the decisions we are making, and therefore we have the power to stop those, there would be less death, less economic disruption, less damage. These things are not *disconnected*, you can argue that a word is just a word, but words are powerful” (Informant, 1. *My emphasis*). From his argument, gender and DRR must be understood and seen together. It follows the concerns of feminist theorists; if women are not considered part of mainstream society, then DRR policies will not capture women’s experiences of disasters. “They are intrinsically linked (re-defining disasters and gender). You cannot have one discussion without having the other — and they need to be discussed together” (Informant, 1).

Findings from Scharffscher's (2010) PhD research suggest that women in disaster-affected areas often represent important knowledge and resources, and international relief workers often fail to connect or cooperate with local women's organizations in post-tsunami Batticalo. Scharffscher (2010) suggests that the reason behind the disconnection can be linked to the 'us' and 'them' undercurrents of international relief work, part of lingering remnants of a colonial heritage. These disconnections, she argues, may lead to a disempowerment of local capacities, flaws in international relief activities, and reduced resilience among Batticaloan women in relation to the Sri Lankan civil war. Despite a growing volume of policies and guidelines on the importance of involving local capacities, there are inadequacies in the way international relief agencies operate vis-a-vis disaster affected communities. On a practical level, this can be rooted in cultural, social, and linguistic barriers (Scharffscher, 2010:116) which are to be addressed if relief workers are to provide effective and sustainable assistance to crises-affected communities.

To understand the depth of the issue that the thesis problematizes, we must understand the Sri Lankan context. As the theoretical chapter has illustrated, gender, as different from sex, refers to socially constructed categories of femininity and masculinity, as opposed of the biological differences between women and men. Hence, within this context, gender is understood as socially constructed processes. It follows that there is a direct relationship between biological sex and social differences and capacities, however as Fordham and Meyreles (2014:27) claims, this is a false assumption. Rather, they contend that the way practitioners rely on these (false) narratives contributes to subordinated groups being increasingly disadvantaged, and hence in disaster situations, their death rates are proportionately higher than men. They claim that this needs to be acknowledged and challenged to obtain effective reduction of disaster risk. Moreover, this makes disaster management a social and political endeavor, rather than a simply technical one (Fordham and Meyreles, 2014:27).

Studies of gender in disaster research are predominately framed through the binary categories of men and women. Usually associated with concepts such as *vulnerability* and *resilience*, they are highly contested, and should be seen in relation to time and space. "The very dominant view that both gender and vulnerability are intertwined social constructs is at odds with the near-universal prominence given to biological dimorphism in underpinning gender identities" (Gaillard, 2021). Moreover, it is noted that while INGOs have incorporated a gender perspective in their policies, it has been on their own terms (Prügl and Lustgarten, 2006). As a result, they argue that gender

mainstreaming has become part of a technocratic management process; one that is not geared to attaining social transformation.

Indeed, there are endless policy briefings and conduct documentation on *how* to reduce vulnerabilities. Currently, what is most common within DRR is the focus on the local communities typically named *community-based disaster risk reduction* (CBDRD). *Despite* all these different approaches and perspectives to solve and reduce the risk of people, few address what root causes created risk in the first place. Instead of addressing the root causes of disaster, these discourses work merely as a distraction to transformative disaster risk reduction as they do not challenge the structural reasons behind risks.

Most scholars recognize how misleading the term ‘natural’ disasters are, instead, they point towards how disasters are the result of the unequal distributions of power and resources between those who are more vulnerable and those who are less so; even the most marginalized people in society are not helpless ‘victims’ when dealing with disasters (Gaillard, 2019:57). In both ways of thinking, gender has been viewed within traditional understandings of gender roles, where women are either the victims or the responders. *Women* are not a homogenous group; not all women are weak, elderly, pregnant, lactating or menstruating, and are not so all the time. Despite decades of gender-focused research, the humanitarian community still tends to use ‘gender’ when they, in practice, refer to women and girls (Hilhorst et al., 2018:6). Moreover, when referencing gender (women and girls), they essentially focus on the status of women and girls as vulnerable people or victims without agency (Hilhorst et al., 2018:6).

