On the Margins and the Mainstream: Engendering the Disasters Agenda
Gender Equality and Disaster Risk Reduction Workshop
Honolulu, Hawai‘i, August 10-12, 2004
Dr. Sarah Bradshaw
Not to be cited without author’s permission

This presentation is based on a number of research projects undertaken in Nicaragua post-Hurricane Mitch, including the civil society 'Social Audit' initiative that sought to capture the opinions of the poor on the relief and reconstruction efforts (see CIET/CCER 1999; 2000) and a project focussed on understanding possible changes in gender roles and relations post-disaster (see Bradshaw 2001; 2000). It is also based on involvement in the processes as they have evolved after the Hurricane - living and working in Nicaragua funded by International Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) ICD UK from 1998 – 2001 and since then 3 month period during academic non-teaching time over the summer. A number of semi-structured interviews with some key actors within the women’s movements who were very much involved in the reconstruction processes post-Mitch were also undertaken to evaluate the situation then and now. The presentation focuses on Nicaragua, however, this is complemented by information from Honduras and, to a lesser extent, El Salvador were possible in order to draw more general arguments (see Bradshaw 2004a).

While national contexts are important, discussions of disaster risk reduction efforts in the ‘developing’ world context cannot be divorced from more general discussions of ‘development’ and the global development context. This global development context is presently dominated by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The 191(?) states that make up the United Nations agreed a Millennium Declaration in 2000. This and the UN conferences of the 1990s such as Cairo and Beijing provided the basis for the formulation of the 8 Millennium Development Goals with their related targets and over 40 indicators, the majority of which the world’s government’s have committed to achieve by 2015.

It is to be noted that the work of formulating the goals was a ‘collaborative’ effort – collaboration being between the United Nations, and the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are known. This new ‘consensus’ between these institutions, or what some see as the co-opting of the United Nation’s agenda by the Bretton Woods Institutions, is a fundamental problem for some analysts. The narrow nature of the MDGs is the second limitation of the goals. The goals do widen the notion of ‘development’ from the narrow economic growth focus of the IFIs with the key aim being to cut in half, by 2015, the numbers living in poverty and hunger, and including goals around access to education, health - infant and maternal mortality and epidemics including HIV/ AIDS, gender, the environment and North-South relations. However, they also represent a narrowing of the agendas that emerged from the conferences of the 90s with some central agreements being notable by their absence. Notable absentees include women’s reproductive and sexual health and rights and gender based violence; sexualities, differing abilities, ethnicity and race; and disasters, conflict and war.

1 Dr Sarah Bradshaw, Middlesex University, UK and Puntos de Encuentro, Nicaragua. Address for correspondence: s.bradshaw@mdx.ac.uk
In gender terms activists and analysts are debating the utility of engaging with the MDGs (see Bradshaw 2004b for a summary of the debates and WICEJ 2004 for discussion) and it has been suggested that MDG is better understood as ‘Most Distracting Gimmick’ (Antrobus 2004). Many of the concerns rest on what is seen to have been a politicisation of the process and the involvement of fundamentalist groups – both religious (of all denominations) and economic – in ‘expunging’ women’s rights from the millennium development agenda (Antrobus 2004). Similar discussions do not seem to have occurred among those working within the ‘disasters’ context despite its absence from the Goals. The Millennium Declaration did recognise the risks to development of disasters and resolved to intensify collective efforts to reduce the number and effects of natural and man made disasters. However in the move from the Declaration to the Development Goals this resolution is lost.

A recent publication by the Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery of the United Nations Development Programme (2004: 15) notes that “at first glance, it may appear that the MDGs do not relate specifically to conflict, crisis or natural disasters” and as such is at pains to demonstrate the ways in which MDGs are implicitly related to disaster related initiatives and disaster related initiatives could be informed by the Goals. While it concludes that meeting the MDGs will not be possible while disaster risk management is ‘left outside’ of development the report does not represent a demand to include disaster reduction as a Goal for the millennium; rather it highlights opportunities that exist within the current MDG framework for including risk and mitigation initiatives. Interestingly the Goal which the report suggests offers the ‘most far-reaching’ opportunities for disaster risk reduction - MDG 8 developing a global partnership for development – is the Goal that is perhaps the least developed and most criticised and of all the MDGs. The focus on MDG 8 implies implicit acceptance of the political nature of disasters, however, the political nature of ‘development’ suggests that this focus will bring few gains.

