

# Extractivism and the engendering of disasters: disaster risk creation in the era of the Anthropocene

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper argues that extractivist logic creates the environmental conditions that produce “natural” hazards and also the human conditions that produce vulnerability, which combined create disasters. Disaster Risk Creation is then built into the current global socio-economic system, as an integral component not accidental by-product.

**Design/methodology/approach** – As part of the movement to liberate disasters as discipline, practice and field of enquiry, this paper does not talk disasters *per se*, but rather its focus is on “extractivism” as a fundamental explanator for the anthropogenic disaster landscape that now confronts us.

**Findings** – Applying a gender lens to extractivism as it relates to disaster, further highlights that Disaster Risk Management rather than alleviating, creates the problems it seeks to solve, suggesting the need to liberate gender from Disaster Risk Management, and the need to liberate us all from the notion of managing disasters. Since to ‘manage’ disaster risk is to accept uncritically the structures and systems that create that risk, then if we truly want to address disasters, our focus needs to be on the extractive practices, not the disastrous outcomes.

**Originality/value** – The fundamental argument is that through privileging the notion of “disaster” we create it, bring it into existence, as something that exists in and of itself, apart from wider socio-economic structures and systems of extraction and exploitation, rather than recognising it for what it is, an outcome/end product of those wider structures and systems. Our focus on disaster is then misplaced, and perhaps what disaster studies needs to be liberated from, is itself.

**Keywords** Gender, Patriarchy, Extractivism, Disaster risk creation

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The editors of this special edition ask us to consider if disaster studies, as discipline, practice and field of enquiry needs to be liberated, and if so, from what? This paper argues disaster studies do need to be liberated, and from something that many may see to be its fundamental aim Disaster Risk Management (DRM). To “manage” disaster risk is to accept uncritically the structures and systems that create that risk, structures and systems that place whole groups and geographies in danger of disaster, or better stated, are responsible for Disaster Risk Creation (DRC). The idea that the current neo-liberal model, and related structures and systems, are the cause of, not the cure for disasters is not new and has been accepted by many, for many decades (Blaikie *et al.*, 1994). Yet, we still talk about “disaster studies” as if disasters were an inevitability, around which we have then built careers, set up university departments and degrees, around which NGOs have created programmes and projects, and we have designed international policies. In privileging disaster, we create it, bring it into existence, as something that exists in and of itself, apart from wider structures and systems, rather than

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recognising it for what it is, an outcome/an end product of those wider structures and systems. Our focus on “disaster” is then misplaced, and perhaps what disaster studies needs to be liberated from, is itself.

As part of this liberation movement, this paper does not talk disasters *per se*, but rather its focus is on what it argues is a fundamental explanator of disasters “extractivism”. It is not the intention of this article to critically interrogate the body of work around DRC, which readers of the journal will hopefully already be familiar with; rather the aim is to highlight the utility of the concept of extractivism as an explanatory for the anthropogenic disaster landscape that now confronts us. Over the last decade a considerable body of literature has contributed to the development of the idea of DRC (Bankoff and Hilhorst, 2022; Lewis and Kelman, 2012; Oliver-Smith, 2022). However, little work has considered extractivism within this as an explanatory concept (see Covarrubias and Raju, 2020; Flint and Luloff, 2005). Originating in the late twentieth century, over the last decade academic writing on the concept of extractivism has proliferated (see Chagnon *et al.*, 2022 for discussion of evolution of the concept). Its origins lie with critical analysis of processes of natural resource exploitation in Latin America, and Indigenous Peoples’ resistance to mining and other Extractive Industries (EIs) (Gudynas, 2015). Given its origins lie in, and with, the Global South it is then in itself a potentially liberating concept. However, since then, the concept has “morphed, travelled, and expanded”, both theoretically and geographically (Chagnon *et al.*, 2022, p. 761).

