

Rebuilding Lives: Investigating the Consequences of the 2015 Earthquake on Family Dynamics and Resilience

Dipesh Kumar Ghimire

Assistant Professor of Sociology, Central Department of Sociology, TU, Nepal

Email: dipesh.ghimire@cdso.tu.edu.np or dipesh.ghimire33@gmail.com

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Abstract

Nepal, being among the world's most disaster-prone countries, witnesses numerous fatalities resulting from calamities each year. The devastating earthquake of 2015 in Nepal claimed the lives of 8,848 individuals, left 22,307 injured, and caused the collapse of 868,042 homes. This research paper aims at delving into the repercussions of the earthquake on change in the family dynamics in Nepal. Unger and Douglas (1980) assert that families play a crucial role in facilitating adaptation to stress, providing emotional and marital support through formal and informal channels during and after disaster events. This study endeavors to ascertain the impact of the 2015 earthquake on the change in dynamics of family relationships and structures.

Key Words: Rebuilding Lives, Disaster, Earthquake, Resilience, Family Dynamics

Introduction

Nepal is one of the world's 20 most disaster-prone countries (CME-DHMA, 2015). Every year in Nepal hundreds of people die from natural hazards. Ever since the first recorded earthquake of 1255 AD that killed one-third of the population of the Kathmandu Valley, the last great earthquake (of magnitude 8.4) in 1934 AD resulted in more than 10,000 deaths in the Kathmandu Valley. Most of the infrastructures and major heritage sites had to be rebuilt. There have since been earthquakes causing severe human and physical loss in 1980, 1988 and 2011 (MoH, 2073 B.S.).

On Saturday, 25 April 2015 at 11:56 local time, a 7.6 magnitude earthquake as recorded by Nepal's National Seismological Centre (NSC), struck Barpak in Gorkha district in Nepal. 8,848 people were dead, 22,307 got injured with 868,042 houses being collapsed due to the great earthquake (NPC, 2015). It is estimated that the lives of eight million people, almost one-third of the population of Nepal, have been impacted by the earthquake. Thirty-one of the country's 75 districts had been affected, out of which 14 were declared 'crisis-hit' (NPC, 2015). The destruction was widespread covering private and public buildings, heritage, schools and health posts, road ways, bridges, water supply system, and hydropower.

The subsistence-based households are badly affected in the rural areas by earthquake. Not only the earthquake destroyed physical infrastructures, it affected the family structure and relationships. Basically, the joint families in the rural areas have been split into nuclear

families. The earthquake has been proven as the responsible factor for such family dynamics. This article is based on the effects of 2015 devastating earthquake on families of Nepalese society.

The primary aim of this study was to investigate the influence of post-disaster government policies on family dynamics in Nepal. To accomplish this, I gathered qualitative data through fieldwork, employing an exploratory qualitative approach. The primary data were procured through a combination of interviews, observations, and Key Informants Interviews (KIIs). In addition, I incorporated secondary data from various sources, including journals, books, government documents, and newspapers.

In this study, we sought to gather the necessary information to address the research question posed. To do so, data were systematically collected from individuals residing in the disaster-affected region of Sanichaur¹, located within Ramechhap District. To facilitate data collection in an organized manner, a comprehensive checklist was meticulously prepared for use during fieldwork. This checklist served as a valuable tool in capturing a wide range of relevant information.

Following data collection, a rigorous qualitative analysis was conducted to interpret and describe the insights derived from the gathered qualitative information. This analysis provided a deeper understanding of the factors at play within the study area and contributed to addressing the research question in a meaningful way.

Understanding Disaster and Family

Disaster is a socially disruptive event which causes physical and social harm (Perrow, 1984). Disaster is such an event which incurs physical damage and losses and/or disruption of their routine functioning. Both the causes and the effects of these events are related to the social structures and processes of societies or their subunits. Disaster can be viewed as being created by hazardous fleeting events like earthquake, hurricane that disrupts everyday routines (Davies, 2002). Quarantelli (2005) defines disaster as a social phenomenon. According to him disaster is socially constructed and rooted in the social structure of the community affected by a natural hazard. Similarly, Simmel (1908) argues that disaster is an event that can be designated in time and space which have impacts on social units. The social units enact responses that are related to these impacts.

