Intersectionality, marginalised groups & disasters:
Culture & identity in disaster preparedness & response

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CONTENTS

01. Introduction

02. The relevance of identity in shaping disaster perception and preparation

04. The interplay between culture, identity and disaster perception

05. Status, cultural identity and disasters: How wealth, power and cultural identity impact vulnerability, preparedness & response.

08. Recommendations for including culture & identity in DRR

10. Conclusion

12. References
Introduction

Disasters pose significant challenges to communities worldwide. The ways in which these communities perceive, prepare for, and respond to such emergencies are deeply influenced by their culture, cultural heritage and identity (Parsizadeh et al, 2015). Cultural heritage encompasses the practices, beliefs, rituals, and historical experiences passed down through generations, forming a collective memory and identity that shape a community’s worldview (Parsizadeh et al, 2015). These cultural elements determine how communities interpret the risks and threats posed by disasters, influencing their level of awareness and preparedness. For instance, a community with a rich tradition of storytelling may have oral histories that include accounts of past disasters, which inform their current understanding and preparedness strategies (Parsizadeh et al, 2015).

Moreover, a person’s or community’s culture, which intersects with factors such as gender, race, religion, socio-economic status, and disability, plays a crucial role in shaping the behaviours and responses of individuals and groups during emergencies (Tandon, 2020). These identities influence access to resources, social networks, and support systems, thereby affecting the ability to respond effectively to disasters (Tandon, 2020). For example, marginalised groups may face barriers to accessing emergency services or may be excluded from decision-making processes, leading to increased vulnerability (Blanchard, 2024). In essence, cultural heritage and identity provide a lens through which communities view disasters, affecting their perceptions of risk, their preparedness measures, and their response strategies (Chmutina et al, 2021). This interplay between cultural factors and disaster management highlights the need for culturally sensitive approaches that recognize and integrate the unique strengths and challenges of diverse communities (Tandon, 2020).

The primary objective of this report is to illuminate the critical role that culture and identity play in disaster preparedness and response. By examining the convergence of traditional knowledge with modern disaster management practices, the report aims to highlight both the strengths and challenges of integrating these approaches.

Understanding these cultural dimensions is essential for developing disaster preparedness and response strategies that are both effective and inclusive, ensuring that all community members are adequately supported and resilient in the face of emergencies.
The Relevance of Identity in Shaping Disaster Perception and Preparation

Identity plays a pivotal role in shaping the ways individuals and communities perceive and prepare for disasters (Chmutina et al, 2021). A person's gender, race, sexuality, social status, cultural background and other characteristics of their lived experience influence how they perceive and prepare for disaster risk (Seglah & Blanchard, 2022). As such, the intersectionality of these identities provides a useful framework for understanding how different groups and sections of our societies experience and respond to disasters (Chmutina et al, 2021 & Blanchard, 2024).

**Gender** significantly influences disaster perception and preparedness, often dictating roles (before, during and after disasters), responsibilities, and the type and level of access to resources (Gaillard et al, 2015). Women, for example, may face unique vulnerabilities during disasters due to societal norms and expectations due to their role as primary caregivers which can limit their mobility and increase their risk during emergencies (Gaillard et al, 2015). Additionally, gendered divisions of labour (both formal and informal) often result in women having less access to the economic resources and decision-making power needed to recover from disasters and further exacerbating their vulnerability (Cannon, 2015).

Men and boys can often have differences related to how they perceive and respond to disaster risk. Traditional gender roles often emphasise stoicism, bravery, and self-reliance in men and boys, discouraging them from seeking help or showing vulnerability during disasters (Enarson & Pease, 2016). This cultural expectation can lead to higher risks as they may engage in more dangerous behaviours or fail to take the necessary precautions to mitigate risks (Enarson & Pease, 2016). This stoicism and lack of preparedness driving by cultural ideals of masculinity and what it means to be a ‘man’, can result in mental health issues with little aid or support tailored to their needs, further exacerbating their risk in disaster scenarios (Rouhanizadeh & Kermanshachi, 2020).