Extractivism has been characterised as “a core logic of the 21st-century global experience” (McNeish and Shapiro, 2021, p. 2) and one which is suggested to be “diametrically opposed to the concept and practices of sustainability” (Chagnon *et al.*, 2022, p. 762). Extractivist operations such as mining, gas and oil industries, large scale agro-agriculture and deep-sea fishing result in, among other things, land and soil degradation, biodiversity loss, deforestation, and climate change, while also increasing global inequalities, across multiple spatial contexts. Extractivism can be understood as “the properties and practices organized towards the goal of maximizing benefit through extraction, which brings in its wake violence and destruction” (Durante *et al.*, 2021, p. 20), a violence that is played out against humans and other living beings, as well as against the lived environment. This suggests extractivist logic creates the environmental conditions that produce “natural” hazards and also the human conditions that produce vulnerability, which combined create disasters. It suggests then if we want to “manage” disasters, our focus needs to be on the extractive practices, not the disastrous outcomes.

However, as with all concepts, extractivism as generally understood is not without its limitations and the literature to date suffers from some level of gender blindness. Just as communist critiques of capitalism fail to recognise patriarchy as a sister structure of oppression, and one that is no less real or important, so extractivist thinking, just like EIs, tend to be male-dominated. However, EIs and gender inequality have been suggested to be “inextricably linked” (Mukeba, 2015). Applying a gender lens to extractivism as it relates to disaster illuminates a further area of disaster studies in need of liberating. The paper suggests, rather controversially perhaps, especially from a writer best known for her work on gender, that we need to be liberated from attempts to “engender” DRM. It suggests the current focus on women as a key actor in managing disaster risk is in itself extractivist, and thus while women are seen to be part of the “solution” the current gender focus is also indicative of problem. A gender lens allows us to see that existing programmes and policies that focus on disaster, rather than the structures and systems that create them, reinforce and re-produce those very structures and systems, perpetuating the cycle of disaster creation through disaster response.

The paper begins from a standpoint, not just in the feminist sense of that notion, but also around the issue of intent. Wisner and Lavell (2017, p. 12) when considering DRC suggest there is a “continuum of intentionality” whereby some agents of risk creation may be unaware

of their actions, while [Dickinson and Burton \(2022, p. 197\)](#) assert DRC is “not usually intentional, but often a side-effect of the decisions made by financial and governance systems in place”. This paper takes the standpoint that DRC is built into the current global socio-economic system, as an integral component not accidental by-product. It uses an extractivist and gender lens to highlight how this produces not just localised but globalised disasters.

The paper begins with a discussion of the origins of extractivism and highlights how it relates to DRC in a theoretical sense. In the next section the example of the pandemic is used to highlight how extractivist logic produces globalised disasters. The third section links the global to the local in exploring extractive sites as sites of capitalist and patriarchal oppression, highlighting how the “super-normal” patriarchal relations we see in EIs are not a by-product of extractivism but necessary for their continued functioning. In the final section the focus is on “disasters”. Taking a gender lens it illustrates how the very focus on disaster creates the problems it seeks to solve, suggesting the need to liberate gender from DRM, and the need to liberate us all from the notion of managing disasters.

### **Extractivism and disaster risk creation**

In operation for thousands of years, extractivist practices are inextricably entangled with European colonialism, and the development of the modern world system. The roots of extractivism as a concept can be found in the Latin American notion of “extractivismo”, which originally emerged in the 1970s to describe the excessive and highly conflictive developments in the mining and oil export sectors in the region, and as importantly, the resistance of Indigenous Peoples ([Gudynas, 2018](#)). The commonality across the range of EIs is an “extractivist logic” of depletion, the taking of resource, without reciprocity, without stewardship, as a fundamental or “imperative” driving force ([Dunlap and Jakobsen, 2020](#)). The extraction of minerals such as copper, lead and zinc, and of coal, oil and natural gas is the basis of industry. Given the nature of, and demand for these resources, EIs are sites where financial gains can be well over “usual” profit margins. They allow the generation of abnormal, or what economists prefer to term “super-normal” profits (see [Bradshaw \*et al.\*, 2017](#)). Resource prices are influenced by many factors but in part are due to the technical knowledge needed and the high financial costs involved in, for example, drilling for oil, meaning only a few large corporations can afford to seek out and exploit new finds of natural resources. This, and the nature of the markets for these resources, keeps profits high. National governments often do not have the capacity to exploit the natural resources they “own” and invite international corporations in, taking a proportion of the gains through taxation. That being said, the concept of “neo-extractivism” has been used to capture the involvement of often left-wing Latin American governments in ecological-political patterns of intensive natural resource exploitation ([Gudynas, 2021](#)). Given the often remote geographical location of EIs, and given that profit motivates both governments and the corporates, these are often largely un- or under-regulated sites. That is, un- or under-regulated in terms of extractive methods and health and safety, but, as discussed below, often highly regulated in terms of patriarchal structures that dictate social relations of power and oppression for those that work there.