Theoretical advances concerning disaster and gender in geography have further problematized how *gender* too often are being equalized as *women*. A gender-blind perspective has predominated in disaster-studies, claims MacGregor (2009:136) “hence ‘a stranger silence’ exists on gender and climate change within the social sciences. Fordham and Meyreles (2014) refer to this as a paradox; masculinity which contributes to the structure of power that privileges men *can also put men at risk*. It is only recently that gender and masculinity has been incorporated into studies of disaster, the dominant ‘gender perspective’ which is emerging, has tended to consist only women. It also becomes visible that the increased attention to women has created deficit in literature pertaining to men’s role and perceptions of disasters (Rushton et. al, (2020:1). From the late 1980s and onwards, there has been a deliberate focus on women, as women, especially in low-income areas, were recognized as the most marginalized and disadvantaged (Rushton et. al, 2020:5). It has however generated a skewed understanding of people’s experiences of disaster.

These confluences of ‘gender’ with ‘women and vulnerability’ also helped direct the need-based character of humanitarian aid; by shedding light on the social reality of women by exposing gendered differences of women and men in disasters, have we also made women more vulnerable? Has this led to a kind of tunnel vision that only centers the suffering of women? (Hilhorst et al. 2018:6). The inclination to view women as the *primary* victims and *primarily* as victims argues Hilhorst et al. (2018:7) is being re-produced in the ‘moral language’ familiar to international donors, which continues to dominate policy discussions and journalistic representation.

Hilhorst et al. (2018:9) problematizes the imaginary of women as victims is rarely openly contested in humanitarian policy. “Gender relations are deeply ingrained in, and reproduced by, the working of all institutions in society, ranging from the personal between men and women, to the working of cultural values, geopolitics, governance practices and religion” (Hilhorst et al. 2018:9).

6.1. Why do women die in disasters?

So why then do women die at a higher rate in disasters? Or perhaps more prominently, who are these vulnerable people? Who do we think of as more vulnerable? This can be a highly politicized question, but nevertheless an important one. Crucial to understanding *vulnerability* is risk, or more specific *who is* at risk. Oxfam (2005:9) reports that “women appear to have been killed in greater numbers than men”; they say ‘appear’ because “‘here is precious little accurate, disaggregated data that shows how many of the dead were women’”. Despite this data gap however, it is assumed that the tsunami killed more women than men. The point I am trying to make is *why* do we automatically assume that women are hardest hit by disasters? As it is evident that disasters do not discriminate; woman or man, disasters do not care.

The Telford et al. (2006) *Joint Evaluation of the International Response to the Indian Ocean tsunami* reported that women died at a higher rate, “the tsunami killed 40,000 to 45,000 more women than men” (Telford et al., 2006:70). The report claimed that the tsunami mortality risk for females compared to males correlated with “the reason given for the gender and age differences in survival rates in these disasters are usually related strength and stamina, and the ability to swim or climb trees” (Telford et al., 2006:35). This framing of women’s mortality rate has been challenged by feminist scholars, as this *biological essentialism* is part of ignoring the gendered social construction that increases women’s risk in disasters (Rushton et al., 2020:2).

To recognize both the power and vulnerability involved in the subject position that men take up and the variant gendered identities to address issues such as violence are of direct concern to women (Cornwall and White, 2000:3). Indeed, as Gaillard (2017) contends, “considerations of gender in the disaster sphere has centered almost exclusively on the vulnerability and capacities of women”, arguing that this trend stems from a polarized Western perception of gender as a binary man-women. Ultimately, policymakers who fail to consider the interests of half of the population cannot hope to understand the world. Interpretations of disasters represent political choices, which in turn have political impacts, particularly from a gender perspective. Indeed, it is not hazards that kill ‘vulnerable’ people, rather it is the society who fails to account for those who are at risk. This realization is manifested from turning to treating disasters as a purely technical problem, to understanding it as a social problem. This chapter suggests that not only is there a need to question the comparison made whereby development can only be ‘good’ set against a colonialism that is wholly ‘bad’, but that in presenting a different history of development, we can see how development works in and against its colonial past (Kothari, 2005:51).