**Race and ethnicity** profoundly shape disaster experiences and responses. Marginalised racial and ethnic groups often face systemic inequities that increase their vulnerability to disasters (Perilla et al, 2002). These groups may reside in high-risk areas due to historic, discriminatory and socio-economic constraints, have limited access to emergency services, and face discrimination during relief efforts (Perilla et al, 2022).
Historical experiences of racism and exclusion can also affect trust in authorities and willingness to engage with disaster preparedness programs (Davidson et al, 2013). For instance, communities with a history of discrimination, neglect or mistreatment by governmental agencies and other official bodies may be sceptical of disaster warnings and less likely to evacuate or seek help (Davidson et al, 2013).

**Gender and sexual minority communities** during disasters highlight the importance of considering sexuality in disaster risk reduction. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and other non cis-gender and non-heterosexual people (LGBTQ+) often face specific challenges, including discrimination and stigmatisation, which can impede their access to emergency services and safe shelters (Seglah & Blanchard, 2024).

Disaster preparedness and response strategies must therefore be inclusive of LGBTQ+ needs. This includes ensuring that emergency shelters are safe and welcoming for all, training disaster response personnel on issues of sexuality and gender diversity, and promoting policies that protect LGBTQ+ rights during emergencies (Seglah & Blanchard, 2024).

Social status, encompassing factors such as income, education, and occupation, is a critical determinant of disaster vulnerability and resilience (Jiang et al, 2020). Individuals with higher social status generally have greater access to resources, information, and networks that facilitate disaster preparedness and recovery, as such they can afford to live in safer areas, retrofit their homes, and purchase insurance, reducing their risk and enhancing their capacity to recover (Tselios & Tompkins, 2019).

Conversely, those with lower social status often lack these advantages (Jiang et al, 2020). They may live in vulnerable locations, have fewer financial resources to invest in preparedness, and possess limited access to information and support networks (Jiang et al, 2020). This exacerbates their risk during disasters and hinders their recovery. Addressing these socio-economic disparities is essential for equitable disaster risk reduction (Tselios & Tompkins, 2019). Policies must aim to enhance the resilience of lower-status groups through targeted interventions, such as affordable housing, accessible information, and community-based support systems.

Understanding intersectionality is vital in disaster policy, essential for understanding how overlapping identities shape disaster experiences. This involves recognising the complex ways in which different identities intersect and addressing the specific needs and strengths of diverse groups (Hill et al, 2024). Intersectional strategies promote equity by ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their identities, have access to the resources and support they need to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters (Hill et al, 2024).
The interplay between culture, identity and disaster perception

Cultural elements within a community or broader society influence not only the understanding of risk but also the strategies adopted for preparedness and recovery (Appleby-Arnold et al, 2018).

Cultural identity encompasses a wide range of attributes including language, religion, values, customs, and historical experiences. These elements collectively form a lens through which communities interpret the world, including the threats and uncertainties posed by disasters (Appleby-Arnold et al, 2018). The perception of disasters is not merely a reflection of the physical hazards but is also deeply intertwined with the symbolic meanings attached to these events within that particular cultural context (Appleby-Arnold et al, 2018). For example, certain natural hazards may be viewed as divine retribution or spiritual trials in some cultures, influencing both the emotional and practical responses to these events (Sun et al, 2018).

One illustrative example of cultural influence on disaster perception is the role of traditional or indigenous knowledge on the process and systems related to disaster preparedness (Machingura & Museka, 2022). Many indigenous communities possess a wealth of traditional ecological knowledge that informs their understanding of environmental changes and natural hazards (Machingura & Museka, 2022). This knowledge, often transmitted through oral traditions, includes signs of impending disasters, such as specific animal behaviours or changes in plant life. These culturally embedded practices can enhance community resilience by providing early warning signs and fostering a collective sense of vigilance (Machingura & Museka, 2022).