Extractivism can be seen not only to define our current global socio-economic structures but also our “individual” and collective mindset, with industrialisation and commodification presented and understood as the key to prosperity. In the drive to commodify and consume, extraction and anthropocentric appropriation leaves behind negative externalities such as changed landscapes and exhausted resources, pollution and impoverished and often displaced populations. [Durante \*et al.\* \(2021, p. 24\)](#) use the example of deforestation to highlight how anthropocentric appropriation is ecologically destructive and can include loss of soils, depletion of groundwater or the mass extinction of other-than-human species. The over-exploitative use of

the land by EIs and permanent border expansion into spaces previously considered “unproductive,” has produced vulnerability and unsafe conditions (Covarrubias and Raju, 2020).

Many communities that are sites of EI do seek to influence the process and to protect people and planet (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2016; Flint and Luloff, 2005). However, there are many examples across time and space of EIs directly causing deaths in the local communities they infringe upon, from the colliery spoil tip collapse in Aberfan Wales in 1966, to the dam collapse related to the iron ore mine at Minas Gerais, Brazil nearly 50 years later. However, the everyday impact of EIs is as disastrous. Extractivist practices impact on the metabolisms of individual organisms through pollution, toxicants and micro-plastics that now permeate practically all ecosystems and organisms. The environmental impacts for groundwater, biodiversity or climate in extractive sites may only become visible after several decades, making places uninhabitable and affecting the opportunities and life choices of future generations (Glaab and Stuvoy, 2021). Less visible harm inflicted on people and environments overtime has been conceptualised by Nixon (2011) as “long dyings”, and violence that unfolds slowly over long periods leads to invisible and therefore often unaccounted for “disposable casualties”. These violences to planet and people are inherent in extractivism as a way of organising systems and socio-economic structures.

Willow (2018, p. 2) highlights the importance of understanding extractivism as “more than just a way of using the land . . . It is a way of being in the world”, arguing that unlike extraction, extractivism is both principle and practice, it is “. . . a political as well as an environmental project, both a social and an ecological problem”. Durante *et al.* (2021) deconstructing the term “extractivismo”, note the Spanish dictionary suggests adding “-ismo” to a term, changes it to imply a doctrine, system, school or movement. The concept of “extractivism” then denotes, “a particular way of thinking and the properties and practices organized towards the goal of maximizing benefit through extraction” (Durante *et al.*, 2021, p. 23). As such, it has been suggested it is a “modality of capital accumulation that conditions, constrains, and pressures lives of virtually all humans and other-than-humans” (Chagnon *et al.*, 2022, p. 763).

If we understand extractivism as a socio-economic system which is insensitive to the harm its practice inflicts on both people and the environment, then extractivist logic can also be recognised in other industries such as the financial sector and digital economies, and also the academe. Much academic knowledge is based on the appropriation of knowledges, and defined by an “epistemic extractivism” that has constructed an historical memory of the origins of philosophy and modern science as Western (Grosfoguel, 2020) and continues to promote science and technology as the solution to the problems it creates. While extractivist critiques of the academe are relatively new, the critique of knowledge as selectively created and shrouded in a veil of objective truth is not new. Feminist writers in the 1980s questioned the possibility of objective knowledge produced from an outside-of-nature and perspective-free viewpoint suggesting instead an embodied objectivity, understanding that knowledge is always situated, always local and limited. More recently McKittrick (2021, p. 34) writing around Black ways of knowing, suggests a knowledge system that “cannot be proved”, with the related “unknowing” as a “way of being”. Despite long-standing critiques of the notion of knowing and scientific knowledge’s claim to truth, with related calls to change the “forces and the relations” of knowledge production (Gilmore, 2002, p. 22), extractivism highlights the continued privileging of scientific knowledge as solution, not problem.

