

New Zealand Aid Programme Awards for Postgraduate Field Research

Research Brief on Exploring women's vulnerability to disasters through the lens of intersectionality - A case study of women from an ethnic minority in Vietnam.

Chung Thi Nguyen

PhD, Faculty of Health & Environmental Sciences, Auckland University of Technology

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Disasters generate profound impacts on human lives, the economy as well as the environment (Twigg, 2015). They are also a major concern to the sustainable development of many countries. It is widely accepted that a disaster arises when people's vulnerable conditions come into contact with hazards (Wisner, Gaillard, & Kelman, 2012). Such conditions are reflected by inequalities in access to resources among social groups, which partly results from social barriers such as prejudice, stigma, and discrimination (Reid, 2013; Wisner et al., 2012).

Women's vulnerability has been dominantly explained through the lens of gender or the gender lens with others such as age and race/ethnicity as additive factors. The former approach considers women as a homogenous group while the latter, despite acknowledging the contribution of other identities to women's vulnerability, still overlooks the complex and dynamic interaction between their social categories in creating social barriers. This has led to insufficient understanding of women's vulnerability in the face of disasters. To grapple with the nuanced vulnerability of women, an intersectionality framework, that recognises the diverse collective of identities embedded in each person, and the simultaneous and dynamic interaction of the identities in shaping human vulnerability to disasters (David & Enarson, 2012; Ryder, 2017), is adopted in this study. Given the diverse hazardscape and significant vulnerability of mountainous ethnic minority communities in Vietnam (Baulch, Chuyen, Houghton, & Houghton, 2002), Bru Van Kieu ethnic minority was selected to explore how the vulnerability of women through the intersectionality lens. Specifically, this research aims:

- 1) To understand how women from ethnic minority (WEM) experience disasters;
- 2) To explore what social barriers contribute to their vulnerability to disasters;
- 3) To examine how the intersection of identities leads to the complexity of the vulnerability of WEM;

KEY THEMES OF THE STUDY

In this study, the following conceptual framework (Figure 1) was adopted to investigate the vulnerability of WEM in the face of disasters. Disaster risk that WEM face is a consequence of the interaction between their vulnerability and hazards. It views their vulnerability as a manifestation of inequalities in access to resources that people use to cope with disasters. The resources are classified into 6 categories – natural, human, social, physical, economic and political – as detailed in the Pressure and Release model (Wisner et al., 2012). Cannon (2008) described human vulnerability through five components: i) Livelihood; ii) Wellbeing and base-line status; iii) Self-protection; iv) Social protection; and v) Governance. These five components are interrelated. In this study, these components were adopted to reflect the vulnerability of WEM. this study focused on the natural hazards, the main threats faced in the study area.

This study mainly focused on social factors in forms of social attitude (e.g. prejudice or stigma) and practice or behaviour (e.g. discrimination). These social factors are great social barriers that prevent WEM from accessing resources for their disaster risk reduction (DRR). In many cases, social attitude leads to discrimination preventing opportunities for employment, economic support, social services, political representation and participation in decision making (Reid, 2013). These barriers are created by the intersection of all identities such as gender, ethnic minority, disability, age, and class instead of gender only (Fordham & Meyreles, 2013). This study thus argues that the vulnerability of WEM is shaped by the intersection of their different identities.

Research Brief: Exploring women's vulnerability to disasters through the lens of intersectionality - A case study of women from an ethnic minority in Vietnam.