The social scientists argue that disaster is defined by human beings not by nature, not every windstorm, earth-tremors or rush of water is catastrophe, if there are no any serious injuries or death with other serious losses (Carr, 1932). Calamities are natural but disaster are social (Mishra, 2015). Disaster that results in a huge loss of life, assets and livelihood are instead socially created.

¹ According to the Nepal Government's policy, it is called as irregularity if one family receives the relief or grant of same kind more than once. For this, name of research field has been changed in this report for preserving privacy of that site.

Historically, ideas about disasters have gone through three important phases. Traditionally, catastrophes were attributed to the supernatural. They were characterized as 'Acts of God'. The rise of Enlightenment secularism led to an important shift in the way society conceptualized disasters. The development of science as the new source of knowledge altered people's perception of disaster. They were increasingly seen as 'Acts of Nature'. In recent times, the view that disasters are caused by 'Acts of Nature' has been gradually, displaced by the idea that they resulted from the 'Acts of Human (Quarantelli 2001, pp 3-4).

Disaster can be defined as the events that cause the loss of many lives and property that has been owned by the human beings in whom the cause may be itself human or the nature. Social scientists say that disaster is defined by human beings not by nature. For example, natural calamities like earthquake, landslide, volcanic eruption, flood etc. can occur in nature frequently but unless it affects the human being it cannot be called disaster. Although events such as hurricane, flood and earthquake serve as trigger for disaster, disaster themselves originate in social conditions and processes that may be far removed from events themselves, such as deforestation, environmental degradation, factors that encourage settlements in hazardous areas, poverty and other forms of social inequality, low capacity for self-help among subgroup within population and failure in physical and social protective systems (Blaikie et. al, 1994).

The family has been often regarded as the cornerstone of a society. There are various forms of family-- the universal basis of all human societies. The family has been seen as a universal social institution, as an inevitable part of human society (Haralambos 2010). In a study entitled social structure, Murdock (1949) has examined the institution of the family in a wide range of societies. The family is a social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship and one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults (Murdock, 1949).

The family is the basic unit of social organization and it is difficult to imagine how human society could function without it. The family has been seen as a universal social institution; an inevitable part of human society. According to Burgess and Lock (1945), the family is a group of persons united by ties of marriage, blood or adoption constituting a single household interacting with each other in their respective social role of husband and wife, mother and father, brother and sister creating a common culture.

Ogburn and Nimkoff (1940) say that family is a more or less durable association of husband and wife with or without child or of a man or woman alone with children. According to Maclver and Page (1962) family is a group defined by sex relationships sufficiently precise and enduring to provide for the procreation and upbringing of children. They also describe family as a group of persons whose relations to one another are based upon consanguinity and who are therefore kin to one another. Malinowski (1913) argues that the family is the institution within which the cultural traditions of a society are handed over to a newer generation.

The family is one of the few social structures which exist in all cultures and societies. It is a universal group which represents cultural continuity and tradition, a group which is said to fulfill important social functions such as introduction through birth and socialization of new members into society. There are different types of family in the universe.

The small family unit, often referred to as the nuclear family, typically consists of two parents residing with their biological children under one roof. However, it's important to acknowledge that the definition of a nuclear family can sometimes be nuanced. In some cases, a nuclear family might encompass more members than a traditional joint family, especially when a couple has a larger number of offspring, resulting in a household with, for instance, six children, which would total eight members. Conversely, one can also encounter joint families with fewer members than this larger nuclear family configuration.

As sociologists, it is beneficial to employ a more precise differentiation, taking into account primary and secondary/tertiary kinship ties. In this context, we can categorize a nuclear family as one consisting solely of primary kin, while a joint family incorporates both primary and secondary/tertiary kin. This distinction offers a clearer understanding of family structures and dynamics.