In the era of the Anthropocene, humankind can be understood as a “major geological force” (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000) in that we as humans are influencing the planet as much, or more than the planet influences us. While the Anthropocene is a contested notion, the underlying idea is understood and accepted, even in the mainstream climate discourse where extreme weather events are presented as an outcome of changes in the earth’s temperature, which in turn is understood as related to our daily activities. While the idea of disaster as non-

natural is gaining traction, questioning the naturalness of natural hazards is much less common, and in the dominant discourse nature is still constructed as both natural and as threat. In this discourse, social and scientific knowledge is selectively used by policy makers. It is used to highlight the need for individuals to change their behaviour, but not to suggest capitalist modes of production change their extractivist behaviour, which instead are presented as scientific triumphs over nature.

The practice of extractivism then creates problems/hazards, while extractivism as a principle constructs the myth of naturalness to ensure a no-blame culture, and epistemic extractivism evidences this position as truth while presenting the acceptable, scientific solutions to the problems created. Within this dominant discourse, disaster is understood as “conceptual negative” with no inherent meaning other than being outside what is understood to be normal (Anderson, 2011) with the key being the “un-ness” of the situation (Rosenthal, 1998). Yet the exceptional or non-normal nature of disasters is contested, and as the pandemic highlights, they do not occur from an “abnormal disruption” of “normal” functioning but rather are a “normal consequence” of “abnormal functioning” (Revet, 2020).

### **Global anthropogenic disaster: COVID-19**

While COVID has been constructed as arising from nature in that it is a naturally occurring virus, its origins suggest something much less “natural”. Evidence to date supports the hypothesis that the coronavirus spread from animals to the people who raised, butchered or bought them. Kelman (2020, p. 1) notes this suggests “deep questions” around why and how, as happened with Human Immunodeficiency Viruses (HIV) and Ebola previously, humanity seemingly has disturbed ecosystems to the point that microbes “jump” species, creating new hazards for human beings. Paula (2021) suggests the answer may lie with the prevailing extractivist logic that has seen a doubling of resource extraction in the last 25 years (McNeish and Shapiro, 2021, p. 4). Extractive logic underpins social dislocation and ecological destruction, and the intensification of extractive practice creates the conditions that facilitate the spread of zoonotic disease (Artiga-Purcell *et al.*, 2023).

In September 2019, the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) Global Preparedness Monitoring Board (GPMB) report entitled “A World at Risk”, noted the urgency for the World to prepare for “a rapidly spreading, lethal respiratory pathogen pandemic” and in the face of this the need for determined political leadership at national and global levels. The foreword to the 2020 report “A World in Disorder” opens with the statement; “Never before has the world been so clearly forewarned of the dangers of a devastating pandemic, nor previously had the knowledge, resources and technologies to deal with such a threat. Yet, never before has the world witnessed a pandemic of such widespread and destructive social and economic impact.”

Instead of recognising lack of action as integral to creating the pandemic, the focus was placed on the virus as a natural occurrence, as a disease and as a “health” issue, with the WHO naming COVID as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. Proclaiming a health emergency allowed governments to put in place actions to respond to and reduce the impact of the virus. So called non-essential activities, including schooling, were part of local, regional and national lockdowns. The notion of “non-essential” is of course subjective and the response to COVID while constructed as a temporary break from normality, also constructed a new normality based on the intensification of “normal” roles and relations. For example, across the globe women were encouraged to resume their “natural” roles as caring for the home, carers of children, the elderly, the sick (Bradshaw, 2021).

