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Nata Duvvury, Bilge Erten, and Smita Ramnarain

ABSTRACT

Violence against women (VAW) is widely recognized as a pervasive, global problem that is associated with poor health and economic outcomes for women and children. Women are disproportionately exposed to physical, sexual, and psychological violence during volent conflicts and political upheavals. Similarly, research on disasters indicates a disproportionate impact of such events on women and girls, with an increase in physical and sexual VAW, specific deprivations, and child marriage. This special issue is focused on providing a feminist understanding of the economic drivers and impacts of conflict and disaster on VAW, both within and outside the home. The introduction provides an overview of the contributions and interventions in this special issue, highlighting the complex links between conflict or disaster with VAW. This collection of articles also points to the large gaps in terms of integrating feminist perspectives into the international architecture for post-conflict or post-disaster aid and reconstruction.

KEYWORDS

Violence against women, violent conflict, disaster, feminist economics, gender-based violence

JEL Codes: B54

HIGHLIGHTS

- VAW is a persistent feature of disruptions due to conflicts and disasters.
- Disruptions provide opportunities for women to resist and transcend existing gender norms.
- Robust gender-sensitive risk-reduction strategies mediate negative impacts of disasters.
- International humanitarian response because of war or disaster does little to reduce risk of VAW.

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- Funding for VAW services reaching survivors remains inadequate within global humanitarian aid.

In today's context of conflict in Ukraine, Gaza, and in several other parts of the world, and the rising threat of natural hazards with environmental change, this special issue embarks on a timely exploration of the links between conflict, disasters, and violence. Violence against women (VAW) is alarmingly prevalent in both armed conflicts and civil unrest, as well as in subsequent post-conflict periods, where social and legal norms often deteriorate, leaving women particularly vulnerable to sexual, physical, and psychological abuses. Armed groups may use gender-based violence (GBV) as a strategy to terrorize and destabilize communities, and even after conflicts end, the legacy of violence can persist through increased domestic violence and continued sexual aggression due to enduring militarized cultures and the proliferation of armed groups. Similarly, natural hazards – such as earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes – occur in contexts of social and structural inequalities of gender, race, and class, which in turn can create disaster conditions.

VAW may be exacerbated in these disaster conditions due to the destruction of property and means of living, displacement, economic strains, and the breakdown of community protective mechanisms. At the same time, women's active participation in political protests and social movements can lead to a decrease in violence against them, as such engagement not only challenges entrenched gender norms but also elevates their visibility and voice, fostering protective solidarity and greater involvement in decision-making processes that can act as deterrents to GBV. This involvement empowers women and contributes to broader cultural shifts that can reduce the incidence of violence against them, highlighting the complicated mechanisms at play where crises can be catalysts for violence as well as platforms for empowerment. This Special Issue seeks, therefore, to expand the body of knowledge around conflicts, disasters, and VAW using a feminist economics framework, presenting a diverse range of articles drawing lessons from a multitude of crises from different settings, and their implications for VAW and its prevention.

VIOLENCE AS A FORM OF DISPOSSESSION

In tracing the intimate connection between violent conflict and VAW, the first contribution "Dispossession After War: A Feminist Political Economy Perspective" is a theoretical contribution by Jayanthi Lingham in this special issue, which genders the concept of dispossession to examine the mechanisms by which transitional periods in the wake of armed conflict might be characterized by continued forms of dispossession, beyond the conventional forms that entail separation from land. VAW, then, is a

tool by which these gendered forms of dispossession are enacted in the transition from conflict to the "post"-conflict period. And in turn, a deeper examination of these processes contributes to a richer understanding of VAW.