Conversely, cultural beliefs can also contribute to fatalism and inaction (Aksa, 2020). In some cultures, disasters are perceived as inevitable acts of fate or expressions of divine will, which can lead to a resigned acceptance of risks and a reluctance to engage in proactive disaster preparedness measures (Jackson, 2021). This fatalistic attitude is not merely an individual psychological state but a culturally reinforced belief system that shapes community-wide responses (Jackson, 2021). Understanding these cultural dimensions is crucial for developing effective disaster risk reduction strategies that resonate with the affected communities.

Religious beliefs often play a pivotal role in shaping disaster perception and response. For instance, in many religious communities, disasters are interpreted as acts of God, tests of faith or as opportunities for spiritual growth (Aten et al, 2019).
his belief can manifest in various ways, such as collective, community-wide prayer, rituals aimed at appeasing deities, or the mobilisation of faith-based organisations for disaster relief (Davis et al, 2018).

Cultural identity can also influence the communication and dissemination of disaster-related information (Bankoff et al, 2015). The effectiveness of warning systems and public awareness campaigns is significantly enhanced when they are culturally sensitive and resonate with the target audience's values and communication norms (Reksa, 2021). For example, utilising local languages, incorporating culturally relevant symbols, and engaging trusted community leaders can significantly improve the uptake of disaster preparedness messages (Reksa, 2021). A lack of cultural sensitivity in communication can lead to mistrust, misunderstanding, and non-compliance, thereby increasing vulnerability (Reksa, 2021).

**Status, cultural identity and disasters: How wealth, power and cultural identity impact vulnerability, preparedness & response.**

Socio-economic status plays a critical role in shaping disaster vulnerability and resilience, with the disparities in income, education, occupation, and access to resources significantly influencing how individuals and communities prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters (Cvetković & Šišović, 2024).

Income level is one of the most direct determinants of disaster vulnerability. Individuals and families with higher incomes generally have greater access to resources that can mitigate the impact of disasters (Saja et al, 2018). These resources include safer housing (often in less risk prone neighbourhoods and areas), insurance coverage, savings, and the ability to relocate temporarily or permanently if necessary (Saja et al, 2018). Low-income households often have little choice but to reside in more vulnerable areas, such as floodplains, informal settlements, or substandard housing, due to macro and micro economics (Saja et al, 2018). These areas are typically characterised by poor infrastructure, lack of basic services, and heightened exposure to hazards, increasing the risk of disaster-related losses (Perera et al, 2018).
Occupation and employment status is often directly related to income levels and as such, further impacts disaster vulnerability. Those employed in stable, formal-sector jobs typically have better access to benefits such as health insurance, paid leave, and social security, which can cushion the financial shocks of disasters (Jordan et al, 2015). They are also more likely to have flexible working conditions that allow them to evacuate or take time off during emergencies. In contrast, individuals engaged in informal or precarious employment often lack these protections and face greater economic instability (Jordan et al, 2015). The loss of income due to disaster-related disruptions can push these individuals further into poverty, exacerbating their vulnerability and prolonging recovery. Access to financial services and assets is another critical and related factor in disaster resilience (Jordan et al, 2015).

Social capital (which can also be known as community and relational capital), encompasses the networks and relationships that provide support during emergencies, is also influenced by socio-economic status (Delilah Roque et al, 2020). Individuals with higher socioeconomic status often have more extensive and diverse social networks that can offer various forms of assistance and greater resources, including financial aid, shelter, and information (Delilah Roque et al, 2020). These networks enhance collective action and community resilience. Socio-economically disadvantaged groups may have similar levels of connectedness and social ties but importantly, these connections may have limited access to resources, increasing their isolation and vulnerability during disasters (Masud-All-Kamal & Monirul Hassan, 2018).

The intersection of socio-economic status with other identity factors such as race, gender, and age further compounds disaster vulnerability. For instance, low-income women and children often face heightened risks due to gendered roles and responsibilities, limited mobility, and restricted access to resources. Similarly, elderly individuals with low socio-economic status may have specific health and mobility challenges that exacerbate their vulnerability. Understanding these intersecting vulnerabilities is crucial for developing inclusive disaster management strategies that address the needs of diverse socio-economic groups.