The politics of development also inform national level disaster agendas and at this level too the gap between the development-disasters continuum rhetoric and reality is clear, as the case of Nicaragua demonstrates. Donors continue to conceptualise disasters in terms of outcomes rather than causes, limiting their disaster oriented work to relief and reconstruction, and in terms of ‘natural’ rather than social events, conceptualising everyday hazards such as conflict and violence as individual problems rather than a collective disaster. In contrast actors within organised civil society in Nicaragua conceptualise the country as in a state of permanent disaster or Nicaragua as a process of disaster - a process of conflict, violence and poverty, earthquakes, hurricanes and volcanic eruptions (see CCER 1999). This gap between donors and national actors has important implications in a country that, as one interviewee suggested, ‘moves to the rhythm of the donors’. That is local level initiatives may not receive funding for being too disaster focussed when donor priorities lie with ‘development’ or for not being not sufficiently disaster focussed in terms of donor definitions of ‘disaster’ work.

For example, a Nicaraguan NGO working at the community level with child-to-child programmes conceptualises its ‘health’ work not in terms individual illness but the notion of a ‘healthy community’ and as such it encompasses initiatives aimed at conserving the environment and initiatives related to psychosocial preparedness and mental health within its activities. As such the organisation considers its work to include elements of risk reduction
and disaster preparedness and mitigation, and moreover sees these issues to be part of a ‘health’ agenda. Donors, however, often see the NGO as a ‘health’ NGO and make funding decisions accordingly.

This issue of how donors respond to funding requests centred on disaster mitigation or risk reduction is one that needs to be monitored in the light of recent processes. The absence of specific mention of disasters within the MDGs is important given the major agencies, such as the UN, major institutions, such as DFID in the UK, and International NGOs, such as Oxfam, are committed to the MDGs and funding is geared toward achieving these goals. What does not fit within the MDG framework will struggle to achieve funding. This new narrower funding focus is accompanied by a new narrower form of channelling funding – the idea of the Sectoral approach. Effectively organisations in the future are being called upon to fund MDG themes or sectors – such as the health sector or education - rather than specific projects, making monies available to governments to use with their own budgetary resources. The negative consequences for funding of more holistic ‘risk reduction’ work via civil society organisations are clear.

The fact that disasters, conflict, war, and race are four issues not considered in the MDGs may be indicative not only of a lack of prioritisation but also a lack of willingness to engage in political issues but also of wider institutional and societal racism. One interviewee when reflecting on the situation post-Mitch noted the response from outside agencies, organisations and individuals – a large scale response for what was, relatively speaking, a small scale event - comparing it to the situation in the Sudan and in Bangladesh. While the importance of ‘yet another’ war or yet another flood cannot be denied, nor can the influence of magnitude on ability and willingness to respond, neither can the importance of race. The ability to identify with those affected by an event is an important determining factor in responding to that event and the ‘otherness’ of the black female victims of the conflict in Sudan may help to explain the lack of identification and response in this case. This response racism is linked also to notions of responsibility, which has both international and national facets.

National governments are increasingly being held ‘accountable’ for their actions and in countries such as Nicaragua there is said to have been an improvement in ‘democracy’ over recent years as promoted by the BWIs. However at the same time there has been a resurgence in interest in the mobilisation of people and communities the involvement and participation of non-state actors – so called civil society. This has been accompanied by a new interest in networks of reciprocity and exchange - what is now called social capital. When discussing, as I have been asked to, community level responses it is important to bear in mind that some argue this ‘new’ focus on civil society and social capital is little more than a further privatisation of development. It shifts the burden of responsibility from the State and international agents to the people themselves, from the collective to the individual and as such must be seen to be part of rather than apart from the neoliberal agenda.