This and other negative outcomes of COVID, such as economic impacts, were framed as necessary consequences of a health emergency or rather as averting a (further) health emergency. However, in various Latin American countries, governments used the state of emergency to re-define mining, oil and gas extraction as “essential” activities to ensure their continued

functioning. In Chile protestors denounced mining as a super-spreader activity, with the environmental organisation Movimiento Socio-Ambiental Valle del Huasco noting: “Large-scale mining first kills us with pollution, now it kills us by COVID” (cited in [Artiga-Purcell et al., 2023](#)).

As a health emergency, the number of cases reported was the trigger for actions such as lockdowns. However, while often presented as scientifically calculated and led, triggers are subjective. For example, New Zealand commenced an intense lockdown on 26 March 2020. At that time, NZ had just over 100 COVID-19 cases and no deaths. At the same time England went into national lockdown. At that time, England had registered over 200 COVID-19 related deaths. The subjectivity of response to the crisis highlights how, as [Kreps \(1998\)](#) suggests, disasters or here a “health emergency”, tells us something about how society views and defines physical harm and social disruption, and should be understood in relation to the response itself, rather than the physical damage ([Dynes, 1998](#)). For some African governments the number of cases was less important than economic considerations and the driving logic was, if the economy cannot afford the losses, workers have to keep on working. [Greco \(2020\)](#) asks the important question – to what extent was potentially putting workers’ lives at risk during the pandemic a departure from the norm? Arguing in the extractivist model, this is an extreme position, but not an exceptional one.

### Extractive industries: through a gender lens

Men, and women, are attracted to extractive sites by the economic opportunities they seem to offer, and EIs do generate great wealth – for the owners of the means of production who can benefit from abnormal or what economists term super-normal profits. While in the Global South EIs are often largely unregulated in terms of health and safety, the remote and dangerous nature of the work means they are often highly regulated in terms of social systems and structures. In the Global South male workers often live in dormitory style accommodation and (Western male) mine owners may control male workers’ everyday lives up to and including their alcohol consumption and sexual relations. Dangerous working conditions mean men working in the mines rely on other men for their safety. These conditions may build both an exaggerated or “macho masculinity” and a solidarity between male workers ([Campbell, 2000](#)) creating a system of “super-normal patriarchy” ([Bradshaw et al., 2017](#)). Patriarchy is a power system where gendered hierarchies of power relations are structured through forms of masculine lines or logic, which tends to result in male privilege; this includes the privileging of some men, and the subordination of other men and even more so women ([Edström et al., 2014](#)). As male workers may have little control over their own lives, to continue to live and work in this context they need to exercise control over something or somebody, and we see overt displays of masculinity between men, and over women. These intensified patriarchal practices are not then a by-product of extractivism but necessary for its continued functioning (see [Holz and Pavez, 2022](#)).

Within the EI sector, women’s roles have often been “obscured and hidden, forgotten and devalued” ([Lahiri-Dutt and Macintyre, 2006](#)) and women are often invisibilised as workers ([Macdonald, 2017](#)) and instead constructed as either “wives” or “whores” ([Lahiri-Dutt, 2012](#)). EI depends on the reproductive and unpaid work of women/wives, the cost of which is both “invisibilised and expropriated” perpetuating an “economic violence” against women ([Holz and Pavez, 2022](#), p. 127). That said, the economic violence of EI may include an overt policy to remove some women (read wives) from the sites, often justified on the grounds of protecting them from the violence associated with the macho-masculinity that characterises these sites. While some women are removed, other women arrive or are brought in by companies under the pretence of becoming cooks and cleaners, when really they are employing them for sex work ([Cane et al., 2014](#)). While there exists a profound and global connection between “prostitution” and mining ([Laité, 2009](#)) as [Lahiri-Dutt \(2012\)](#) cautions this focus on women as sex workers may be used to draw attention away from the everyday politics of gender relations within the wider

social changes brought by EI. We should also be cautious in suggesting sex work is the epitome of patriarchy (Seshu and Pai, 2014) and recognise the economic opportunities opened up by EIs might benefit women more than the related social stigma harms them (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2017). Rather than constructing male and female behaviour in this context as “ab-normal” it should perhaps be better understood as “super-normal”.

