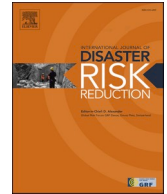




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Women and children first? An analysis of gender roles in the rescue of people following the 2011 Lorca earthquake

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ABSTRACT

Catastrophes like earthquakes, hurricanes and tsunamis, have a devastating effect which extends beyond personal or material losses and also affect social order. At the same time, there is an increasing amount of scientific evidence demonstrating the impact of disasters on gender relations. This article aims to investigate an issue that to date has not been examined in the Spanish context, namely the gender roles undertaken by men and women in the rescue of people after a catastrophe has occurred. To this end, the discourse from four focus groups of people who experienced the 2011 earthquake in Lorca (Spain) has been analysed. The focus groups were recorded, transcribed and codified with the MAXQDA program and afterwards an interpretative analysis was carried out.

The results of this study demonstrate that, although, in principle, the danger should be the same, the lived experiences and reactions of men and women faced with a catastrophic event are often different. Men appear as the principal protagonists of the rescue phase and their way of rescuing as the norm. Despite the fact that women also play an active role in saving people, their protective actions are less visible. In part this is because women do not limit their actions to physical rescue, but also make suggestions and recommendations aimed at helping people around them and often remain with those who are rescued. These findings point to the need to broaden the notion of what rescue involves through incorporating the specific actions of women identified.

1. Introduction

Research into socio-environmental disasters frequently considers that events such as earthquakes, floods and pandemics affect all aspects of a population equally, without taking into account the gender perspective. However, and particularly since the 1990s, the results of scientific studies have demonstrated that the impact of catastrophes, including those that involve natural hazards, is not neutral from the point of view of gender relations [1–4]. More recent research has begun to consider not only the increased vulnerability women experience during and post-catastrophe and the gender inequality inherent to the various dimensions and phases of a disaster, but attention has also focused on the active role that they may play [5,6]. As such, increasing attention is being paid to women's leadership, focusing on their agency and avoiding relegating them to the role of passive victims in disaster situations [7,8]. The feminist intersectional approach has also been incorporated into studies of gender and disasters, highlighting the impact of gender in combination with other variables such as social class [9,10], age [11], disability [12] and/or ethnicity [13,14]. The literature has also thrown a spotlight on the role of men and masculinities in disaster contexts [15–18], as well as that of people from the LGBTQI

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community [19–21], thus widening the concept of gender with respect to disasters [22,23].

One area of study of particular relevance for research into gender and disasters is the emergency response phase and, in particular, the rescue of individuals in the immediate aftermath. In the period immediately after a catastrophe, an infinite number of urgent decisions need to be taken into consideration; which involve, among many other things, prioritising actions, coordinating efforts, helping in the search for people and alleviating the suffering of and caring for survivors. Men and women do not necessarily deal with such tasks in the same way, and for this reason it is important to analyse how traditional gender roles play out in the immediate wake of a catastrophe.

Gender roles have been widely analysed in the literature from a variety of perspectives, including those that consider them to be socially constructed and related to gender inequality [24]. Such approaches view gender roles as fundamental to understanding people's social status, as well as their identity, their responsibilities and/or the privileges derived from their position and the rules governing their interactions, in terms of gender. The structural nature of gender roles does not, however, ignore the fact that they are, at the same time, dynamic and changeable depending on the model of society and/or time in history being studied. The disaster context is an especially interesting scenario within which to observe the double dimension of, on one side, the reproduction of gender roles and, on the other, their alteration on the basis of the rupture of everyday life that the catastrophe brings about. Studies of how gender roles operate during the emergency that follows a disaster, in particular with respect to the rescue of individuals, demonstrate the prominence of men's leadership in this phase. This can be understood as being a result of men's increased participation, both as professional workers and volunteers, in institutions in charge of rescue operations, which are often strongly masculinised, and, in consequence, expose how traditional gender roles continue to be reproduced [15,16,25,26]. However, there are also some studies that demonstrate women's capacity for agency in this phase and point to a certain degree of alteration of traditional roles. The same studies reveal that most of these women act from a position that is not one of authority [3–5,27].