This neoliberal global development agenda is also a gendered agenda. The inclusion of a gender MDG is said to demonstrate the UN’s commitment to gender equity, the UNDP’s Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery claim gender is mainstreamed into all its activities, as does the World Bank who launched a ‘gender mainstreaming’ strategy in 2001. However, the notions of ‘gender equity’ and ‘gender mainstreaming’ as used by these
institutions all need to be examined closely. For example, the gender MDG – to improve gender equity and the empowerment of women – has one single target; access to education. While education is necessary for gender equity, it is far from sufficient. The World Bank’s gender mainstreaming policy also sees gains to be made from investing in girl’s education in terms of productivity, economic growth gains and population decline. That is the Bank is ‘selling’ improving gender equity to its members, associates and colleagues as an efficient economic growth enhancer. The new gender mainstreaming may be better thought of as a co-opting of the gender agenda a cooption that may produce gendered products and policies focussed on women but from processes that are ungendered and from which women are excluded (Bradshaw, Quiros and Linneker 2004).

Post-Mitch reconstruction clearly demonstrates the new interest in these two elements: civil society and gender. In one study in Nicaragua when asked ‘what is the most important thing the government has done in terms of reconstruction?’ 70% of respondents said ‘nothing’, rising to 90% in some areas – most notably the Atlantic Coast region which is of black African descent (CIET-CCER 2000). What reconstruction did occur occurred via national and international non-governmental organisations this was not only due to the lack of governmental action, however, but also due to the corrupt nature of the government of the day that meat donor’s sought alternative funding channels.

Donors also sought to ensure that the projects they funded were ‘gendered’ and studies suggest that to a large extent it was women who were involved in reconstruction projects. However, one study highlights that women’s inclusion should not be assumed to suggests engendered projects (see Bradshaw 2001a). Of the women interviewed in four communities in Nicaragua half perceived that it was they who had participated most in the projects for reconstruction, yet only a quarter felt that it was women who benefited from reconstruction projects. The majority stated that it was the family that benefited from their participation. Interviews with organisations instigating reconstruction projects in the communities in the study also support this view. One representative when asked about the organisation’s ‘gender approach’ claimed they had ‘positively discriminated towards women’ when asked if this had caused any problems with the men or between men and women the representative concluded no, since “the women have their cows and the men are drinking the milk……...” (Bradshaw 2001b: 5).

However, conflict was a key factor post-Mitch at all levels although there is no ‘hard’ evidence to suggest that the same can be said about violence in general and gendered terms. The same study mentioned found that 1 in 3 women felt there had been conflict between the organisations working in the community and the community itself over needs and priorities. Women who suggested there had been such problems were also more likely to report that women’s participation in the projects and the resultant decisions over the use of the resources obtained had caused conflict between men and women within households. Conflict may be related to changing roles without resultant changes in relations or changing roles that are valued differently by different people. The proportion of women with male partners engaged in income generating activities fell post-Mitch, while participation in projects increased, women with male partners were also more likely to name themselves as the person who made the most important contribution to the household after Mitch compared to before. The fact that over half of their male partners stated they and they alone made the most important contribution demonstrates how conflict may arise. In contrast
while female heads of household continued to engage in income generating activities post-Mitch and increased their participation in community projects a higher proportion post- than pre-Mitch named a male member of the household, usually a son, the key contributor. This suggests that participation in projects and the access to the resources that participation may be understood and valued differently by different people and cannot be assumed to automatically bring benefits to the ‘participants’ not least since a increase in economic well being may be off set by a decline in social well being as power and voice declines inside the home as it increase outside and levels of conflict rise in all areas of daily and social life.

Conflict is something that may be seen to have defined the post-Mitch experience not just at the micro level of the individual or community but also at the ‘meso’ level. As has been noted before disasters reveal unequal power relations (Enarson and Morrow 1998) they may also reinforce or mutate them, however, there is little real evidence that they change them. Post-Mitch Nicaragua and Honduras both saw the bottom-up formation of civil society coordinating bodies, the Civil Coordinator for Emergency and Reconstruction in Nicaragua and Interforos in Hondurus, emerging to respond to the crisis not just in practical relief and reconstruction terms, but in terms of the overall policy of reconstruction and development (see Bradshaw and Linneker 2003 for discussion). These civil society coordinators continue to exist over 5 years since Mitch and play an important role as the ‘opposition voice’ in countries where no real ‘alternative’ party political voice exists. This ‘strengthening’ of civil society occurs because of weak government but also leads to conflict with weak government. However conflict is not limited to government-civil society but also between international and national non-governmental actors and within national civil society.