The diagram illustrates the complex interplay between various factors involved in integrating cultural heritage and identity into disaster risk reduction strategies. The interconnectedness of these factors emphasises the importance of understanding and incorporating diverse cultural and identity perspectives to enhance disaster preparedness, resilience, and recovery. The diagram provide illustration that an effective response, increased resilience, equitable recovery, and inclusive strategies can be achieved through community engagement, policy development, and research, thereby underscoring the critical role of cultural heritage and identity in developing comprehensive disaster risk reduction frameworks.
Diagram 1: Integrating the various factors involved in considering cultural heritage and identity in disaster risk reduction strategies.
The overlapping social identities of individuals and communities profoundly affect disaster response and recovery strategies. These identities, which include race, gender (including beyond the binary genders), socio-economic status, sexuality, and other factors, intersect to create unique experiences of vulnerability and resilience. This intersectionality must be considered in every stage of the disaster cycle to ensure that strategies are effective, equitable, and inclusive (Andharia, 2020).

The concept of intersectionality in disaster risk reduction and management is often viewed as complex and difficult to implement in a real world scenario (Paupini & Gjøsæter, 2021). However, the argument for building an intersectional approach to disaster response and recovery is one that has considerable benefits. For example, an intersectional approach would help a low-income woman of colour more effectively than a non-intersectional approach because it acknowledges and addresses the multiple, overlapping forms of discrimination and disadvantage she faces. Intersectionality recognises that her vulnerabilities are not just due to her low income, gender, or race in isolation, but rather the combination of these factors (Yadav et al, 2021). This leads to a more comprehensive understanding of her specific needs during and after a disaster. With an intersectional approach, disaster response strategies can be tailored to address the unique challenges faced by individuals with multi-layer vulnerabilities. This might include targeted support services that address both racial and gender biases in emergency shelters, as well as financial assistance that considers her socio-economic status. Additionally, policies developed through an intersectional lens are more likely to be inclusive, ensuring that all aspects of her identity are considered, leading to more effective and equitable support (Paupini & Gjøsæter, 2021).

Cultural beliefs and practices also play a significant role in shaping disaster resilience. Many communities possess traditional knowledge that enhances their preparedness and response strategies (Womack, 2021). These practices, transmitted through generations, can foster community resilience by providing early warning signs and a collective sense of vigilance.

**Recommendations for including culture & identity in DRR**

Incorporating considerations of culture and identity in disaster risk reduction is essential for creating more effective and inclusive strategies. Here are several recommendations to achieve this:

**Addressing Socio-Economic Disparities:**
Socio-economic disparities often lead to unequal access to critical resources like
safe housing, healthcare, and financial support. Governments and organisations should ensure that vulnerable populations have access to affordable housing that meets safety standards, comprehensive healthcare services, and financial assistance programs through subsidies, grants, and low-interest loans targeted at low-income households. These efforts should consider cultural preferences and traditions related to housing and healthcare practices. Additionally, access to emergency supplies and services, such as food, water, medical care, and temporary shelter, should be culturally appropriate and accessible during and after disasters.

**Enhancing Public Awareness and Education:**
Disaster risk reduction education should be accessible to all socio-economic groups, focusing on hazard identification, emergency response procedures, and the importance of preparedness measures. Community workshops, school curricula, and public information campaigns can be effective tools. Incorporating cultural heritage and practices into educational materials ensures that diverse communities understand and act on the information provided.

**Fostering Community Engagement:**
Engaging community members in disaster preparedness and response planning helps identify and address local vulnerabilities and needs. Community-based organisations and local leaders are crucial for mobilising resources, disseminating information, and coordinating response efforts. Encouraging the formation of community emergency response teams (CERTs) and supporting existing community networks can enhance collective action and resource sharing. Involving marginalised groups, including those with distinct cultural identities, in decision-making processes ensures their perspectives and needs are considered, leading to more inclusive and effective strategies.