It is obvious that statistics are as good or bad as the methods used to collect them. However, *disaster statistics* also have some specific weaknesses. In this case, I am not referring to the number of ‘affected’ or ‘injured’ which are both ‘fussy’ terms that can have many meanings. Instead, the above assumption made by Telford et al. (2005) is based on the number of deaths. The term ‘death’ too, can be complicated, however not *as* complicated as the number of ‘affected’. A person is either dead or alive. The validity of the number produced can however be questioned. For instance, there can be political pressures to either overstate or to understate casualties (Wisner et al., 2004:66). Likewise, the lack of census information for many of the Tamil controlled areas further complicated the number of deaths.

6.1.1 In-built male bias in relief programmes

Some tsunami widows received little or nothing because only ‘the man, as the head of household’ could claim it, on the other hand women’s options in establishing income generations projects was culturally limited (Dominelli, 2020:6). Because it is seen as a sensitive area, governments do not readily seek to intervene in family life (Hopper, 2018:86). It derives from the notion that the family is considered to belong to the private realm. As such, even though the government does legislate in this area, there are limits to how much the state can redefine gender relations or reach the ‘everyday’ practices of disaster preparedness. Thurnheer (2009:82) highlights some of these problems through her field work in Batticaloa. She points to the support extended to women by

humanitarian organizations such as financial grants for women to establish small shops. These shops, she argues, became a typical part of tsunami-aid. However, the women who took part in these activities (some quite successfully) were kept within the informal economy. It is arguable whether the aid implemented was transformative or not.

Likewise, cash transfers were also common in the post-disaster setting. However, these payments were often administered by state agencies which usually addressed the eldest male adult in the family as the “perceived authoritative head” (Thurnheer, 2009:83) making it difficult for women to receive the aid.

Some western observers believe that the status of women in the Global South is even more inferior to men than in their own society (Harrell-Bond, 2986:266). The failure of not seeing women as agents for change, but rather as passive victims of disasters, has led not just to women being disadvantaged but to whole programmes going awry. A prime example is the male bias built into aid and relief programmes, reinforced as ‘head of the house’. Commonly in eastern Sri Lanka — women (rather than men) oversee the household finances, women as such benefited from income-generation projects mainly when they corresponded to the category of “women-headed households” (Thurnheer, 2009:83). These gendered effects of tsunami aid were remarked by Thurnheer (2009) during their ethnographic fieldwork in the Eastern parts of Sri Lanka. Whereas women played a vital role in the household in coastal villages, these activities did not involve any equipment that could be replaced. Thurnheer (2009:82) notes, within the fisheries sector, distribution was largely based on the criterion of former possession. A new boat granted for a boat lost in the tsunami”. However, Smith (2019:365) concludes that “there seems to be an unspoken agreement, demonstrated by the lack of gender analysis in global-level policy documents, that gender is not relevant to global-level processes”, yet, global policies influence local realities. There is therefore an immediate need to incorporate gender-based analysis to overcome the ‘tyranny of the urgent’ she claims (Smith, 2019:367).

6.2 Bridging the gap between policy and practice

One thing is clear, it is not that easy. “Not just our own, but also those with the power and resources to decide for others, with or without their awareness and consent. The decisions occur continually over the long term, determining how society treats different groups, and how it governs, distributes wealth, and makes and implements choices” (Kelman, 2020:43). The harsh reality is that those with power, resources, and privilege have always had options to

reduce vulnerability and to avert the disasters (Kelman, 2020:62). This insight, of vulnerability created more by society than by physical factors, applies to gender as well.