In this article, our aim is to examine the similarities and differences in the gender roles performed by the men and women affected by a catastrophe, namely, the earthquake that occurred on May 11, 2011, in Lorca, an area of the autonomous community of Murcia (Spain) and a part of the world where no research of this kind exists. Focusing on rescue actions carried out by the inhabitants, i.e., beyond those carried out by technical and professional staff from organised bodies, can lead us to a better understanding of the response from civic society. Particularly the rescue efforts of women, who usually participate to a lesser extent in the organisations involved in emergencies and whose actions may not tailor themselves to the hegemonic masculine model. In the next section the principal research findings in this respect are presented.

2. Gender roles and the rescue of people in the context of socio-environmental disasters

This work is framed within the theoretical perspective of gender in disasters, specifically through the analysis of the gender roles operating after a disaster in the phase of rescuing people. Gender roles have been studied in terms of how men and women deal with risk, evacuation and rescue efforts, all of which may impact on the individual's own chance of survival following the catastrophe [2,28, 29].

The literature pertaining to this issue demonstrates the influence of hegemonic masculinities when dealing with an emergency [16, 17,26,30]. Various studies indicate that men and women have different ways of evaluating danger and taking risks [28]. In fact, men assume more risk in terms of evacuation (that is, leaving the danger zone), being the last to abandon their homes, and even at times contravening the orders of the authorities [31]. A large part of the research on the impact of masculinities in catastrophe contexts deals with rescue operations carried out by civil emergency services and military personnel, institutions which are all highly masculinised [32,33], as well as volunteers that work with such organisations, for example in fighting forest fires, as reported by Tyler and Fairbrother [15,30] and Parkinson and Duncan in Australia [26]. The findings of these researchers are in line with a social imaginary that is widely disseminated through the media, that equates such rescue actions with skills and capacities that are traditionally considered to be masculine, such as the use of strength and bravery [34–37]. Men, it has also been shown, act from a position of social authority, adopting social roles that not only refer to the simple physical act of rescuing people in danger, but also in terms of decision making in the immediate aftermath of an emergency [5,15,26,30].

Research into the role of women in the phase of rescuing people has raised important issues. Analysing the participation of women in the emergency phase following a catastrophe subverts the notion that women are mere passive victims of disasters [2,4,27]. Indeed, as has been demonstrated in studies conducted in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and India during the tsunami that hit South-East Asia in 2004, it was principally women who undertook the evacuation and psychological support of family members in the emergency rescue period [5,38–40]. Women taking active roles in evacuation and rescue has also been documented in other contexts; for example, the earthquakes in Wenchuan (China) in 2008 and in Pohang (South Korea) in 2017 [6,7]. In the latter, women used their social networks and technology to organize and carry out collective actions to rescue people, mainly children, who were potentially in situations of vulnerability.

Some authors, such as Drolet et al. [41], point out that catastrophes can become an opportunity to redress gender disparities, specifically because of this active role women develop collectively, and which allows them to augment their social and relationship capital. However, the clear link between women's actions in these situations and their traditional reproductive and care roles cannot be ignored. Nor can the fact that the social consequences of these gender roles may be dramatic since social obligation to take care of children and other family members may end up affecting women's survival prospects when they put those lives ahead of their own [5, 38,39]. In addition, despite the women's agency that these processes clearly demonstrate, their rescue actions do not receive the same social consideration as men's [6,31] and neither is it translated into greater participation in decision making in terms of the management of the catastrophe [29,42]. This undervaluation is also evident when women participate in tasks which are traditionally

viewed as masculine, such as rescue and clearing rubble from inside buildings or from the streets, as was seen in Nicaragua and El Salvador after hurricane Mitch in 1998 [31,43]. While undertaking such masculine tasks bestows greater social visibility on their actions, such work is generally perceived as being secondary or complementary to that carried out by men, which is considered essential to deal with the catastrophe [6,29].

Finally, following a disaster, not only the results of people's actions remain, but also the emotions they experienced at the time and afterwards. In this sense, the literature shows that men and women experience similar feelings, namely fear, unease, worry and anxiety about loved ones [17,18,44]. However, they also point out that women tend to express their emotions more easily, while men either minimise their expression, or completely negate it [45,46], this resulting in an additional emotional cost to them [47]. The emergency also allows people to develop a sense of place, a special link with the territory and the community, particularly in the case of men [17,18,36]. These elements provide a valuable starting point and framework from which to conduct the empirical analysis on which this article is based, and this is explained in the next section.