**Implementing Inclusive Policies and Programs:**
Policies that address socio-economic inequalities and promote social protection can significantly reduce disaster vulnerability. Social safety nets like unemployment benefits, health insurance, and cash transfer programs can provide financial stability and reduce the impact of disasters on low-income households. Additionally, policies promoting equitable access to education, employment, and healthcare enhance overall community resilience. Prioritising the needs of vulnerable populations in disaster planning and resource allocation is crucial, including conducting vulnerability assessments to identify at-risk groups and developing targeted interventions that respect cultural identities and practices.

**Leveraging Technology and Innovation:**
Technology can mitigate the impacts of socio-economic disparities by providing timely information through early warning systems and mobile communication
technologies, enabling vulnerable communities to take protective actions. These technologies should be designed to be culturally accessible, considering language and communication preferences. Technology can also improve access to financial services, such as mobile banking and digital payment systems, facilitating recovery efforts. Innovative approaches like community-based insurance schemes and micro-finance programs can provide financial support to low-income households and small businesses, aiding quicker recovery from disasters while being sensitive to cultural practices and needs.

**Fostering Partnerships and Collaboration:**
Governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), private sector entities, and community groups must collaborate to develop and implement comprehensive disaster risk reduction strategies. Partnerships can facilitate the sharing of resources, knowledge, and expertise, leading to more effective and coordinated responses. Collaborative efforts should include cultural organisations and community leaders to ensure that initiatives are culturally sensitive and inclusive. Leveraging funding and support for initiatives that target socio-economic vulnerabilities, while respecting cultural identities and heritage, can enhance the resilience of vulnerable communities.

**Conclusion**

This report has illuminated the critical role of cultural heritage and identity in disaster preparedness and response. Key findings reveal that cultural heritage encompasses practices, beliefs, and historical experiences that significantly shape community perceptions of risk and preparedness strategies. Identity factors such as gender, race, religion, socio-economic status, and disability influence access to resources and support systems, thereby affecting vulnerability and resilience. The intersectionality of these identities provides a complex framework for understanding how diverse groups experience and respond to disasters. Traditional knowledge, deeply embedded in cultural heritage, offers valuable insights and strategies for disaster risk reduction, demonstrating the efficacy of integrating indigenous practices with modern approaches. Furthermore, the report highlights the importance of community cohesion and culturally sensitive communication in enhancing disaster resilience.

Stakeholders, including policymakers, disaster management professionals, and community leaders, must recognise and integrate cultural dimensions into disaster planning and response. Culturally sensitive approaches are essential to developing inclusive and effective disaster preparedness strategies. This involves acknowledging the unique strengths and challenges of diverse communities and
identity. By leveraging traditional knowledge and practices, communities can enhance their resilience and improve disaster outcomes. Therefore, it is imperative to foster dialogue, promote cultural awareness, and incorporate cultural heritage into all aspects of disaster risk reduction.

The integration of cultural heritage and identity into disaster management presents several areas for future research and policy development. Further research is needed to explore the specific mechanisms through which cultural practices and identities influence disaster resilience. This includes examining the role of traditional knowledge in contemporary disaster management frameworks and identifying best practices for integrating these approaches. Additionally, research should focus on the intersectionality of identity factors and how they compound vulnerabilities and resilience during disasters.

From a policy perspective, there is a need to develop frameworks that recognise and protect traditional knowledge and practices. Policies should promote the inclusion of cultural heritage in disaster risk reduction strategies and ensure equitable access to resources and decision-making processes for marginalised groups. This includes supporting the preservation and transmission of traditional knowledge, fostering partnerships between indigenous communities and disaster management professionals, and addressing socio-economic disparities that exacerbate disaster vulnerability.

To summarise, enhancing disaster resilience through the integration of cultural heritage and identity requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders. By embracing culturally informed approaches, we can build more resilient and inclusive communities capable of effectively responding to and recovering from disasters.
References


• Masud-All-Kamal, M. and Monirul Hassan, S.M., 2018. The link between social capital and disaster recovery: evidence from coastal communities in Bangladesh. Natural Hazards, 93, pp.1547-1564.