Bridging the gap between the theoretical and practical sphere of development, Kothari (2005:52) advocates for a critical analysis of development and suggests that many of those engaged with policy and practice see themselves as primarily practitioners, *and therefore presume to have little use for theory*. This division between the relative importance of theory and practices is part of an ongoing debate within development studies. Likewise, some scholars point to how gender in a development perspective has become part of a technocratic management process, in the sense that it is not geared towards attaining social transformation (Hopper, 2012:112). This follows Yadav et al's (2021)e suggestion that even though gender has received increased attention in DRR policies and practice over the past decades, it has yet to bring *transformative change to the lives of people*, especially women. Kothari (2005:42) observes that feminist and postcolonial scholarship does not yet properly inform development; this she argues, may be due to the fact that those working in the field see themselves primarily as practitioners rather than theorists.

Summary

This chapter has highlighted some of the key reasons why people are vulnerable are not only related to policies, but also about politics. In sum, disaster studies increasingly shows how pre-existing societal conditions decidedly expose, vulnerability protections, and recovery chances, in turn, they depend on socioeconomic and political order more than geophysical extremes and are responsible for most casualties and large parts of the damage; for this reason, disasters are largely preventable. Disasters, it seems, are constructed by choices.

CHAPTER 7. Conclusion

In this critical study I have explored, both theoretically and empirically how *gender* in relation to disasters and disaster risk is conceptualized and operationalized in the lived experiences by women related to the 2004-tsunami by drawing on the findings of researchers visiting after the tsunami struck. The purpose of the thesis has been two-fold; the first objective is aimed at understanding what disasters are, and how aid agencies interpret these understandings in relief- and reconstruction phases, whereas the second objective is concerned with how vulnerability is produced and maintained in the post-disaster setting.

Intrigued by what I saw during my first field visit to Sri Lanka in 2018, I began this research by exploring the ways humanitarian aid impacted longer development goals. The story of the missing kitchens in Galle became my entry-point to disaster scholarship and the issues surrounding the humanitarian-development nexus.

My thesis, then, is a critical study of the past in present-day Sri Lanka, with a particular focus on the imaginative geographical spaces of disasters. I have suggested that this presence of the geographical imagination has produced an exclusionary field of knowledge, wherein who is considered as 'knowers' is limited, leaving women out. Evertsen (2021) describes such exclusions as 'epistemic ignorance' or the process of 'Othering'. The research has been guided by the thesis question: *How can humanitarian aid maintain and reproduce vulnerability?* I have explored this question by focusing on the discursive ways disasters are understood by asking: *what are disasters?* By looking at how interpretations of disasters as a phenomenon have impacted who we understand as victims of disasters.

Through the case of post-tsunami Sri Lanka, I have illustrated how international aid can become contentious when implemented in a highly political landscape. I have argued that disasters must be seen as the results of political choices, drawing on Kelman's (2020) conceptualization of how disasters are produced and maintained. By focusing on the root causes of disasters, the thesis builds on previous research within disaster scholarship which has turned to researching vulnerability in disaster-settings.

The contribution my thesis to further research on disaster I hope will open spaces for alternative approaches to address risk. By showing how the misreading of the political landscape in Sri Lanka is framed by two key spatial assumptions: 1) that humanitarian space can be identified, and 2) the idea that humanitarian space can be represented and maintained separately from the political space in which humanitarian relations are confined to the places where disasters have occurred and chiefly serve its victims, my work shows how gender and vulnerability need to be rethought in DDR. It is therefore necessary to ask,

How does humanitarian interventions contribute to reducing vulnerabilities?

To answer the above question, I combined theoretical perspectives from feminist geography and research on disasters and humanitarianism with the everyday lived experiences of women from four different fieldwork conducted in post-tsunami Sri Lanka as part of my data collection.

Throughout this study I have demonstrated that the discursive ways of thinking about disasters are part of constructing *victims of* disasters. I have elaborated on how different discursive ways of understanding disasters has contributed to framing women as victims. More specifically, I have argued that without a comprehensive understanding of the local context, and without this understanding, aid provided by international humanitarian organizations (INGOs) might rather contribute to making women *more* vulnerable than what they were before. In a world with much uncertainty and potential vulnerable linked to global warming and global changes how states in the global south respond to international emergency aid and developmental aid are of interest to the global community as it can provide useful insight in how to respond to such disasters in the future. My main finding from this critical exploration is that the 2004-tsunami did not simple produce passive victims; rather, they were subjected to embedded power structured within the society *prior* to the tsunami.