In terms of the former, the drive by donors to ensure a gender focus in their work may have fuelled existing fractures within civil society, and most notably among gendered actors (Bradshaw 2002). In Honduras the post-Mitch period saw a rupture of the women’s movements as a small number of NGOs are said to have benefited from reconstruction and become accepted, by the international community at least, as the ‘voice’ of women. In both countries disagreements also occurred over the advisability of participation within the newly formed civil coordinating bodies given many in the women’s movements saw these ‘mixed’ spaces a further site of struggle rather than solidarity and worries over who and what they represented. In Honduras women left Interforos as they found their voices were not listened to, in Nicaragua many women withdrew from fear that their voices were being said to support activities they did not agree with. While the formation of the CCER and Interforos is often proclaimed as a positive outcome of Mitch, this strengthening of the voice of civil society may have weakened the voice of civil society actors – most notably women’s voices may become fragmented, co-opted or silenced.

Such an analysis of the situation post-Mitch suggests that on a practical level gender mainstreaming in reconstruction brought few if any actual benefits to women, and that on a political level the desire to mainstream gender into processes may have had negative rather than positive consequences from women’s voices. However, on the margins of the mainstream gendered reconstruction did occur and continues to influence the development and disasters agenda both locally and nationally. Most notably the vision of a holistic disaster response and development agenda emerged post-Mitch, focussed on notions of psychosocial as well as physical well being. While led by women’s groups and movements these initiatives did and do not necessarily focus exclusively or predominately on women.
Perhaps the most agreed upon achievement post-Mitch was the development of programmes of attention that focussed on mental or psychosocial health in terms not only of focus of the work but the form of the work. Interviewees mentioned the following as key aspects of this work:

?? Training was led by non-governmental organisations but sought to include state actors such as fire fighters and police men and women in the training sessions
?? Collective work across organisations rather than centred on one organisation
?? Drew on historical knowledge and international knowledge to train a network of people who in turn shared that knowledge
?? Established alliances, national-local and local-local, as an integral element of the work
?? It is in this area where it is possible to see lasting changes having occurred:
?? National NGOs organised workshops utilising trainers from outside Nicaragua. In turn people trained in Nicaragua were flown to El Salvador after the earthquake to share their knowledge, establishing a regional chain of effect
?? People trained after Mitch have established a network in the North of the country and each of the 120 participants have responsibility to train teachers in one school, establishing a national chain of effect.

The notion of psychosocial impact is now accepted within Nicaragua. After a recent landslide newspapers reported on initiatives to attend to the trauma of children and adults alongside reports around their physical and material needs. It has also moved out of the 'disaster' agenda and is now an established element of many 'development' initiatives and organisations in recognition of the state of permanent crisis that the majority of the population live through. Recognition of the importance of networks and alliances also remains and in particular there was recognition that the civil response in Nicaragua post-Mitch and in El Salvador, in comparison with Honduras, had much to do with revolutionary political processes. Nicaragua suffered a Hurricane 10 years prior to Mitch, which was potentially more damaging, but State commitment, and organisational capacity meant that losses were fewer. The suggestion is that a latent organisational capacity remained or an intrinsic social capital exists among those who were part of the revolutionary process. Recognition of the importance of this capacity may have been strengthened during Mitch and be reflected in a focus on young people and the increase in projects aimed at strengthening organisational and leadership skills among the young.