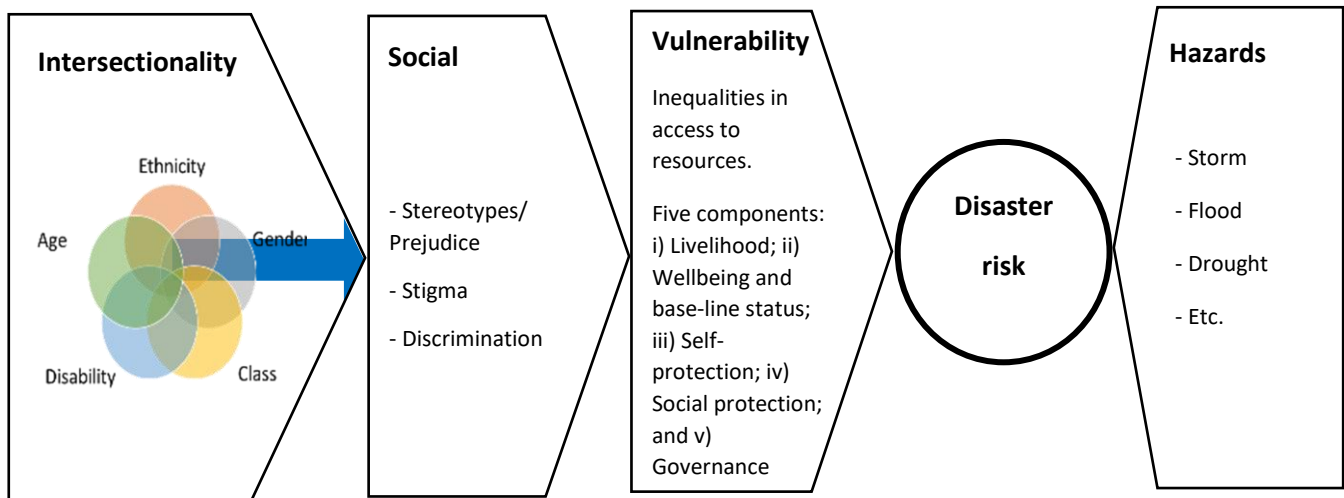


Figure 1: Research conceptual framework

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

A Bru Van Kieu (Bru) community, an ethnic minority living in a mountainous commune in Truong Xuan Commune, Quang Binh Province, Vietnam, was selected as a studied community. Truong Xuan is a mountainous commune where Kinh (ethnic majority) and Bru (ethnic minority) people live together. Bru people account for about 37,6% and live mostly in 4 villages of this commune. There is 16,8% poor household in Commune, in which Bru households take about 63,2% (Truong Xuan Commune People's Committee, 2019).

The data was drawn from 4 months of fieldwork. During this time, the researcher had opportunities to participate in everyday life activities of the studied community (e.g. working on the field, cooking and washing clothes in river) and observed the way people live and deal with challenges or barriers in earning their living and preparing for disasters. After building up the rapport with the local community, two focus group discussions (FGDs) were firstly conducted with 15 women from Bru Van Kieu ethnic minority (Bru women) (7-8 participants per FGD) to understand local hazards and their impacts on Bru women's lives, women's vulnerability to disasters, important social identities/categories associated with their lived experiences and disasters (Fig 2). Eight semi-structured interviews with Bru women were followed to explore in-depth some issues that arise from the FGDs (Fig 3). There were 5 narrative interviews conducted with Bru women aim to explore their real lived experience of disasters and the intersection of all social categories in relation to social barriers that they experienced.

