

Media release

Embargoed until 14:00, Fri 1 September, 2006

Royal
Geographical
Society
with IBG

Advancing geography
and geographical learning

● More women die than men as a result of natural disasters

More women die than men as the direct and indirect result of natural disasters, according to research presented at the Royal Geographical Society's annual conference in London today (Friday 1 September 2006).

This effect is strongest in countries with very low social and economic rights for women. In contrast, in those countries in which women in their everyday lives have almost equal rights as men, natural disasters kill men and women almost equally.

141 countries were studied in the first statistical analysis of the effect of natural disasters on the life expectancy of men and women, conducted by Professor Eric Neumayer of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and Dr Thomas Plümper of the University of Essex.

Physical differences between men and women are unlikely to explain the result, according to the research. For example, women are often at an advantage in famines because they can cope better with food shortages due to their lower nutritional requirements and higher body fat. Social norms can provide some explanation. In many countries women are supposed to look after children, the elderly and their homes which hampers their own rescue efforts in almost all types of natural disasters. Yet, the most important reason why women are more vulnerable to the fatal impact of natural disasters is because of their lower social and economic status in many countries. With existing patterns of gender discrimination, boys are likely to receive preferential treatment in rescue efforts and both women and girls suffer more from the shortages of food and economic resources in the aftermath of disasters.

This research incorporates 4,605 natural disasters included in the Emergency Disasters Database between 1981 and 2002. Most natural disasters take place in large countries such as the U.S. (442 natural disasters), India (293) and China (125). Poorer countries have the most victims in terms of absolute numbers of deaths, namely Ethiopia (311,286 total number of deaths), Sudan

.....

(158,252) and Bangladesh (149,225). The study used life expectancy data from the U.S. Census International Data Base to estimate the effect of natural disasters.

Prof Neumayer said: "The feminists got it right. Natural disasters are a tragedy in their own right but in countries with existing gender discrimination women are the worst hit. While most disasters cannot be prevented, policy makers, international and humanitarian organizations must develop better policies to address the special needs of women in the wake of large-scale natural disasters."

– ENDS –

Notes to editors

For further information please contact Will Harvey or Jonathan Breckon at the RGS-IBG press office on 020 7591 3019, mobile 07775 678718 or email press@rgs.org

1. 'The Gendered Nature of Natural Disasters: The Impact of Catastrophic Events on the Gender Gap in Life Expectancy, 1981-2002' will be presented at 14:00-15:30 BST, Friday 1 September 2006. A more detailed paper is available on request. Prof Eric Neumayer, LSE is available for interview.
2. The 2006 Annual International Conference of the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) is held in the Society's London HQ at 1 Kensington Gore, London SW7 2AR between Wednesday 30 August and Friday 1 September. Further details of the programme and abstracts can be found on the website at www.rgs.org/ac2006.
3. The natural disasters include droughts, earthquakes, epidemics, extreme temperatures, famines, fires, floods, insect infestations, landslides, storms, tsunamis, and volcano eruptions. A natural disaster must fulfil one of the following conditions: ten or more people are reported as killed, 100 people are reported as affected, a state of emergency has been declared, or the country has issued a call for international assistance. The number of people killed is used to measure the magnitude of a natural disaster. The number of people killed is divided by the total population size of the country affected by the natural disaster since the influence of natural disasters on an affected country's life expectancy not only depends on the magnitude of the disaster but also on the population size of the affected country.
4. The Royal Geographical Society (with The Institute of British Geographers) is the learned society and professional body representing geography and geographers. It was founded in 1830 and has been one of the most active of the learned societies ever since. Today the Society is a leading world centre for geographical learning - supporting education, teaching, research and scientific expeditions, as well as promoting public understanding and enjoyment of geography.
5. The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) is a world class centre for its concentration of teaching and research across the full range of the social, political and economic sciences. Founded in 1895 by Beatrice and Sidney Webb, LSE is a world centre for advanced research, with 97 per cent of its academics actively engaged in research. From its foundation, LSE has aimed to be a laboratory of the social sciences, a place where ideas are developed, analysed, evaluated and disseminated around the globe. More information can be found at www.lse.ac.uk