

WOMEN’S SOCIAL VULNERABILITY IN NATURAL DISASTERS: USING THE PREDICAMENT OF WOMEN IN THE HENAN RAINSTORM AS AN EXAMPLE

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When a Rainstorm Became Lethal

“Victims were lying everywhere on the ground in the temporary shelter, taking paper boxes as their beds and sanitation supplies as their pillows. I was in menstruation but could only apply toilet paper as pads.” Mrs. Silence, a victim, remarked on her impression of the Henan rainstorm in July 2021. In fact, according to Tencent News, 302 people in Henan lost their lives in this rainstorm, among which 292 were in Zhengzhou, the provincial capital of Henan.



看见这条真的破防了，昨天月经第一天，再加上长肿瘤身体本来就比较寒，泡在水中行走的四个小时简直痛不欲生更是寸步难行。一起同行的陌生人，不对，是在生死面前虽然互不认识，但是也会挺身而出的人，一直在拉着我、拖着我往前走.....真的很庆幸生在华夏这个充满爱的国家，有这么一群善良可爱的人。#河南暴雨 如果你处在经期#

A Weibo post by a female victim describing her condition

Among the victims, women in menstruation were placed in a particularly vulnerable position. “Before I got rescued, my lower body was left with no choice but to soak in rainwater in the subway, yet that was my first day for this round of menstruation, so I felt extra cold. I guess it was the coldness that caused my cramps and some bacteria in the water must have entered my body,” narrated Mrs. Silence, which was posted on Weibo and garnered more than two thousand attention. Upon seeing such calls for help, many impassioned netizens began reposting healthcare professional advice for women in menstruation who had soaked in rainwater. It was then that some people realized that the social vulnerability of women in natural disasters may be relatively higher than that of men.

“The men-to-women ratio is 1 to 4 in terms of the mortality rate in natural disasters.” In particular, during the 2004 Southeast Asian tsunami, women accounted for as high as 70% of the total dead. In the case of the 2021 Henan rainstorm, 11 women and 3 men lost their lives on the Line 5 subway. Thus, it is apparent that women have a significantly higher mortality rate in natural disasters. “The difference in mortality between genders in natural disasters is the most intuitive manifestation of gender-based social vulnerability,” says Shengjie Yu, a scholar from the College of Humanities and Development Studies at China Agricultural University.

Yet, many people remain utterly ignorant of this reality. According to a survey we conducted a year post-disaster, concerning the public perception of the extent to which natural disasters affect genders, only 48.78%, not even over half, of the respondents suggest that women would be more vulnerable in natural disasters. Even more surprising is that even those who are fervent advocates of gender issues display little awareness of this gender discrepancy in natural disasters.

As our survey demonstrates, on a scale of 1 to 5, representing the amount of attention paid to gender issues from least to most, the average response from the mass respondents was at 3.46.

However, when representing the amount of attention paid to the vulnerability of women amid natural disasters, it was a lot lower, at 2.05. But this does not mean that the public is indifferent to this issue. More likely, they lack real-life awareness and information on it.



Rainstorm victims lying on the ground in the temporary shelter (Photo authorized by UU Charity)

with 48.78% suspecting that women would be more vulnerable in natural disasters compared with men, 7.32% choosing men, and 34.15% choosing equal vulnerability.

Biological Discrepancies as the Unavoidable Barrier

“Even if some girls stood on the chairs in the subway, they could not compensate for the differences in height between men and women and were still disadvantaged in the rainstorm,” remarked Mrs. Silence on what she observed in the subway. The height difference underscored here between adult men and women sheds light on the inevitable biological discrepancy between the two genders.



Ruins after the rainstorm (Photo authorized by UU Charity)

Generally, men have greater physical strengths and other biological advantages, such as height and weight, when compared with women. Therefore, in the case of the Henan rainstorm, it would have proven easier for the men to leverage their strength to get hold of some nearby handrails to stabilize themselves during torrential downpours and to push themselves above water to be able to breathe. In contrast, given that women are at a greater physical disadvantage comparatively, natural disasters pose a more challenging situation for women than men.