7.1 Looking forward

Future researchers may want to assess and evaluate how or whether existing ‘gender-inclusive’ data banks represent the lived realities of diverse boys and men caught up in disasters, and of transgendered persons and all others whose very identity challenges easy check-box approaches, for example in post-disaster needs assessments” (Enarson, 2016:222). Moving on from today, research on disasters must not only study the construction of disasters, but also how vulnerability is understood. Disaster research as such should aim at reinventing itself to address the increasing interconnectedness between North and South. In sum, we need to engage more with the linkages between knowledge, power, and social change.

Preventing disasters never stops; preventing disasters is not about a single or one-off action (Kelman, 2019:2). Preventing disasters means considering processes covering how people think and behave, such as attitude, paradigms, values, and cultures. Ever presence within society; preventing disasters, argues Kelman (2015:2) should be part of usual, day-to-day lives as continuous processes. Finally, this thesis is asking more questions than it provides a definite answer. It exposes the incoherence and flaws of Western discourses in disaster but does not propose a definitive

alternative approach to subvert it. Alternatives will (and should) be emerging from below, within its specific contexts to reflect local ontologies and epistemologies.

Where do we go from here?

We walk the talk. We hold major aid actors account on gender equality commitments (CARE, 2021). But to ‘walk the talk’ one also needs to recognize women as legitimate partners for change, and not just viewing them as ‘*vulnerable victims*’ of disasters. The future for disaster research therefore should reinvent itself to address the increasing interconnectedness between North and South, intricate power balances and.

At worst, it has been a neocolonial or western impositions on ‘the Other’ by claiming to ‘know’ about ‘the Other’ and what is good for ‘the Other’, therefore we need to select on the role which the researcher and the practitioner in disaster research play, and on the links between knowledge, power, and social change. In sum, my analyses argues that *inclusive DRR* start with moving beyond focusing on technical fixes in dealing with natural hazards. This way of seeing disasters is downplaying the *embodied* forms of knowledge and erases the *everyday* as a meaningful site of understanding how to respond.

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Appendix 1: A disaster Studies Manifesto

Downloaded from: <https://www.radixonline.org/manifesto-accord> 22.05.22

Power, Prestige & Forgotten Values: A Disaster Studies Manifesto

We want to inspire and inform more respectful, reciprocal, and genuine relationships between “local” and “external” researchers in disaster studies. This Manifesto calls for rethinking our research agendas, our methods, and our allocation of resources.

We recognize that, while every researcher in our globalized system struggles with complicity and contradiction, the manifesto reflects principles that we as a collective aspire to. It is not by any means a claim of having achieved these objectives in our past work.

We, the undersigned, are committed to these principles and call others to join us in putting our words into action.

1. Our concerns

1.1 Disaster studies *is not always informed by local realities*: researchers are sometimes operating from a cultural deficit, and the everyday risk that people experience is ultimately inappropriately articulated.

1.2. Consequently, disaster studies often lead to ‘discovery’ that is the *common knowledge* of people who live with risk. At worst, this can become an intellectual conquest - research done ABOUT people experiencing risk, rather than BY, WITH and FOR them.

1.3 *Methodologies* are broadly embraced which were inspired by Enlightenment thinking and implemented by researchers from countries steeped in such traditions. Even the language that we use (today, mostly academic English), our prevailing narratives, our cultural lenses and the framing of our research problems rely heavily on Enlightenment origins as opposed to local and indigenous ontologies and epistemologies. These are well reflected in expectations of peer reviewers of proposals and publications.

1.4 The *impact and success* of research is generally *measured* based on the priorities of institutions valuing Enlightenment-type thinking including the agenda/values/reporting needs of similarly thinking funding agencies and donors.

1.5 The research agendas in disaster studies are too often driven by *fleeting institutional interest* in concepts, buzzwords, industry, and political agendas that appear to present the greatest opportunities for research funding. In addition, mechanisms for funding tend to favor research proposals that serve a *neoliberal status quo*, promote interests outside of the local (studied) contexts and ultimately fall short scientifically and ethically.