The starting point of Lingham's inquiry is a rich body of feminist scholarly work that has interrogated notions of the "post"-conflict especially in terms of the of continuum of gendered violence, exploitation, and discrimination that occur before conflict, during conflict, and in its aftermath (Meintjes, Turshen, and Pillay 2001; Cockburn 2004; Giles and Hyndman 2004; Ramnarain 2020). VAW, especially sexual violence, remains a significant feature of modern armed conflict. For feminist scholars, the roots of the physical gendered violence during armed conflict may be easily traced to the pre-conflict structural violence of unequal economic systems, to the violence inherent in patriarchal norms prevalent irrespective of armed conflict, and to pre-existing gender inequalities (Cockburn 2004; Caprioli 2005; Ramnarain 2015; True and Tanyag 2018). In the "post"- conflict period, this continuum might prevail in the form of a rise in domestic violence, as the competition for resources and economic stress increases among war-torn populations (Manjoo and McRaith 2011; Justino 2018; True 2018). More recent work has highlighted how armed conflict and associated VAW triggers crises in social reproduction through a depletion of the biological, economic, and affective resources rendered through reproductive and care work that households and communities rely on in times of war (Chilmeran and Pratt 2019; Rai, True, and Tanyag 2019). The physical, emotional, material, and discursive harms brought about by VAW and the consequent depletion of social reproduction (DSR) has adverse implications for individuals, households, and communities attempting to recover from the ravages of war since it is these unpaid or low-paid care economies and the labor of social reproduction that "are expected to cushion 'crisis shocks'" in the face of external crises (Rai, True, and Tanyag 2019: 565).

Drawing from political economy and Marxist-feminist theories, Lingham's article extends this analysis by tracing three distinct processes by which gendered dispossession might occur during and in the immediate aftermath of war and the ways in which VAW is implicated in each. The notion of bodily dispossession – through VAW in "post"-conflict periods that entails the loss of women's bodily autonomy and power – is formulated to understand how material practices of patriarchal and capitalist accumulation are enabled in the wake of war through ideologies of militarism and nationalism. Second, dispossession through reconfigured social reproduction processes speaks to the manner in which survival and capitalist production in conflict societies is subsidized by the labor of social reproduction (largely women's), even as the material conditions for the performance of this labor become increasingly adverse,

eventually threatening the social reproduction of war-affected populations. And finally, drawing inspiration from Tania Li (2014), Lingham traces the manner in which gradual or piecemeal dispossession is gendered in the "post"-war period. Akin to death by a thousand cuts, piecemeal dispossession points to the everyday forms of dispossession through debt or sale of assets, with gender-specific consequences on economic security and labor. Thus, Lingham's article contributes to a deeper understanding of the "hidden abodes of gendered violence that continue in post-war, which are enabled by wartime dispossession" (2024).

CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The next two articles in this volume use country-specific microeconomic data to analyze the effects of conflicts and protests on different dimensions of violence experienced by women. "Women's Participation in the Arab Spring Protests and the Prevalence of Domestic Violence: Evidence from Egypt," by Tomer Stern and Bilge Erten (2024) contribute to a rich strand of analysis that seeks to examine the role of conflict on women's risk of experiencing physical, psychological or sexual violence, using the backdrop of the Arab Spring protests in Egypt. A rich debate continues in feminist literature on interpersonal violence on whether increased economic opportunity for women reduce VAW through a greater leveling of intrahousehold power through bargaining, or whether such opportunities provoke a male backlash through violence as men attempt to reinstate traditional gender hierarchies of male dominance and female dependence. This question gains greater salience in contexts of transitions from violent conflict, in terms of women's empowerment outcomes. While some studies point to the opportunities created for transformations in gender roles, women's increased agency, and their greater presence in public roles during and after violent conflict (Petesch 2013; Bakken and Buhaug 2021), others have documented the "backlash" effects that soon follow a ceasefire and forms of hypermasculinity that emerge, which seek to push women out of their hard-won access to public spaces in transition periods (Cahn and Aolain 2009; Pankhurst 2012; Justino 2018). Yet others have highlighted the critical context of the conflict and the complexities (and stages) of women's lives in transitional periods between being victims and agents (El-Bushra 2003; Buvinic et al. 2013).