In practice, nuclear families are often prevalent in urban areas, where households tend to be smaller and more nuclear in nature. On the other hand, joint families are more commonly observed in rural settings, where extended family members such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins frequently share the same household. It's worth noting that in traditional societies, the majority of individuals are affiliated with joint families due to the strong emphasis on extended kinship networks.

Impact of disaster in family relation

Disasters create complex changes in interpersonal dynamics within family members. There is strong consensus that post disaster family functioning is an important factor explaining variability in the psychological distress of their members. When disasters impact entire families, coping becomes a fundamentally collective process. One aspect of family functioning that may interfere with adjustment is unwillingness to share feelings and reactions about the disaster (Gil-Rivas et al., 2010).

Disasters also may lead to change in dynamics and structure within the family. Cohan and Cole (2002) examined changes in various social circumstances in the state of South Carolina, USA during a period that encompassed Hurricane Hugo.

Similarly, Hutchins & Norris (1989) identified that the exposed survivors were more likely to report a new conflict with extended family than were non exposed survivors. Family conflicts and negative atmosphere have been related to higher levels child and adolescent disaster survivors (Bokszczanin, Green et al., 1991; Roussos et al., 2005; Tuicomepee & Romano, 2008; Wasserstein & La Greca, 1998).

Study Area

Ramechhap was among the most affected districts by earthquake 2015. According to the Population Census 2011, there are 43,883 households in the District with a total population of 202,646 (CBS, 2012). According to the 2011 Nepal census, Ramechhap Municipality had a population of 28,612 in 6,126 individual households (CBS, 2012). 99 percent houses were destroyed due to earthquake 2015 in Ramechhap. Regarding the data in Sanichaur, a total of 13 people were injured, 1 child died with 57 houses being destroyed.

Sanichaur is a rural place with basic transportation facility. Majority of population is based on agricultural livelihood. According to 2011 census, there were 67 households in this village among which 17 joint families before earthquake were randomly selected for this study. 11 households are from Brahmin community, 4 from Janajati (ethnic group) and 2 from Dalit community. During the study, one third gender was found. Before earthquake there were 14 male and 3 female head of households. The local teachers and representatives of political parties were interviewed and their views on effect of earthquake on family structures have been included in this report.

The field visit was carried out in Sanichaur village in May and June of 2019. The effects of earthquake on families discussed in this report are basically based on primary data. The case study, recollection, narrative and observational approach have been adopted for analyzing and proving the effects of earthquake on families ethnographically. Similarly, many secondary data have been collected as supporting facts.

At least three generations from the same households had same kitchen before the earthquake. Majority of people are literate because there is secondary school in the village and almost all people attended school. Almost all the people had agricultural livelihood, although some of them are government employees. Among 17 households, 9 houses have at least one person in government job. The job included Nepal Police, Nepal Army, teacher and government officials. Of the total population in the study households, 19 youth were out to the village for study purpose. Only 2 people had been to foreign countries in search of employment.

Breaking the Family: Joint to Nuclear

There was the practice of joint family system in Sanichaur village. Most of the households constituted the three generation. The government of Nepal announced a relief grant of 2 lakh (100 thousand is called one lakh) rupees to each household with their houses being destroyed in the earthquake. This was the provision of the Operational Procedure 2073. Later, the amount was increased to 3 lakh rupees. This was to be distributed once for each household whose house was completely destroyed. It was also stated in the directives that the household with multiple houses would not get grant if one of their houses was not destroyed. This provision was highly politicized later. The provision was amended and the all-party mechanism could prepare name list with their recommendation and then the grant was distributed. All the families in Sanichaur separated for receiving the grant amount.