In contexts where communities are displaced or fractured by EI activities, women face particular pressure as they tend to be the ones who assume much of the responsibility for building and maintaining community cohesion (Hinton *et al.*, 2003). Studies have found women have a lesser voice in negotiations over land use but bear a greater proportion of the stress associated with, for example, oil-induced social and environmental changes than men (Scott *et al.*, 2013). Any benefits from EI tend to go to men in the form of employment and compensation, while the costs, such as family and social disruption, fall most heavily on women (Eftimie *et al.*, 2009). Tran (2023) notes of EI that traditional gender norms of feminine altruism have been co-opted into extractivism, unevenly burdening women with the social and ecological consequences. Gilmore (2002, p. 15) suggests more generally women take the lead in the “everyday struggles against toxicities”. We see this echoed when considering disasters, where women are presented as both those that need protecting from disaster, and simultaneously the protectors of planet and people, or those charged with managing disaster risk.

### Engendering disaster risk creation

While the climate change discourse is highly masculinised, framed in scientific language and developed within a securitised agenda, the solution to the climate problem is often presented as lying with women’s “natural” affinity to nature (see Alston and Whittenbury, 2013; Cela *et al.*, 2013). Since the 1990s the notion of “ecofeminism” has tended to promote a “women as closer to nature” discourse, giving women a special role in the environmental and climate discourses, with women in the Global South constructed to be even closer to her biology than other women (Koffman and Gill, 2013). Prioritising biology as the explanatory factor for women’s supposed natural affinity with nature has been critiqued as not only presenting women as a homogenous group but also as essentialising women (Leach, 2007). In line with what elsewhere has been called a “feminisation” (Chant, 2008; Bradshaw, 2010) or “motherisation” (Molyneux, 2006) of policy response, this “ecomaternalism” (Arora-Jonsson, 2011) has enabled caring for the planet to be constructed as a woman’s responsibility. Constructed as “chief-victim-and-caretaker” (Resurreccion, 2012) for many decades we have seen the appropriation of women’s unpaid labour to undertake activities to protect the environment by actors such as the World Bank (see Jackson, 1998).

We can understand this appropriation of women’s labour as part of wider extractivist practice and principles of depletion without reciprocity, played out within a modality of capital accumulation that conditions, constrains and pressures lives, depleting women’s resources of time and energy for the good of the capitalist economic system. Indeed, in 2006 the World Bank made clear what underpins its focus on women, with its now infamous statement that gender equality is just “smart economics” (Wilson, 2015). This sentiment was echoed in 2018 in promotional literature for a World Bank conference on “Gender in Oil, Gas and Mining” that highlighted “working with and investing in women makes good business sense”. When women are targeted by policies and projects, it is often due to efficiency rather than equality reasons. In part this is based on research that shows income and resources provided to women are more likely to be used to improve the wellbeing of all those in the household. The socially constructed “good” behaviour of women is in contrast to the “irresponsible” behaviour of men which sees men withhold income for their own personal use, such as drinking, as they act out the social constructions around what it means to be a man, and how men perform masculinity (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2017).

In the disaster context too, women are targeted as virtuous-victims (Bradshaw, 2013). Disasters and related constructs such as gendered risk and vulnerability are not natural but are to be expected as “normal” outcomes of the economic growth model of the neo-liberal era that is based on extractivist logic. Disasters reflect and intensify rather than disrupt this normality, leading not to ab-normal but rather super-normal experiences of everyday realities (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2022). Within this, women are constructed as both blameless victims, and as virtuous, using resources efficiently to reduce the vulnerability and improve the well-being of others. Resources are then targeted at women, rather than for women. For example, post-hurricane Mitch an international Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) gave cows to women in Nicaragua. This was presented as a gender empowerment project, as previously generally only men had owned cows, while women raised chickens. When asked if this had caused problems with men, the NGO replied no as “the women had their cows, and the men were drinking the milk” (Bradshaw, 2013). Quite clearly while targeted at women, and while women undertook the additional work to care for the cattle with the related impact on their time and energy, they were not the main beneficiaries, and importantly this was not seen to be a problem, but an expectation. The research highlighted that below 20% of women engaged in reconstruction felt they benefited personally. This use of women to fulfil other aims is by design not accident, and suggests women are at the service of the policy agenda, rather than served by it (Molyneux, 2007).