Intervening in this debate, Stern and Erten (2024) use data from the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) to examine the changes in women's risk of experiencing domestic violence in regions where the Arab Spring political protests – and women's exposure to these – were of greater magnitude. The authors attribute the observed lower probabilities of women experiencing physical, sexual, or psychological violence to their greater decision-making power in the regions where the Arab Spring

conflict was more pervasive. This article furthers feminist analysis of the relationship between VAW and violent conflict by highlighting the critical importance of context. That is, the type of conflict and the nature of women's engagement or exposure to it might matter for its impacts on gendered forms of violence and empowerment.

The second contribution related to the effects of conflicts on VAW examines the effects of civil conflict on women's probability of employment and their exposure to intimate partner violence providing evidence from Nepal. In their article, "Effects of Conflicts on Labour Market Outcome and Intimate Partner Violence: Evidence from Nepal," Iqbal Hossain, Dana Bazarkulova, and Janice Compton (2024) investigate the effects of exposure to Nepal's 1996–2006 civil armed conflicts on women's employment and intimate-partner violence (IPV) risk using Nepal's Demographic and Health Surveys from 1996 to 2016. Building on pioneering work by Nidhiya Menon and Yana Van der Meulen Rodgers (2015) and Pratistha Joshi Rajkarnikar and Smita Ramnarain (2020), the article examines whether the short-term impacts on women's employment last over the ten years after the conflict, and whether such employment effects play a significant role in women's risk of experiencing IPV in the post-conflict period.

The findings from Hossain, Bazarkulova, and Compton (2024) show that women experienced reduced employment opportunities and delayed human capital formation in the decade following the armed civil conflict in Nepal. Such reductions in educational attainment and labor market outcomes can have significant impacts for women's risk of experiencing IPV (Erten and Keskin 2018). Moreover, the results from the study show that these effects were particularly strong for younger women who experienced persistent deterioration in their labor market outcomes. Specifically, the long run effect of conflict exposure was more sustained for married women who were children or teenagers at the onset of the war compared to older cohorts. In the short run, the findings indicate a small decline in men's justification of IPV and their IPV perpetration; however, these effects dissipate over time. These findings provide suggestive evidence in favor of the instrumental theories of violence where a reduction in women's employment and earnings may reduce the incentives of men to use violence for research extraction or control of household decision-making process (Bobonis, González-Brenes, and Castro 2013; Erten and Keskin 2021, 2024). More research is needed to shed light on alternate mechanisms that may be driving these results.

DISASTERS AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The subsequent three studies use microeconomic data from different contexts to examine the effects of disasters stemming from natural

hazards on various forms of violence against women. Despite a broad understanding that disasters can potentially increase the risk of VAW, robust empirical evidence is sparse (Fisher 2010; Rao 2020; Thurston, Stöckl, and Ranganathan 2021). Equally lacking are in depth studies that identify the mechanisms that mediate the association between VAW and disasters. Prarthna Agarwal Goel et al.'s (2024) pioneering work titled "Does Natural Disasters-Induced Male Unemployment Increase Violence Against Women? Empirical Evidence from India" fills this gap in the literature through a novel disaggregated analysis of association between VAW (and domestic violence [DV]) and disaster, as well as the key drivers of this association. The authors restrict their analysis to droughts and cyclones since these are the most pervasive natural hazards impacting their context of study.

Two important datasets are used for the analysis – the annual crime reports issued by the National Crime Records Bureau on the one hand and drought and cyclone data from the Ministry of Food and Agriculture and Indian Meteorological Department on the other hand. A key innovation in the article is the consideration of a range of context-specific policy instruments that influence gender equality including liquor sales ban, women's political representation, women's police stations, and gender budgeting to explore to what extent they mediate the impact of natural disasters on VAW. Another innovation in the article is the inclusion of disaster risk management policies for droughts and cyclones to gauge whether these policies contribute to reduction of VAW and DV in times of natural disaster. The consideration of these variables is an important expansion of the standard ecological framework of drivers of VAW that includes individual, relationship/household, community, and macro/societal variables (Heise 1998).