Those who have migrated to the cities have built houses back in their village. In the two households under study, it was found that the husband and wife received two grants by getting divorced. The number of households increased from 17 to 43 after the earthquake. The numbers of head of the family before and after earthquake are enlisted in the table 1 below:

Table 1: The male and female head of the household numbers in Sanichaur before and after the 2015 earthquake

Head of household before 2015 earthquake			Head of household after 2015 earthquake		
Female	Male	Third gender	Female	Male	Third gender
3	14	0	13	29	1

Source: Field Study 2019

The family structure of Sanichaur village has changed drastically after the earthquake. Of the 17 households, 13 households were joint families. Only 3 households were nuclear families. They shared the common kitchen and had common lawns and yards. They worked collectively at the farm, kept income in one basket and the head of household managed their expenditure collectively. Of the 13 joint families 13 male children had been to the district headquarter, Kathmandu or other places for study and employment. They shared land and other properties with family members and did not have separate houses in the village.

While analyzing data from 2058 B.S. to 2076 B.S. it seems that the number of households has increased dramatically. The emigrants have increased significantly but there is very less number of immigrants in the village. Table 2 below shows the population of the households under study in different points of time as stated.

Table 2: Comparative household numbers and population in Sanichaur

S.N.	Description	2058 B.S.	2068 B.S.	2076 B.S.
1	Number of households	7	14	43
2	Total population	45	66	77

Source: Population Census and Field Study 2019

There were only 7 households in 2058 which increased to 14 after 10 years. The 14 households have increased to 17 after two years in 2070. But this number increased to 43 after only two years. The household number has increased dramatically but the population has not increased in the similar ratio. The total population was 45 in 2058 and this increased to only 77 in twenty years.

Table 3: Detail of age wise total population in Sanichaur

S.N.	Age group	Number	
		Male	Female
1	Below 5 years	3	4
2	5-15 years	4	6
3	15-40 years	7	9
4	40-60 years	12	13
5	Above 60 years	9	10
Total		35	42

Source: Field study 2019

The table 3 above clarifies the age-wise distribution of population in which age group 40-60 years has greatest number followed by age group above 60 years.

Ramechhap is one of the 14 crisis hit districts in 2015. The earthquake had done great destruction in this district. Majority of houses had been destroyed. The table below is the list of physical destruction by earthquake in the village:

Table 4: List of houses destroyed by 2015 earthquake in Sanichaur

S.N.	Description	Total houses	Type of destruction with number		
			Minor destruction	Total destruction	Safe
1	House	19	4	15	0
2	Barn	21	7	13	1
Total		40	11	28	1

Source: Field study 2019

The table clarifies the total number of houses before the earthquake.

Expectation of relief and fragmentation of family

The Government of Nepal (GoN) made a decision of distributing an amount of 15 thousand rupees to each largely affected family right after the earthquake. The local government entities lacked the peoples' representatives at that time and thus all-party mechanisms were established who would recommend people for getting that relief amount. The all-party mechanisms went house to house to collect list of people and made recommendation. People in the village believed that the Government would distribute the grant for house reconstruction on the basis of the same list. Thus people requested the party cadres whom they were close to for enlisting their name as staying separately at home. People gave them false information that they were living separately under the same roof with different kitchen and they forced them to recommend for house grant. A local in the village says:

We are three brothers staying together with our parents and our children in the same house before earthquake. When the Government announced about the house grant, we filled the separate information and showed that we have 4 households altogether. All of our four households received house grants separately. (Based on talk held on May 15, 2019)

During the earthquake, the local government bodies lacked the peoples' representatives. Thus the initial data collection was done by forming the all-party mechanisms. The party representatives made recommendations to those who were affiliated to their parties or who were near to them. In doing so they recommended grants for almost all members of family as them being separate households. A single family before earthquake changed to 4 different households. A local teacher says:

The all-party mechanisms falsely made recommendations for the families who supported their party. All members were enlisted as a different household just for receiving the grant. (Based on talk held on May 18 2020)

The Government of Nepal (GoN) announced an opportunity to enlist names that were initially missing from the first list. During this phase, several couples registered their names separately, claiming that they had already obtained a divorce. However, it should be noted that it remains uncertain whether the Village Development Committee (VDC) has the authority to issue divorce certificates.