1.6 Agendas are also formed by *foreign policy and development aid interests*, and often take the form of research grants that promote diplomatic and trade interests of donors irrespective of others' needs. Capacity building projects can be neo-colonial. There is a lack of resources available for research FOR and BY local people.

1.7 *External "experts" taking the lead* (and the credit) for researching "vulnerable" "others" is widely normalized. In such instances people who are subjected to these investigations and local researchers that should be leading such work are disempowered and patronized. This unhealthy approach is modelled by many experienced researchers, universities, and donors.

1.8 Individual researchers are often motivated not only by funding opportunities, but also by the chance (and pressure) to develop and publish ostensibly *unique findings in ostensibly high-impact journals* - and the perceived prestige that follows - based on research of "the vulnerable", the exotic, the Other, who do not necessarily get to hear of the research outputs.

2. The future we want

2.1 We want disaster studies to *model respect for and trust in local researchers*, their knowledge and abilities, no matter where they come from. Those who are usually researched or who are currently used to assist outside researchers recognize that they can and should lead research and that their knowledge and skills are as valuable as those from other places in the world.

2.2 We want *local researchers to study their own localities at risk* and local disasters wherever they happen. Local researchers tend to know local contexts better than anyone else and thus should become principal investigators of any research project that deals with risks and disasters. They should lead academic and non-academic publications, both oral and written.

2.3 We want outside researchers to come and support locally driven initiatives *only when needed*. When such collaboration is warranted, local researchers and/or local people must retain power in leadership and decision making, including through genuine participatory research led by people at risk where there is no local research capacity. Collaboration between local and outsider researchers should advantageously build on pre-existing partnerships and dialogue while seeking mutual interest in new partnerships and dialogue.

2.4 We want local research epistemologies and indigenous constructs of disasters to be central to our field, to better reflect diverse local realities. Local researchers should thus *value local*

ontologies and epistemologies, whenever appropriate, to decolonize disaster research and move beyond the Enlightenment-based sources, concepts, methodologies and languages that dominate the field. Local and non-local researchers should be encouraged and supported to not only publish in international journals, but also to value local publications, both as an outlet for their research and as a reference for their studies.

2.5 We want our field to reaffirm that disaster research carries a political agenda, that is *to address the root causes of vulnerability and recognize the capacities* of local people. Our research should therefore be geared towards reducing the risk of disaster, rather than towards building academic reputation. Putting local researchers at the forefront of scholarship should be the first political and symbolic move in this direction, recognizing that disaster research is neither apolitical nor detached from historical heritages.

2.6 We want our field to *not only get our stories right, but also to tell them right*. The dissemination of research outputs and outcomes must occur in a way that demonstrates collaboration, local leadership and appreciation for local knowledge and ways of collecting and presenting knowledge. We should also share and present knowledge in languages accessible to people who can/want to make use of this knowledge. Our peer reviews of publications should thus be sensitive to non-Enlightenment-based ontologies and epistemologies.

3. How do we get there?

Change HOW we research:

3.1 Stop assuming the role of “expert” as part of research on local conditions and people outside of our own culture and instead ensure that local researchers and people experiencing risk can tell their own stories and develop their own methods, in their own ways, for their own purposes. Disaster studies research can then push against normative approaches that largely benefit external scholars and rather promote the idea that research should be undertaken principally for the local benefit.

3.2 Research should be framed from locally appropriate, culturally grounded perspectives and methodologies which must be similarly developed and critiqued. It is still largely assumed that Enlightenment-based ideas about science are fundamental and rational, thus assuming superiority and a mission to ‘bring progress’. The ‘progress’ however is ill-fitting and ignores local social and institutional practices. This epistemological shift should feature in our routine research chores such as the peer review of proposals and publications.

Change WHAT and WHO we research:

3.3 Encourage and promote local researchers to lead the development and design of research proposals based on local priorities, theorizing local issues, and making best use of local capacities—always with critiques.