The authors find that there is an overall increase in VAW and DV with occurrence of natural disasters. Interestingly the increase in both VAW and DV is sharper in the case of cyclones than droughts. An important finding of the study is that male unemployment is a key mediator – drought-induced male unemployment in fact increases VAW by 20 percent and DV by 14 percent. In fact, the analysis underscores the crucial role that masculinity norms play in driving violence in line with broader literature on violence. Notably, a ban on liquor sales has a profound impact reducing the incidence of violence in both periods of droughts and cyclones. A finding of particular significance is that districts with disaster risk management policies show 16 percent fewer incidences of DV and 12 percent of VAW in times of drought. A key policy implication of the study is that robust disaster risk management policies are essential to be funded and in place to mediate the negative impacts of sudden disasters that render the social infrastructure apart. The exploration of institutional policies, such as women's police stations and women's political

representation, finds that these policies facilitate an increase in reporting of crimes suggesting that interventions that expand gender equality in the broader community could potentially mediate the impact of disasters through empowering women to report and seek services of VAW and DV incidents. Thus, the authors call on the government to increase public investment to expand female literacy, proportion of women in higher administrative positions, and women's police stations as key measures that would counteract toxic masculinity norms and enhance women's voice and agency to mitigate the negative effect of disaster on violence against women.

Another form of disaster resulting from a natural hazard that has been understudied in relation to its effects on GBV are those resulting from earthquakes. While previous studies documented the effects of earthquakes on crimes broadly defined (Weitzman and Behrman 2016; Aoki and Koutmerides 2019; García Hombrados 2020), we know little about the effects of earthquakes on crimes against women and the underlying mechanisms through which this specific natural disaster affects the risk of crimes that women suffer from. On the one hand, earthquakes may enhance social cooperation as people come together to address urgent issues including saving lives, thereby fostering behaviors that support others (Fritz 1996). This increase in prosocial behavior could reduce the chances of crimes against women. On the other hand, alternative theories suggest that natural disasters, such as earthquakes, might lead to a rise in crime by undermining the effectiveness of institutions that deter antisocial conduct (Cohen and Felson 1979). The lack of effective supervision can create opportunities for crimes directed at women. Such effects are more likely to be more pronounced in contexts where the government's ability to enforce laws and provide services is weak (Besley and Persson 2010).

In their article "Earthquakes and Crimes Against Women," Adan Silverio-Murillo, Fernanda Marquez-Padilla, and Jose Roberto Balmori (2024) examine the impact of two significant earthquakes that hit Mexico in September 2017 on crimes against women, specifically focusing on femicides, sexual abuse, and rape. By analyzing crime data at the municipal level and employing a difference-in-differences approach, the study finds that femicides saw a 2 percent decrease, while sexual abuse and rape incidents increased by 11 and 12 percent, respectively. Further analysis using an event-study methodology reveals two distinct trends. Initially, femicides dropped following the earthquakes but reverted to the levels seen before the disaster within three months. On the other hand, instances of sexual abuse and rape experienced a rise post-disaster and did not decrease to their prior levels. Additional findings also indicate that the surge in sexual abuse can be directly linked to the earthquakes in 2017, whereas the uptick in rape incidents is associated with an increase in police

investigations. Another interesting contribution of the study is to provide suggestive evidence that gangs contribute to the rise in sexual abuse cases. Overall, these findings suggest that policymakers should monitor changes in crimes against women following a natural disaster since a rise in GBV could exacerbate or prolong the adverse effects of an earthquake on a community.

Earthquakes not only impact women's risk of exposure to GBV, but also alter gender norms in the affected communities. In this special issue, Padmaja Ayyagari, Giulia La Mattina, and Lei Lv's (2024) contribution "Natural Disasters and Acceptance of Domestic Violence" studies the effects of the 2006 Yogyakarta earthquake in Indonesia on acceptance of wife-beating in areas hard hit by the disaster compared to less affected areas in the aftermath of the earthquake. Using a difference-in-differences approach, the authors combine information on the location of the earthquake with five waves of the Indonesian Demographic and Health Surveys to study changes in attitudes toward domestic violence in affected provinces relative to the non-affected provinces.