3. Method

This article seeks to ascertain the actions undertaken by men and by women in the immediate aftermath of a catastrophe, namely in the phase of rescuing people. The aim is to observe whether women and men behave in line with traditional gender roles or whether, in the context of a disaster, such roles are modified or transformed in some way. To do this, a qualitative methodology was employed, which consisted of four focus groups of people affected by the earthquake in Lorca (Murcia- Spain) on May 11, 2011. The locality of Lorca is in the autonomous region of Murcia, in the southeast of Spain. On Wednesday May 11, 2011 the area suffered three earthquakes: the main one, measuring 5.1 MW at 18:47 local time, followed by various aftershocks. On the basis of the damage caused and impact on people, it is categorized as an event of moderate intensity (VII on the XII-point European Macroseismic Scale), making it the most destructive in Spain in recent decades. The earthquake resulted in nine deaths –four women and five men–, more than 300 people injured and over 19,000 people evacuated out of a total population of around 60,000. In addition, 80% of the buildings in the town were damaged and over 1100 homes had to be demolished [48].

The focus group technique has not been used often in research into gender and disasters, although it is particularly appropriate when the object of study is novel and seeks to replicate the symbolic universe of the social group of reference, as is the case here [49]. The focus groups were deliberately designed to take into account sex-gender and social position to address the need for homogeneity in

Table 1
Composition of focus groups.

Focus group	Women, low to medium socioeconomic level	Men, low to medium socioeconomic level	Women, medium to high socioeconomic level	Men, medium to high socioeconomic level
Duration	1 h 47	1 h 58	1 h 40	1 h 34
Number of participants	10	7	5	6
Educational level	Low	5 Low	4 Low	1 Low
	Medium	1 Medium	2 Medium	1 Medium
	High	4 High	1 High	3 High
Income	Low	4 Low	1 Low	– Low
	Medium	6 Medium	5 Medium	3 Medium
	High	– High	– High	2 High
Average annual household income	14,250€	25,692€	30,600€	36,996€
Age range	29–79	29–65	40–65	27–64
Marital status	Has a partner	9 Has a partner	4 Has a partner	4 Has a partner
	Divorced	– Divorced	– Divorced	1 Divorced
	Single	1 Single	2 Single	– Single
	Widow	– Widower	1 Widow	– Widower
Children	Yes	8 Yes	4 Yes	4 Yes
	No	2 No	3 No	1 No
Living arrangements	Alone	1 Alone	1 Alone	1 Alone
	With children	– With children	1 With children	– With children
	With partner	5 With partner	3 With partner	4 With partner
	With partner and children	4 With partner and children	1 With partner and children	– With partner and children
	Other	– Other	1 Other	– Other
Tenure with respect to home	Owner	7 Owner	4 Owner	3 Owner
	Long term rental	– Long term rental	2 Long term rental	2 Long term rental
	Temporary accommodation	3 Temporary accommodation	– Temporary accommodation	– Temporary accommodation
	Owned by another family member	– Owned by another family member	1 Owned by another family member	– Owned by another family member
Employment situation	Employed	5 Employed	6 Employed	3 Employed
	Unemployed	3 Unemployed	1 Unemployed	– Unemployed
	Retired	2 Retired	– Retired	– Retired
	Housekeeper	– Housekeeper	– Housekeeper	2 Housekeeper

Source: Based on sociodemographic data from questionnaires completed by participants at the end of each focus group session.

facilitating the flow of conversation. To this end, two of the focus groups were comprised of women and the other two of men because, as stated in other works, we wanted to ensure that conversation was not conditioned by the presence and/or discourse of the opposite sex-gender [50]. Further to this, two of the groups (one of men and one of women) comprised participants from a medium to high socioeconomic level, meaning that they had means of their own to deal with the impact of the catastrophe. The other two groups were made up of people with a low to medium socioeconomic level, and these were more seriously affected by the earthquake. On the other hand, in each of the focus groups we sought to have a certain heterogeneity with respect to age, educational level, employment situation, income, home ownership, and family circumstances in order that, in line with the requirements of the focus group method, as many different potential perspectives as possible were likely to be expressed [49]. A total of 28 people participated in the focus groups, and Table 1 summarises their sociodemographic characteristics.