As noted above response to disasters may have been altered through the experience of the 1988 and 1998 hurricanes with a more holistic approach taken. There has also been an investment in a National Disaster Attention and Prevention System and in particular information is now more freely available and accurate. However, investment in the infrastructure of disaster attention has not been complemented with investment in altering attitudes to disaster prevention. Recent heavy rains in the North of the country provoked mudslides on the slopes of Musu - reminiscent of events in Casitas. Improved knowledge of the potential threat did not translate into any actions to prevent the event, merely into a somewhat improved attention to the outcomes. This focus on responding once the event has occurred is not only indicative of the government but also non-governmental actors.
The civil society coordinations set up to respond to hurricane Mitch, the Civil Coordinator for Emergency and Reconstruction in Nicaragua and Interforos in Honduras, have also evolved over the years. The name change of the former to merely Civil Coordinator, dropping the ‘emergency and reconstruction’ elements quite literally illustrates this evolution. Both coordinations have become more involved with attempting the influence the national and international development and policy agendas rather than explicitly working around issues of disaster risk and mitigation. In Honduras, Interforos has both dropped its disaster profile and had a drop in profile. In Nicaragua the CC remains a high profile civil society actor focussed on lobbying around governmental and international policy initiatives. Within its structures a ‘risk management group’ exists, which responded to events at Musu. This response was not practical but critical, critiquing the government for investing too much in infrastructure for attention and too little in activities of prevention - a critique that could be levelled also at the group itself. The holistic approach to disaster may, therefore, be more myth than reality. The civil society plan for reconstruction talked of - however a key actor in the CC confessed that at a recent meeting of the coordination it was revealed that the majority of participants had never reads the proposal. Similarly, while immediately after Mitch the ‘disasters group’ of the CCER included representatives from women’s organisations and that working around psychosocial issues, the focus and participation has narrowed within the ‘risk management’ group, is its name suggests.

A key question is why did gendered reconstruction processes not result in gendered risk and mitigation programmes? A suggestion is that the cost of gendered reconstruction was too high and that women, women’s groups and women’s movements are still paying the price of engendering reconstruction.

Women were among the first to respond and women and women’s movements assumed the responsibility for reconstruction as their own, took on the commitment of rebuilding homes and lives, of caring for those affected, both physically and mentally; in short took on the gender stereotypical ‘caring’ roles that many individually and collectively work to challenge. New gender roles were also adopted but not always successfully, as many of those involved in house building projects can testify, and gender relations altered as women’s and feminist groups had to work alongside men and mixed organisations producing new tensions and conflicts. That is learnt ‘feminist’ responses may be overruled by socialised gendered responses immediately after an event and reinforced by the reconstruction process.

The responsibility for engendering reconstruction was not only assumed by women, but assumed to be the responsibility of women. Donors and international agencies sought to ensure a ‘gender perspective’ in their work and as such sought out women’s groups and organisations. However, the notion of engendering was not a shared notion and the longer term, holistic vision of reconstruction as development of many women’s groups contrasted with the short term reconstruction as rebuilding vision of donors. The commitment of women active in reconstruction to those effected - or the noted ‘mothering’ role assumed by gendered actors - meant that they assumed the responsibility for the mismatch of expectations between beneficiaries and donors.

Overall reconstruction had an emotional, physical and financial cost for women’s groups and movements and many were severely weakened by the processes post-Mitch to the point of near collapse. Many have since undergone ‘restructuring’ and a scaling back after the influx
of monies post-Mitch. An influx which stands in stark contrast with recent cuts in financing of women’s groups, movements and issues. In an age of gender mainstreaming women’s self defined gender priorities are being marginalised within the development agenda. Women’s organisations may therefore have retrenched, choosing not to continue with ‘disaster’ focussed work, to concentrate on their own priorities and in reaction to recent attacks on hard won advances.

References

Bradshaw, Sarah (2004a) A nálisis de género en la evaluación de los efectos socioeconómicos de los desastres naturales United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) S erie M anuales 33. Also translated as S ocio-economic I mpacts of N atural D isasters: A g ender analysis ECLAC S erie M anuales 32. ISSN1680-886X.

Bradshaw, S (2004b) The M DG s and the G lobal G ender and H ealth A nd g endas in WGNRR newsletter 82: 2


CIETi nternational (2000) P rincipales R esultados de la A uditoría S ocial para la E mergencia y la R econstrucción - Fase 2, C ivil C oordinator for E mergency and R econstruction: M anagua, N icaragua

CIETi nternational (1999) P rincipales R esultados de la A uditoría S ocial para la E mergencia y la R econstrucción - Fase 1, C ivil C oordinator for E mergency and R econstruction: M anagua, N icaragua
