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Decolonising knowledge production in disaster management: a feminist perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper focuses on how feminist research seeks to integrate the inclusion of women in society for them to be active participants in disaster management, and goes on to prove how crucial it is for disaster research to collaborate with feminist research to arrive at a cohesive, interwoven, interdisciplinary field and methodology, while at the same time giving the agency in the hands of local agents for them to bring about change through traditional methods interwoven with broader methodologies. To hand over the process to local agents would result in decolonisation of knowledge production and implementation.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper was written using secondary sources, mainly in the form of books, journal articles and news articles. Reports by international organisations were used to augment data and other theoretical frameworks and references in the paper. The secondary sources were selected keeping in view one of the primary objectives of the paper, namely “decolonising knowledge production”. Analysis by postcolonial authors from the global South has been included. Research and literature based in local contexts form an important part of the sources consulted throughout this paper. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has been used as a case study to highlight how disasters are still “gendered”; it opens up space for further research on the topic.

Findings – Even though women are increasingly recognised as agents of positive change in prevention, mitigation and post-disaster efforts, very little is done at the policy and implementation levels to include their experiences and benefit from them. There is an urgent need for systemic, gender-aware changes at socio-economic and political levels so that hazards may be prevented from turning into disasters by reducing the vulnerability of populations.

Originality/value – The importance of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach and the integration of three fields of study disaster management, feminist/gender studies and decolonising knowledge production. The attempt is to analyse the interdependence of these fields of study to understand the lacunae in planning and implementation of disaster management policies, and to pave the way for further research by way of this integration.

Keywords Feminism, Disaster management, COVID-19, Decolonising knowledge

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The core aim of this paper is to understand the field of Disaster Management (DM) as an academic discipline deriving theory and practice from a purely western, and therefore incomplete, perspective and the implications this has on existing structures in the global South. A lack of analysis from a feminist perspective further exacerbates the lacunae in this field, which translates into policy failure, and a disproportionate burden on the female population. The premise is that the more agency is given to populations from areas vulnerable to, or suffering from disasters, the better chances there are of preventing and mitigating it effectively. Among the population, if women are given agency, there is a better chance that hazards may not turn into disasters. This is explained in detail in the paper. The relationship between decolonisation of knowledge, DM and feminist studies can be understood as a triangle, each field represented by each vertex, underlining their interdependence and the fact they are parts of a whole.

In order to establish the linkages between the three fields, this paper is divided into three main parts. The first part begins with an introduction to the process of decolonising



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