3.4 Do not always prioritize research adopting Enlightenment-based research approaches and do consider local and indigenous ontologies and epistemologies. The epistemologies and ideologies that underpin disaster studies research are important because they frame the questions that are asked, determine the sets of methods that are employed, and shape the analysis.

Change WHO does the research:

3.5 Foster the leadership of local institutions (regardless of the ranks in the international leagues), including local funding agencies, and encourage local researchers to lead

research endeavors, from designing proposals to collecting and analyzing data as well as authoring publications. This will help to minimize the frequent ‘discovery’ of what is new for the external scholar but is common knowledge of those to those who live in the context.

3.6 Employ methods that enable and encourage local people to lead and critique enquiry and local scientific endeavors that provide maximum benefit to local researchers and the people who are the subjects of research.

4. Join us and commit to:

4.1 Develop a research agenda that reflects local realities, priorities, and critiques while recognizing that local groups often differ in their views and interests.

4.2 Respect and build upon what local researchers have achieved already, rather than only “external” scholarship.

4.3 Lobby for change in research agendas through our publications, peer-reviewing, networks, and professional time servicing our field.

4.4 Promote and lobby for more local funding opportunities to support our research so that external funding only top these up when needed.

4.5 Fit into and pursue local research agendas and work within local/indigenous epistemologies where appropriate.

4.6 Ensure that research is done with the benefit of those being researched as a central aim.

4.7 Actively pursue network building with institutions and individuals everywhere (and those often the subject of our research).

4.8 Seek and involve these researchers in projects in our own homes, as co-principal investigators, encouraging their critiques of and advice regarding work and approaches in our homes.

4.9 Commit to support and publish in journals everywhere. Open access also matters - make sure that scholars around the world can use your work while being careful not to perpetuate inequities through only using pay-to-publish-open-access journals.

4.10 Create opportunities for non-English publications in disaster studies.

4.11 Encourage and promote locally led publications and presentations, academic and non-academic.

We hope that you will join us! Disaster studies needs to become more inclusive and collaborative. If we are successful, disaster studies might contribute more fully to disaster risk reduction. We can't afford to wait.

Appendix 2: Information letter

Are you interested in taking part in the research project?

” Gender and disasters in Sri Lanka”?

This is an inquiry about participation in a research project where the main purpose is to examine how gender is conceptualized in disaster policy and practice. In this letter I will give you information about the purpose of the project and what your participation will involve.

Purpose of the project

From a feminist perspective I seek to study the connections between disaster risk reduction measures and gender in the context of Sri Lanka. By using Sri Lanka as an empirical case, I wish to gain an understanding of the workings of humanitarian organizations and local government in including a gender responsive approach to disaster management.

The research project will ask questions about humanitarian organizations and local government(s) working with aid and/or relief during and/or after disasters. In the disaster literature, it is a well-known fact that disasters are profoundly discriminatory. Studies show that wherever disasters hit, pre-existing structures and social conditions determine that some members of the community will be less affected while others pay a higher price. Some groups of society are recognized as more *vulnerable* than others. This *vulnerability*, I will argue is rooted in political, cultural, and historical processes within the society.

Climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction is argued to be inherently linked. An increasingly more unpredictable climate makes planning and preparedness harder. However, the *vulnerability* within a society is ever-present, even if only revealed when a natural hazard appears. Linking climate change adaptation with disaster risk governance is putting the responsibility on local governments, in compliance with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015-2030). As such, the State is recognized as having the primary responsibility to prevent and reduce disaster risk, but as a disaster happens the State rarely works alone. Flows of humanitarian aid in relief and recovery operations is very much needed, but some critics argue that not understanding the working of the local level is enforcing embedded *vulnerabilities* in the society.

This is seen within a wider debate about the transformative capacity of international humanitarian organizations and linkages within development and *sustainable development*. Thus, the main objective of the project is to further examine these linkages between local government and the international humanitarian sector. The data collected in this research project will be used in my master thesis at the department of sociology and human geography (ISS), faculty of social sciences at the University of Oslo.

Who is responsible for the research project?