Lack of Consideration for Women in Relief Supplies

Not only do biological discrepancies pose challenges to women in self-rescuing, but also professional rescues. “After I was rescued and sent to the temporary shelter, I saw charities sending relief supplies to us, containing instant noodles, biscuits, but no menstrual products, and most of the porters were males, so I desperately described my condition and called for help on Weibo for menstrual products,”

Mrs. Silence explained. Indeed, men usually play a more dominant role in post-disaster rescue and relief because the biological strengths and other features of male rescuers make the rescues more labor-efficient. Thus, the special needs of women, especially menstrual care and products, are often neglected.

Given this reality, the “girls-help-girls” mindset should be reiterated to ensure that women’s needs in times of natural disasters are known and met.

Menstrual Stigma as a Barrier to Aid

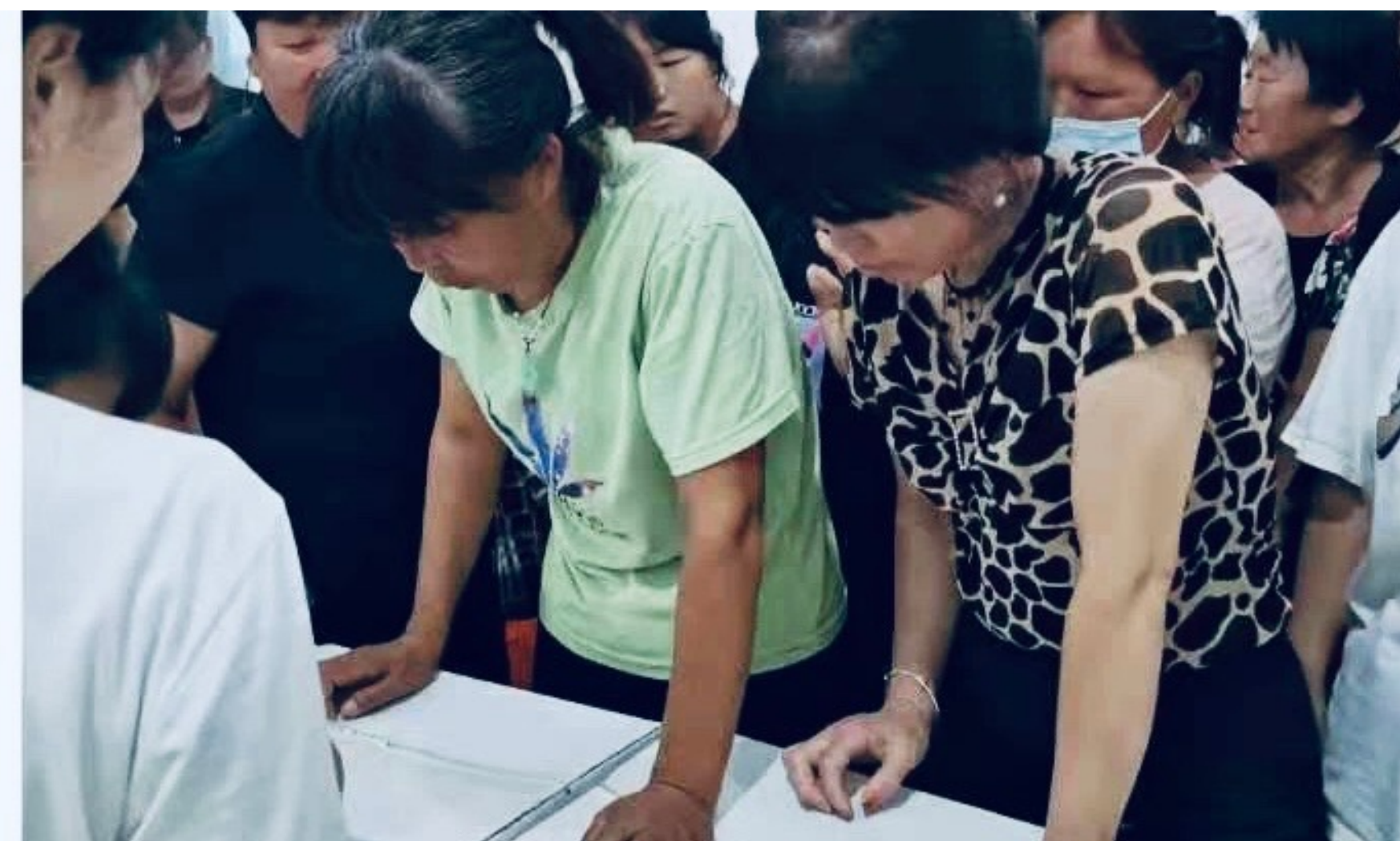
Upon hearing such callings for help from female victims on menstrual care, some non-governmental organizations have been maximizing their potential and efforts to meet the needs. According to Qing You, Founder of UU Charity, a female health-oriented organization, “This is one of the most urgent cases ever! But when we tried to distribute menstrual products for girls at the spot, rarely did we see young girls who suffered the most arriving at the spot, and it was mainly old women claiming to be the relatives of young girls who came to collect the aid.”