The selection of the participants for the focus groups was made following the snowball technique. The involvement of a specialised agency with links to the area was key in the recruitment of people willing to participate in the focus groups. They had numerous personal contacts that they called to ask if they knew anyone meeting the socioeconomic criteria mentioned above. Contacted individuals then put the agency in touch with other people, and in this way a purposive sample was achieved that had the number of participants and diversity necessary to guarantee the validity of each focus group.

The focus groups themselves were conducted following the usual phases employed in this method, namely following a topic guide listing themes felt appropriate to stimulating discussion. The moderator firstly made a presentation about the research and how focus groups work, and also asked for permission to record the session after explaining how anonymity was to be ensured and all individuals had given their informed consent to participate in the research. After this the moderator began the discussion using the first of the prompts, which aimed to elicit people's experience of the 2011 earthquake itself. As each focus group developed the moderator guided people to talk about their experiences in the post-disaster period and each session ended with an opportunity for the participants to reflect on what they had learned from the whole experience, before the moderator thanked everyone for their contributions and brought the session to a close. After each focus group, participants completed a questionnaire relating to their personal sociodemographic circumstances, while the moderator completed a form that compiled details and impressions of how the focus group had gone, any difficulties that had occurred and any points that should be kept in mind for the next one. The discussion within each focus group was very fluent and the moderators hardly had to intervene to keep it on course.

The recordings from the focus groups were transcribed and encoded using the MAXQDA program. The coding and subsequent analysis was carried out by a team of researchers working together in the same session, rather than individually, as is usually the case in the analysis of qualitative data. This procedure, which has been used on other occasions, is particularly suited in comparative qualitative research such as this work and also because the consensus provided by a team of researchers validates the final results obtained [51]. The coding was carried out by a group of three researchers from the GENDER project and was then validated by another two team members working together, and a high degree of agreement was achieved. After this, an interpretative analysis of each focus group was made, also by the research team, following the principles of Grounded Theory [52,53]. This inductive approach, which allows theories to be developed based on fieldwork data and in line with the social constructivism paradigm, was especially useful in this case, as it starts from the premise that through their interactions those who experience a given phenomenon or social process will attribute shared meaning to what has happened.

To close this methodological section, we would like to refer to certain problems we encountered when carrying out the fieldwork and the ethical issues we took into account to address them. Firstly, recruitment to the focus groups was not easy. On the one hand, most of the people contacted did not wish to participate in the project as they did not want to re-live the catastrophe. On the other hand, although we actively sought to include them, we were not able to involve people from the migrant community. To a large extent, this was because, even though before the earthquake almost 20% of the population of Lorca was migrant, principally from Latin-America and North Africa, many of them ended up leaving the locality after the catastrophe. Despite having only conducted four focus groups because of the difficulties mentioned above, the data saturation point was reached, in line with research showing that 90% of all the themes identified using this technique appear when three to six groups are employed [54].

Another issue we had to deal with was that some of the people in the focus groups knew each other. As a result, we were particularly conscious of the confidentiality required both in terms of those who participated in the research as well as in the dissemination of our findings. In addition to explaining to participants at the start of each focus group the need for and parameters of confidentiality and the signing of informed consent forms, participants were given the contact of the principal investigator so that they could communicate any specific issues. As was explained to participants at the start of each session, no data that could identify them is used in this or any other article published, names and personal circumstances were changed where necessary to ensure individuals could not be recognised.