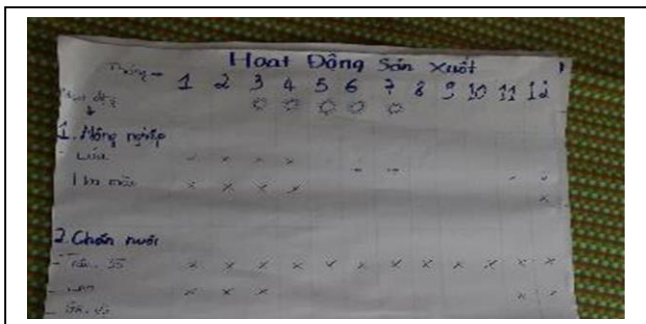


Fig.2: FGD with Bru women

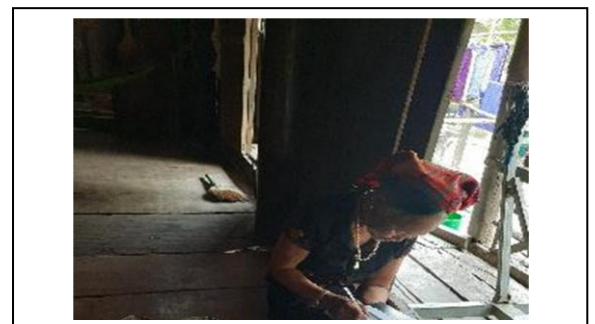


Fig.3: Interview with a Bru woman

In parallel with the interviews with women, 25 semi-structured interviews also were conducted with key informants from related government organisations (GOs) (from local to provincial levels) and non-government organisations (NGOs) to learn about their perspectives on research issues. To gain deeper knowledge on the local cultures and build trust with the local community, the researcher lived in the studied community during the data collection. These field observations were recorded in notes and photographs.

Research Brief: Exploring women’s vulnerability to disasters through the lens of intersectionality - A case study of women from an ethnic minority in Vietnam.

KEY FINDINGS

The research found that due to located on hazardous area, Truong Xuan commune is exposed to many types of hazards such as typhoon, flooding, drought, cyclone, and landslide. Storm, flood, and drought are three significant hazards that greatly influence the lives of Bru women. Storms and floods impacted not only on their lives (e.g. damaging houses, loss of properties, damaging crops and forestry trees, and having less job opportunities) (Fig 5), but also on their mental health. In addition to impacts on farming, prolonged droughts put more burdens on Bru women as they had to work harder to find the water to meet the needs of their family’s everyday life activities. Their disaster experience was attributed to insecure livelihoods, poor well-being, limited self-protection, poor social protection and exclusive governance (Table 1).

Table 1. Some factors that contribute to lived experience of Bru women in disasters

Insecure livelihoods	Poor well-being	Limited self-protection	Poor social protection	Exclusive governance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Insecure income-generating activities - Be dependent on natural resources and susceptible to the weather conditions (Fig 4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Poor quality and quantity of the diet of Bru women - Food insecurity during and after a disaster - Poor local health services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Live in hazardous areas next to mountains and streams - Poor infrastructure conditions - Limited number of safe shelters - Poor living conditions (e.g. housing, water and sanitation) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited support for disaster preparedness for Bru and their needs for medical health care were often overlooked - Not aware of the local disaster management plan - Limited access to early warnings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not often engaged in decision-making related to the family economy, community affairs, and disaster risk reduction. - Played no leadership or authority roles.

(Source: FGDs and semi-structured interviews with Bru women, 2020)



Fig.4: Bru women working on slope area



Fig.5: A Bru woman pointing the last flood’s height

This research found that ethnicity, socio-economic class, education, gender and disability were salient identities related to the lived experiences of Bru women in everyday life as well as in disasters. These identities indeed induced discrimination and self-stigma in their everyday life and DRR.

The important expressions of self-stigma are their feeling of embarrassment, low self-confidence, low self-esteem and uncomfortableness when they interact with outsiders especially local authorities and Kinh people. Moreover, Bru women considered themselves as social underprivileged and powerless groups in comparison to Bru men and even Kinh women.

New Zealand Aid Programme Awards for Postgraduate Field Research

Research Brief: Exploring women's vulnerability to disasters through the lens of intersectionality - A case study of women from an ethnic minority in Vietnam.

As results, Bru women isolated themselves within their village border, avoided to take part in social activities with Kinh people, kept distance from the Kinh group, felt scared to raise voice against domestic violence or inequalities when receiving social supports. Self-stigma also made Bru women self-exclude themselves from accessing public resources and services to change their livelihoods.

Bru women experienced multi-layers of discrimination from the family, community, and institution. Their voice was excluded from family and community issues. They also faced discrimination in accessing employment in both private and government sectors, health services, legal support services, and socio-economic support programmes. These forms of discrimination negatively affected their opportunities to have secure livelihoods and well-being that are crucial for them to deal with disasters.