The identifying assumption is that in the absence of the earthquake, attitudes toward domestic violence would have followed a similar trajectory in both the provinces impacted by the earthquake and those that were not. To evaluate the validity of this common trend hypothesis, Ayyagari, La Mattina, and Lv (2024) investigate shifts in variables associated with women's independence from 1997 to 2003 in the provinces affected by the earthquake compared to those that were not, finding no evidence of differential trends before the event. Furthermore, they find no evidence of changes in the demographic composition of the populations by earthquake exposure, such as those that might result from migration or mortality rates influenced by the disaster.

The findings show that the earthquake had no statistically significant impact on the societal acceptance of domestic violence, a finding that stands in stark contrast to the earthquake's considerable economic effects on household assets and employment. However, this null result conceals significant heterogeneity by rural versus urban locations: a significant reduction in rural women's tolerance for domestic violence in both the medium and long-term, alongside a short-run decrease among urban men that did not persist. The findings also show that the improvement in household wealth that followed the earthquake was concentrated primarily in rural locations, suggesting a potential pathway for the observed decrease in tolerance for domestic violence in rural areas. This article not only enriches the discourse on the intangible effects of natural disasters but also highlights the complexity of societal responses to such events, offering pivotal insights for policymakers aiming to mitigate the multifaceted impacts of natural disasters.

CONFLICT, DISASTERS, AND VAW: NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL POLICY RESPONSES

The final two pieces in the special issue focus on questions related to international policy responses to VAW in situations of complex emergency. The first of these is an important comparative study by Lara-Zuzan Golesorkhi (2024), "Regional Refugee Response Plans and Violence Against Women: A Comparative Analysis of the Humanitarian Situations in Ukraine and Venezuela," which explores the dynamics of regional refugee response plans in addressing the needs of the displaced, particularly addressing violence against women (VAW). These regional plans are key protection frameworks in the context of displacement and humanitarian situations with established operational structures and funding streams. However emerging research suggests that VAW is in fact deprioritized in operational structures and that existing funding streams tend to provide short-term, inflexible funding (Clarke and Campbell 2015, Murphy and Bourassa 2021; Rafferty et al. 2022).

Golesorkhi (2024) builds on this literature and uses a mixed method approach to understand the operation and implementation challenges of regional plans and unpack the power dynamics embedded in response plans. Using the UNHCR Operational data platform (RV4 Platform) for document analysis to sectoral infrastructure and partnerships and the UN Financial Tracking Service to establish funding streams and funding recipients, Golesorkhi (2024) undertakes detailed case studies of Refugee Response Plan (RRP) for Ukraine and the Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP) for Venezuela.

The key argument made by Golesorkhi (2024) is that displaced women and girls (whether refugees or migrants) face heightened risks of GBV in humanitarian situations, such as Ukraine and Venezuela, due to a breakdown of existing protection structures, limited access to legal recourse, and lack of resources and services. Despite a commitment to address violence against women, the analysis reveals that a majority of those needing services were not covered – approximately 5 percent in Ukraine and 4 percent in Venezuela of those needing violence services/programming were reached. Equally problematic is that in both Ukraine and Venezuela the number of organizations receiving funding were extremely limited and largely dominated by UN agencies despite the recognition of the key role of national and community organizations in effective response. This lack of diversity reflects the tensions that exist between sectoral infrastructures and funding streams as well as between implementing partners and funding recipients in both the Ukraine RRP and the Venezuela RMRP. Furthermore, in terms of understanding and addressing VAW risks in border land spaces, the author argues that the narrowness of the funding recipients contributes to a limited sphere of

action that reinforces the continuation of borders as high-risk spaces. Essentially the analysis highlights the scalar, spatial, and temporal aspects of incoherence in GBV prevention, mitigation, and response configured through operational and funding structures in RRPs. The author concludes that limited data on VAW along migratory routes and in destination countries leads to a disjuncture between lived experiences and programs designed to address VAW undermining the effectiveness of the RRPs.