A final issue that we feel needs clarification is the temporal distance between the earthquake and the fieldwork. The focus groups were carried out between May 13 and 17, 2019, eight years after the catastrophe, which might seem excessive. The decision was, however, a deliberate one, taken for ethical and practical reasons. Given that catastrophic events, as well as their recall, are traumatic, an essential ethical consideration was to recruit people who could talk with sufficient emotional distance from the event for them to not be too disturbed by reliving it. Furthermore, we considered that the time that had passed since the fatal disaster was enough to guarantee the collective memory of what had happened. In fact, the focus group participants had no difficulty recalling their experiences of either the disaster itself or the post-disaster period and how they were affected by it. They recounted all manner of detail with respect to what they were doing at the moment the earthquake hit and in the weeks that followed, along with their feelings and how they dealt with the catastrophe and its impact as time passed. This provided us with valuable information about the lived experiences of men and women, not only during the disaster itself, but also in the post-disaster period. What is more, since gender relationships are structural in nature and any changes that occur do so slowly, we believe that there was no need for immediacy in terms of the

catastrophe and the recounting of experiences. In addition, the focus group technique proved to be particularly appropriate in the sense that it enabled people's individual experiences to be transcended and a collective memory to be reconstructed through the group's collaborative and interactive version of what happened [55]. The next two sections present the results of the analysis carried out.

4. The reproduction of traditional male roles in the rescue of people

In the discourse of the men's focus groups analysed in this study, many of the elements comprising the collective imaginary of rescue were present, such as the use of strength and bravery:

P6: First I went into my house to see if my mum was there and to turn off the gas and electricity, the water and all that kind of things. And when I saw it was so difficult to open the door at the bottom of the stairs [to the block of flats], I thought of the neighbours in the same block that are old and I said to myself: "If it's been that hard for me to open maybe they've not been able to open it", and I knocked on all the flats on that floor to see if anyone was still in their flats, to give them a hand (Men, low to medium socioeconomic level).

As can be seen in this contribution, this rescue involves the use of strength to open the stuck door to the apartment building, and almost certainly involves moving rubble. And the rescue action is not limited to the home of the speaker since he in fact searches the whole building for survivors. It is worth noting that the behaviour, as well as involving risk and the use of force, is guided by rationality as indicated by the sequence of the actions taken by the speaker, which follow an order of priority; first the life of his family, then cutting off power and water supplies to the home to avoid further damage such as fires or floods and lastly, the search for neighbours who might remain trapped. The discourse is delivered from a position of authority and leadership, in line with the traditional roles assigned to men, something which reinforces the autonomy of the protagonist and facilitates the visibility and public recognition of his actions. This man's demonstration of characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, namely strength, bravery and taking control of the situation are in line with previous findings [30–34].

The recognition of men's efforts in the rescue of others is also reflected in the discourse of women when they refer to the courage of male family members, such as in this case where a woman talks about her son:

P8: I said to my oldest that he should come [home], but he turned round and said: "Mum, what if there's another [earthquake]? Who's going to help? (Women, low to medium socioeconomic level).

This testimony illustrates the role played by social expectations in terms of the bravery expected of men and the fundamental nature ascribed to their rescue efforts during the emergency. With his question, the young man highlights the social pressure to meet the demands of the role linked to hegemonic masculinity, to the point that, despite the fears expressed by his mother, she herself ends up accepting that he will take on the risk. This situation of the men as protagonists during an emergency mirrors that identified by various authors in terms of the actions taken by them, both volunteers and paid professionals, fighting forest fires in Australia [15,26,30].

From the first moments that people realise that they are experiencing an earthquake and become aware of the danger that is imminent, men take on the functions of giving instructions and attempting to maintain order in the situation through decision making, assuming the role of community representation:

P6: So, the first thing we did was try to get people out of there, take them to a field in case rubble fell on them or something (Men, low to medium socioeconomic level).

In addition to taking charge of giving instructions to neighbours and others in the vicinity to save lives and reduce the risk of more damage, the action of rescue is accompanied by efforts to control the emotions of others in order to maintain calm in the face of their shared fear:

P5: "Stay calm, we've been through this before, not such a hard one, but we're absolutely going to get through this". I managed, among other things, to calm them down a bit (Men, low to medium socioeconomic level).

The men's testimonies allude to their previous experience and knowledge in crisis situations to justify their use of communication and emotional skills, which feeds back into the importance of their intervention and the protagonist role they perform at the community level.

Another significant aspect of the discourse in the men's groups is the number of interventions that mention rescuing women. As well as the quote used above, there are several other examples:

P6: And in the street, we instinctively picked up a woman who had taken cover under her car, I don't know how. She had time to get out of the car and get under it. And get free of the rubble.