round of aid was completed and kept their voice as low as those of flies.”

Menstrual stigma, a broad term for the discrimination faced by people who menstruate, largely penetrates the minds of many girls even in this contemporary era, rendering them shy to talk about menstruation and unsure how to ask for help. Yet, the case in the Henan rainstorm is but a mere glimpse into the issue, given the larger day-to-day context. Such occurrences indicate the urgent need for comprehensive sex education in society, so that both boys and girls can break the stigma around menstruation, so that girls and women feel comfortable speaking up on this topic, and so that future aid in natural disasters may also consider the just as important needs of women.

A Beam of Light Into the Future

The social vulnerability of women in natural disasters, as made visible by the Henan rainstorm, remains a burgeoning topic in Chinese society. Acknowledging the fact that the vulnerability of women in natural disasters can come from the lack of public awareness, biological differences between genders, a lack of consideration for women in relief supplies, and women’s uneasiness to ask for help in public when it comes to menstruation, the public respondents of our survey indicated willingness to help solve this deep-seated gender-based issue, with 75.61% willing to repost educational content promoting the issue on social media, 52.44% eager to donate money, and 23.17% willing to join the frontlines for future rescue operations. “To tackle nearly every natural disaster,” says Professor Sun from Hunan Women’s University, “education empowerment is needed to mitigate the gender-based social vulnerability in the long run.” “People need not contribute effectively using absolute smartness or strengths,” commented Qing You,