The special issue concludes with a contribution by Elena Ortiz (2024) focused on the larger macroglobal picture. The article "Following the Money: Is Humanitarian Aid for Gender-based Violence Responsive to Heightened Risk Factors of Gender-Based Violence?" draws from a new United Nations dataset to explore whether and how humanitarian aid for GBV is responsive to the risk factors for, and rates of, GBV in crises and emergencies. As gender equality has, in recent decades, emerged as a prominent goal in global policymaking, given the emphasis placed on it by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5), a wide variety of international organizations engaged in humanitarian and development endeavors have adopted gender mainstreaming, at least in principle. Gender mainstreaming refers to the explicit integration of a gender perspective at all levels of legislative, programmatic, or policy action, including provision for gender-specific activities or affirmative action where required, to enable women and men to equally reap the benefits of the legislation, program, or policy (United Nations 2002). Despite this putative commitment to the inclusion of gender concerns, Elisabeth Olivius (2016: 1) notes that the disbursement of international aid to countries facing humanitarian crises (including war or disaster) is, in particular, "informed by different, sometimes contradictory, understandings of what it means to work with gender in humanitarian aid." Indeed, despite gender mainstreaming, humanitarian aid for GBV remains quite low.

While a wide variety of qualitative studies have explored the ways in which gender is (or is not) implicated in humanitarian aid to crises contexts, Ortiz's (2024) study provides crucial quantitative analysis and evidence – data gaps notwithstanding – that humanitarian aid for GBV operates quite independently of GBV risk factors and the need for such aid in emergency contexts. Her work not only highlights the omissions in data collection with regard to prevalent forms of GBV (for instance, while actual rates of intimate partner violence, child marriage and female genital mutilation are recorded, other forms of VAW such as street harassment, forced abortion, emotional or financial violence, violence against LGBTQ + populations etc. are not) as well as the disbursement of aid, but also has immense relevance for improving the gender outcomes of humanitarian policy and aid practices.

CONCLUSIONS

Together, the articles in this special issue highlight the manifold and complex ways in which the dynamics of VAW unfold in the context of conflict and disasters. In both settings, traditional norms are disrupted and thereby increase the risk of VAW as confirmed by the analysis of Mexico and India. As Lingham highlights, the continuum of VAW pre-conflict, during conflict and post-conflict results in multiple processes of dispossession undermining economic security and labor outcomes for women. But, the specific outcomes do depend significantly on the context and specific type of conflict and/or disaster. Declining employment of women and potential for increased VAW is a strong finding by Hossain, Bazarkulova, and Compton (2024) in the long-term Nepalese conflict. In contrast, Stern and Erten (2024) show that women's active participation in the Arab Spring protests led to an increase in women's decision-making power within the household and a decline in domestic violence against women in Egypt. Ayyagari, La Mattina, and Lv (2024) highlight no decline in the acceptability of violence within the Indonesian post-earthquake context, while specific drivers for increased VAW in the aftermath of droughts and cyclones in India are explored in the analysis by Goel et al. (2024).

A key question explored by several articles in this special issue is the extent to which the response to conflict and disasters by international and national agencies is effective in reducing the risk of VAW. Ortiz (2024) clearly suggests that humanitarian aid for GBV operates quite independently of GBV risk factors and the need for such aid in emergency contexts. Golesorkhi (2024) reinforces this conclusion with a detailed analysis of the regional Refugee Response Plans (RRPs) in Ukraine and Venezuela. Essentially, Golesorkhi (2024) argues that the funding of these RRPs as well the breadth of response addressing specific GBV risks is woefully inadequate – only 5 and 7 percent of those needing GBV services were reached in Ukraine and Venezuela, respectively.

Despite our clear understanding of the intimate and complex link between conflict or disasters with VAW, there continue to be gaps in integrating this knowledge into the international architecture for humanitarian aid or post-conflict reconstruction. The findings and discussion in this special isue offer important insights to constructing a response grounded in feminist political economy ensuring economic security and sustainable labor outcomes and reduction in risk of VAW.

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