This instrumentalism in gendered development and disasters policies and programmes has elsewhere and in past time been discussed in a practical vs strategic gender needs and interests frame (Molyneux, 1985; Moser, 1989). This highlights that what are constructed as women’s “needs” are in fact the basic needs of all, but they are needs society has constructed as being largely serviced through women. While addressing these needs may make the lives of women easier, they will not bring fundamental change to women’s lives. In contrast addressing women’s strategic interests look to address the structural causes of women’s oppression, not to service the needs these unjust systems create. An example, a World Bank project sought to address the issue of girls not attending school due to their domestic responsibilities such as collecting water from wells and streams some distance away from their homes (WBGDC, 2003). They built a well next to the school so that girls could both attend classes and carry water home for the family. This was presented as a “gendered” project. What it did, was intensify and prolong what is often a long journey home after a school day, now carrying water. It then further depleted girls’ resources of time and energy. What it also did, was reinforce that it is the responsibility of girls to collect water, making this a social gendered norm. What it did not do, was challenge why it is girls who collect water. What it did not do, was challenge why girls (and boys) often have to walk for hours to get to school. What it did not do, was challenge why there is no running water in their homes. In short, by uncritically responding to a practical problem and addressing a tangible “need”, it reinforced and re-produced the systems of oppression that created the problem and the need in the first place.

Constructed as bringing gender equality, policies and projects that target women are often a form of gendered extractivism. Relying on women’s time and energy for their implementation, the policy solutions that are put forward further deplete women’s resources and re-create the conditions they then seek to address. A post-disaster response that “helps” women meet a familial need, or a DRM project that seeks to support women’s actions to mitigate a newly constructed societal threat, are addressing practical not strategic needs and interests, reinforcing and re-producing the systems of oppression that created the problem and the need for a policy response, perpetuating the cycle of need creation through response.

### Concluding thoughts

Returning to the original question - what does disaster studies need liberating from? An extractivist lens highlights that disasters are not an accidental by-product of current

socio-economic structures and systems. They are an inherent component of extractivist logic, a logic which understands but which is insensitive to the harm its practice inflicts on both people and the environment. This means we need to liberate disasters from its current focus on managing disaster risk, since to manage disaster risk is to accept uncritically the structures and systems that create that risk, and merely serves to perpetuate disaster risk and allow those that create the risk to continue to do so.

The insensitivity to the harm extractive practices inflict does not mean that those with power do not act on the harms they create, for at times they do, and their “help”, their policies to manage risks, is too often welcomed rather than critiqued. The recent pandemic was presented as a “naturally” occurring virus that disrupted our normal lives, rather than the natural outcome of our abnormal, extractive practices. Governments across the globe responded to manage the risk, shutting down “non-essential” activities such as schools, but in many countries allowing EIs to continue to operate, continuing the very practices that help create the conditions that facilitate the spread of zoonotic disease.

The responses of those in power to disaster risk are presented as divorced from the processes that are creating those risks. They are constructed as helping solve a problem, rather than as having created the problem in the first place. More recently those charged with implementing these policies and programmes are women. Yet if we understand these policies and programmes not as aimed at bringing gender equality but as being another form of gendered extractivism, depleting the resources of time and energy of those with little power, to the benefit of those with power, then we also need to be liberated from attempts to engender disasters.

In all this, in privileging disaster as our focus of enquiry, we imagine it as something that exists in and of itself, apart from wider socio-economic structures and systems, rather than recognising it for what it is, an outcome/end product of those wider structures and systems. Our focus on “disaster” is then misplaced. Extractivist logic creates the environmental conditions that produce “natural” hazards and also the human conditions that produce vulnerability, which combined create disasters. This suggests our focus needs to be on the extractive practices, not the disastrous outcomes. There is then a need to liberate disaster studies from itself.

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