The research found that each discrimination against Bru women arose from one or several stereotypes acting in the intersection. In turn, each stereotype is often produced by one or several different identities attached to women. These identities are intertwined in acting in an intersectional way to produce a stereotype. For example, discrimination in accessing jobs as teachers in kindergarten can be attributed to stereotypes such as 'less intelligent', 'weak communication', and 'lazy'. Each stereotype in turn is associated with not only Bru ethnicity but also the poor identity. Though some Bru women have advantageous identities such as high education level (i.e. having a college degree in kindergarten education) and women that are preferable for kindergarten jobs, they was not able to access this kind of employment due to the negative stereotypes associated with their identities of being Bru (ethnic minority) and being poor (class). Therefore, the complexity of Bru women's lived experience and discrimination cannot be explained sufficiently by a single lens such as gender or ethnicity. This complexity is fully understood and addressed only when all their identities and associated stereotypes are considered in an intersectional way.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research recommended an intersectional approach that considers all social identities that people relate in addressing their lived experience in everyday life and disaster vulnerability. The effects of the intersection of all identities are complex and unique for each individual and depend on the context in which these identities are acting.

The research also indicates that stigma and discrimination play an important role in producing disadvantages for Bru women. GOs and NGOs that work for women in ethnic minorities should thus focus on interventions to eliminate or reduce the stigma (including self-stigma) and discrimination in their sustainable development and DRR projects. This can be done by addressing the stereotypes that act as a link between social identities and stigma and discrimination. Accordingly, it is necessary to consider all (dis/advantageous) social identities associated with the stereotypes being addressed. This often requires a strong collaboration of organisations working with and for the groups of women, the elderly, people with disabilities, children, and ethnicity.

For development programmes by MFAT, it is necessarily important to consider all disadvantageous identities existing in the communities under support. Accordingly, it should address social barriers associated with these identities to ensure that the most disadvantaged can access and gain benefit from the support programmes.

CONSIDERATION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

While the intersectionality approach is increasingly recognised, its adoption in research, policy and programmes targeting vulnerable people remains limited. More research on the intersectionality approach and the vulnerability of other social groups such as people with disabilities, older people, and children is necessary to inform policy makers and practitioners. Also, how this idea can be considered in development and DRR policies and agenda as well as applied in practice in development and DRR projects is necessarily explored in future research.

New Zealand Aid Programme Awards for Postgraduate Field Research

Research Brief: Exploring women's vulnerability to disasters through the lens of intersectionality - A case study of women from an ethnic minority in Vietnam.

REFERENCES

List referenced works here using the APA 6th edition referencing style

- Baulch, B., Chuyen, K. T. T., Haughton, D., & Haughton, J. (2002). *Ethnic Minority Development in Vietnam: A Socioeconomic Perspective*. World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-2836>
- David, E., & Enarson, E. P. (2012). *The women of Katrina: How gender, race, and class matter in an American disaster*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Reid, M. (2013). Disasters and Social Inequalities. *Sociology Compass*, 7(11), 984–997. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12080>
- Ryder, S. S. (2017). A bridge to challenging environmental inequality: Intersectionality, environmental justice, and disaster vulnerability. *Social Thought and Research*, 34, 85–115.
- Truong Xuan Commune People's Committee. (2019). *The annual socio-economic development report*. Truong Xuan: Truong Xuan Commune People's Committee.
- Twigg, J. (2015). *Disaster risk reduction. Good practice review*. London, UK: Humanitarian Policy Group.
- Wisner, B., Gaillard, J. C., & Kelman, I. (Eds.). (2012). *The Routledge handbook of hazards and disaster risk reduction*. New York: Routledge.

The views expressed in this Brief are entirely those of the award holder and do not necessarily reflect the position of DevNet, the New Zealand Government, the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade or any other party.