(...)

P3: Then, two minutes later, my brother rang me and said: "Hey, can you go to my house because my wife is stuck in the lift?" (Men, medium to high socioeconomic level).

In line with traditional masculine roles, these excerpts illustrate the active role that men fall into with respect to rescuing women in danger [16,26,30]. What is more, in the second excerpt, what is particularly noteworthy is a male family support network through which the men are able to take on the role of protecting the women in their family despite not actually being physically present in the place where the rescue occurs.

In relation to the factor of timing there are also some revealing differences with respect to gender, such as how emergency actions linked to hegemonic masculinity need to be undertaken urgently and quickly in order to save the maximum number of people possible. Immediacy is also important given the type of action involved: saving human lives. This teleological dimension, understood here as

referring to the intention or motive guiding their actions, also limits the course of the action to the extent that once the objective is achieved (i.e., a life saved) the rescue is considered to be over, with no need for further involvement until the next rescue:

P3: On the way, I met a girl who a chunk of wall had fallen on her foot, the front of a house had fallen down on her leg, she was completely immobilised. I lifted it [the wall] up. I left her in a secure area where there were no roofs or anything (Men, low to medium socioeconomic level).

P4: Then I saw my wife running towards the house, she couldn't get there by car and she'd got out so she could run. I told her what had happened and where I'd left the kids, on a cycle lane, and she went to find them (Men, medium to high socioeconomic level).

Even in the case of rescuing children, the action is concluded at the point of removal to safety, regardless of whether they need to be accompanied by an adult or need some other type of care, which men feel is outside their responsibility since it is not part of their traditional role. In fact, it is the mother of the children in the second excerpt who finally goes to take care of them, while the father had left them on their own because he wanted to get to the hospital as soon as possible to check on injured family members.

Ultimately, the analysis of the discourse in the two men's focus groups reveals that it contains many of the characteristics that the literature shows to be linked to hegemonic masculinity. The men involved in the catastrophe take risks and undertake actions that are characterised by the use of strength, energy, bravery and rationality, where their autonomy and leadership abilities are brought to the fore [15–17,26,30,32–34,47]. This type of rescue, indeed, constitutes the societal norm, and as we have already seen, and will see again in more detail in the next section, women themselves recognise the role of protagonist that men take on during emergency situations. However, the analysis is also important not simply because of what the participants in the focus groups say, but also because of what they do not voice. The principal aspect that is absent in the masculine discourse is that relating to the care of their offspring and other dependents, tasks that are essential following a catastrophe and are clearly feminised, and which the men do not mention. It is also of note that in their discourse, men hardly ever make reference to masculine vulnerability in the face of an event as unexpected and traumatic as an earthquake. The discourse of the women, which is analysed in detail in the next section, does show some similarities with that of the men, but there are also clear and important differences.

5. Reproduction and transformation of traditional female roles in the rescue of people

While the men's discourse is full and rich in detail, that of the women is quantitatively less extensive and qualitatively less detailed. In women's testimonies of the rescue of people the traditional gender roles are also in play, especially the care role:

P6: I left my son with my parents at their house thinking he'd be better off there. My mum said: "It's a miracle the child's alive", "But, come on, I brought him here because supposedly it's safer. What do you mean it's a miracle he's alive?". She says: "Because if your brother hadn't grabbed him ...". Because my son had climbed up onto the railings at the side of the river, so, of course, at that moment my son went flying and because my brother was next to him and grabbed him, because if not my son would have fallen into the current below ... (Women, low to medium socioeconomic level).

This participant, the mother of a child, ensures the safety of her son by leaving him with his grandparents. The rescuing of children undertaken by women is clearly linked to the female roles of caring that have been widely identified in the literature [6,7]. The excerpt shows clearly how the woman calls on her family to protect her child, making use of an intergenerational network which no doubt also facilitates the enactment of other activities of a reproductive nature. However, what is most striking is how the situation later develops, after the child leaves the grandparents' home. Despite the mother having first been worried enough to take her son to a place of safety, her family appear to question her management of the situation, and credit the uncle with having saved the child. They do not seem to value her attempts to ensure the safety and care of her son, which they take for granted, and, rather, consider her responsible for her son's bad behaviour, while what is given great visibility is the rescue of the son carried out by his uncle.