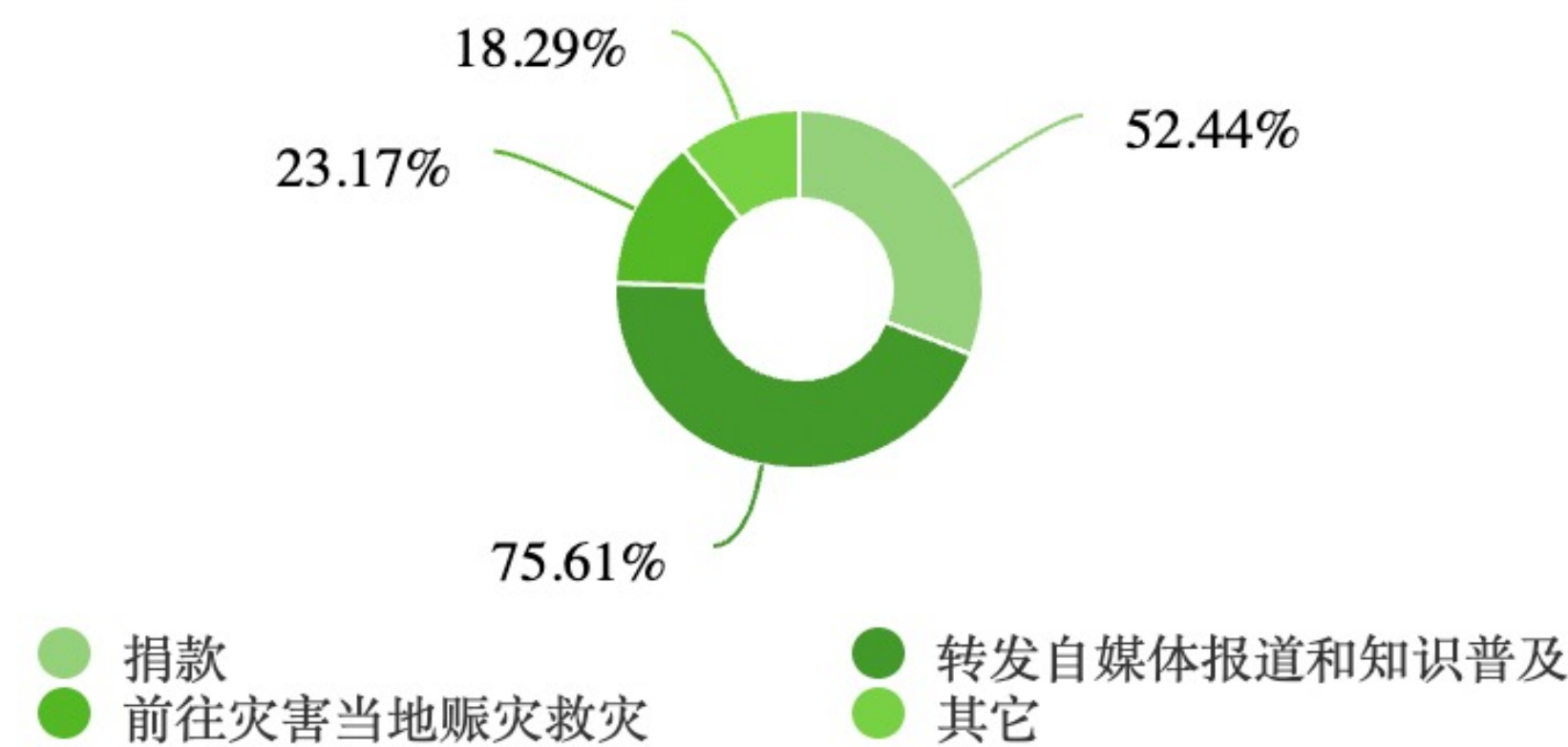


Middle-aged women collecting menstrual products for their young daughters or relatives (Photo authorized by UU Charity)

Lack of Awareness among the Public

The Federal Emergency Management Agency from the U.S. (FEMA) defines social vulnerability as the susceptibility of social groups to the adverse impacts of stressors and shocks, including natural hazards, and more. According to the remark from Hannie Meesters, an officer from The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in 2010,

After all, 45.12% of the respondents indicated uncertainty regarding the question of who would be more vulnerable - a man or a woman - when it comes to natural disasters. After a description of the real-life scene had been provided, where a man and a woman are both stuck in a subway soaked in rainwater, the percentage of the respondents who indicated unsureness decreased to 9.76%,



Survey result on how the public prefer to assist

Young girls appear to be too shy to directly express their need for menstrual products in public. “I felt so relieved upon knowing that Qing You and her charity was aiding us with menstrual products,” Mrs. Silence uttered with a unconcealable pleasure, “but unlike me, many other girls considered it embarrassing if they go collect the products with many males around, so they sneaked there after the first

“and instead, they need to have insights and a sense of love and care that infiltrate the victims with hope. If more people join and support us in achieving this, enabling girls in predicaments to be seen gently and to be helped kindly, we will certainly step into a brighter future with not just a beam of light, but a ray as powerful as the sun’s.”