The University of Oslo is the institution responsible for the project. Kristine Hansen, master student at the institute of sociology and human geography (ISS) will be conducting the research by supervision of Andrea J. Nightingale, professor at ISS.

Why are you being asked to participate?

You are being asked to participate in this research project because I believe you have considerable knowledge about either gender, disaster, the international humanitarian sector and/or Sri Lanka and thus may have valuable information to my research project. I have either found your contact information through open sources or been given your contact information from someone who has participated and believe you have additional knowledge to share.

What does participation involve for you?

If you have chosen to take part in this research project, it will entail that you are willing to answer questions regarding my research topics *gender and disasters*, either in person or via digital tools such as video, phone or by email. In the case of a video interview, the platform used will be Zoom as recommended by the University of Oslo. Each interview will be approx. 30 minutes.

The interviews will include questions about how you work with disasters and how gender is included and/or conceptualized in your field of expertise and/or organization. During the interviews I might ask you questions which can collect information about your ethnic origin, political opinions, religious beliefs, and your philosophical beliefs. It is voluntary to share this information.

The data collected will be your answers, name, work title and workplace. Your answers and personal data will be recorded and stored electronically. In addition, data available through open sources (e.g websites, news articles) may be collected and stored electronically with your answers and personal data.

Participation is voluntary

Participation in the project is voluntary. If you choose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving any reason. All information about you will then be deleted. There will be no negative consequences for you if you choose not to participate or later decide to withdraw from the project.

Your personal privacy: how we will store and use your personal data

We will only use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter. We will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act).

The student (Kristine Hansen) and supervisor (Prof. Andrea J. Nightingale) will be the only one with access to the personal data collected. To ensure that no unauthorized persons can access the personal data, I (Kristine Hansen) will replace your name and contact details with a code, the list of names, contact details and respective codes will be stored separately from the rest of the collected data.

All collected data will be stored at an encrypted server hosted by the University of Oslo (“UiO’s storage hotel”). The storage hotel is operated by the University Center for Information Technology (USIT).

In the case of COVID-19 restrictions being lifted in Sri Lanka and Norway, and travels between the two countries is deemed safe and possible, personal data collected in Norway may be taken abroad to Sri Lanka in pursuit of an ethnographic field study. The University of Oslo will continue to be the institution responsible for the research project. The data will stay stored in UiO’s storage hotel. Contact details and respective codes will stay stored separately, and always locked behind doors if left unattended.

To respect the privacy of my informants, if published, participants will be made unrecognizable (unless otherwise agreed upon prior to publication). If relevant, participants may be referred to their current and/or prior professional career e.g “from his/her experience from UNDP” or “working as an advisor to the Sri Lankan government (...). If applicable, this will be agreed upon with each participant.

What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?

The project is scheduled to end June 1. 2022. Any data collected throughout this project will be deleted by the end of completion, including any recordings with/and without video.

Your rights:

If you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

- Access the personal data that is being processed about you
- Request that your personal data is deleted
- Request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified [L] [SEP]
- Receive a copy of your personal data (data portability),
and send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection
- Authority regarding the processing of your personal data.

What gives us the right to process your personal data? [L] [SEP] We will process your personal data based on your consent. Based on an agreement with the University of Oslo, NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with data protection legislation. [L] [SEP]

Where can I find out more?

If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:

University of Oslo via Kristine Hansen. Email: kthanse@student.sv.uio.no
or by phone + 47 979 73 689

Or via Prof. Andrea J. Nightingale (supervisor) by email: andrea.nightingale@uio.no
or by phone + 47 228 55 141 [L] [SEP]

Our Data Protection Officer: Roger Markgrad-Bye, by email personvernombud@uio.no
or by phone +47 908 22 826. [L] [SEP]

Yours sincerely,

Andrea J. Nightingale

Kristine Hansen

Professor, University of Oslo Master student, University of Oslo -----

I have received and I understand the information about the project Gender and disasters in **Sri Lanka**. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions.

I give consent:

to participate in interview(s)

for information about me/myself to be published in a way that I can be recognized in.

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project.

(Signed by participant, date) []