In our study of 17 households, we identified a concerning trend where two households had fraudulently received grants from the government. These households consisted of husbands and wives who falsely reported being divorced. During our field study, we encountered a person who claimed to be a divorcee, but upon further investigation, it was revealed that they were still married. The husband had fabricated a document to show their divorce solely for the purpose of receiving government grants. Consequently, they received separate grant amounts and constructed two houses side by side, although they continued to live together as a married couple. A divorcee found during field study said:

We are not divorced in real. My husband made a document showing our divorce just to receive the grant from the Government. We received the grant amount separately and built the two houses joining together. But we live together. (Based on talk on May 19, 2019)

The earthquake has brought change on the ownership over land. According to the law of Nepal, only sons have right towards parents' properties. There is no provision of providing this to daughters. Thus there is practice in the rural areas of Nepal for unmarried daughter to stay together with their parents or brothers and rely on everything with them. But after earthquake the ownership of daughters over land have been established. Out of the 14 households included in our study, we found that in 7 of these households, parents had legally transferred a portion of their property to their daughters in order to qualify for the government grant. One parent, who had transferred property to their daughter and received the grant on her behalf, shared the following perspective:

My daughter is 19 years old and currently unmarried. When the government announced the grant program, I took the necessary steps to legally transfer a portion of our property to her name. This legal documentation allowed us to apply for and receive the grant on her behalf as well. (Based on talk held on May 19, 2019).

Role of Government Policy

The GoN has established National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) on December 25, 2015. It is the legally mandated agency for managing the earthquake recovery and reconstruction in Nepal. NRA provides strategic guidance to identify and address to the priorities for recovery and reconstruction, taking into account both urgent needs as well as those of a medium- to long-term nature. The operational procedure of reconstruction of earthquake destroyed private houses 2073 prepared by NRA has made some provisions for relief packages distribution to the earthquake affected people. According to this, the households who have passed their legal separation from respective District Land Revenue Office before 2072, Baisakh would only receive the grants separately. The provisions of the directives were later amended time and again.

In the meantime, the NRA formed a policy of providing grant amount to those possessing their own land. Also, the grant was for reconstruction of destroyed houses only. Though, bounded by political pressure and other unseen reasons NRA made an amendment to this provision. It accepted all the recommendations of the all-party mechanisms. Thus, families with one or more members went on being formed.

Conclusion

The subsistence-based households are badly affected in the rural areas by earthquake. Similarly, the earthquake not only destroyed physical structures, but also family structures and relationships. The inquiry into whether family structure and relationships disintegrate involuntarily or voluntarily presents a web of intricate considerations. Throughout our research, we have illuminated the nuanced nature of this phenomenon. It is evident that families grappling with economic hardships and striving to retain control over their resources often grapple with the imperative of making profound and difficult choices. In parallel, we have also uncovered instances where families consciously opt for separation as a strategic means to access relief grants or governmental support, primarily motivated by the compelling urgency that arises during times of crisis. As the study has revealed, the genesis of family separations is not monolithic; rather, it is characterized by a rich tapestry of intertwined involuntary and voluntary factors. In essence, this issue manifests as a multifaceted puzzle, one that resists simplification and necessitates a nuanced understanding that acknowledges its complexity.

Basically the rural joint families have been fragmented into nuclear families. Donald and Douglas (1980) highlight the critical role that family plays in facilitating adaptation to stress, providing emotional and marital support through formal and informal means, especially during and after a disaster. Traditionally, families around the world tend to draw closer together to endure the hardships of a disaster, relying on their familial bonds for support and resilience. However, it is noteworthy that the situation in Nepal appears to be heading in the opposite direction. In the aftermath of the earthquake, Nepali society seems to be moving against this global trend. Instead of families coming together, many have experienced fragmentation, with the transformation of joint families into nuclear ones. This shift prompts us to question whether Nepali society is indeed heading in the

opposite current, as compared to the more common global pattern of families drawing closer during times of disaster.

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