Another element related to gender roles that comes up in the women's focus groups is compliance with decisions and orders made by and/or transmitted by men, whether they be family members or from strongly masculinised institutions, such as the police:

P3: And, then, my son screamed at me: "Mum, don't touch. Don't touch anything".

(...)

P8: He says [her son]: "Mum, don't shift from there" (Women, low to medium socioeconomic level).

P2: We stayed in the flat and everything, but then my brother called and told us to go downstairs [to the street].

(...)

P5: The police arrived and what they advised us to do was that we should go up to the INEM [the unemployment office]: "Leave here, all of you". To all the neighbours: "Leave, it's very dangerous here because of the trees". But we left, and that's that. Horrendous, really horrendous ... (Women, medium to high socioeconomic level).

It would seem that despite the collective chaos occasioned by the earthquake, the social order is maintained through gender relations, which are reproduced in accordance with the typical distribution of traditional gender roles: men give orders and thus protect the group, while women follow men's orders and are saved. In those cases where women feel it necessary to question the men's orders they receive, because they are not the most appropriate or even imply putting people in greater danger, they formulate the proposal as a suggestion, without any direct confrontation, as though avoiding the possibility of undermining men's authority.

P9: We went to Plaza Colón, because a policeman told us to go to Plaza Colón: “Get over there, because there aren’t any buildings”. And I say to him: “There’s an underground car park there”. And the policeman says: “Well, to the station then” (Women, low to medium socioeconomic level).

Men’s authority and leadership are also evident in situations where women act as the spokesperson by communicating to part of the population the literal instructions of men, as happens in this case where a woman participant receives a call from her partner:

P1: He says: “Don’t even think about it” “Where are you?” “Start telling everyone you see to go to La Alameda [public park]” (...) So, I started telling everyone on this corner where we were, they didn’t know where to go. So, I started telling them quietly, not screeching: “Look, they’ve just rung me, we have to go to La Alameda” (Women, low to medium socioeconomic level).

Although at first sight it might seem that it is the women who are managing the rescue effort in this situation, they are actually doing it as an intermediary. In this way, men extend their decision-making capacity even at a distance, while women comply with the orders and reproduce them, meaning that their intervention is reduced to merely instrumental and auxiliary tasks.

It is also true, that spaces open up which facilitate women and men taking actions that fall outside their traditional gender roles, despite the challenges implicit in a scenario as difficult as experiencing a catastrophe, or perhaps because such events represent a crisis that disrupts the social and symbolic order. Our research shows, in line with previous studies that far from complying with the social imaginary of dependence, passivity and weakness, that women in a context of catastrophe are subjects with agency [5,6,31,39,40], who display a wide range of capabilities:

P10: So, what we did was grab the dog, like this lady said, but my mother and my grandmother, my 101-year-old grandmother and my mother lived on the second floor, so we had to get them down the best we could on the stairs, we got two wheelchairs and we went to Huerto de la Rueda [open-air exhibition centre] (Women, low to medium socioeconomic level).

In practice, without completely breaking gender roles, women do take action and save people, including risking their own lives and putting the lives of others before their own in order to protect them. Their involvement in care tasks and their concern for others in their immediate surroundings lead them to mobilise family and neighbourhood networks through multiple interactions. In this way they deploy a wide range of social relationships, which reveal a community function:

P5: The first thing I did was to go up to the neighbours upstairs, the ones on the third floor, because they are Moroccan and I was very fond of them, they were really scared and I told them: “Don’t worry, come on, come downstairs”. I got them down to my flat (...). Later I went down to see my daughter-in-law who lives a bit further down. (...) She says to me: “I’m going to go up to a friend’s house”. I say: “Right, I’m going to see my daughter”. Then, when I got to my daughter’s flat, they were really scared too and I say to her: “Don’t stay here, they’re saying there’s going to be another [earthquake], go into the street” (Women, medium to high socioeconomic level).

In this discourse, it can be seen that the women’s way of rescuing differs compared to that of men’s in that their actions involve not only the use of strength, but also accompanying people and making verbal suggestions. It is also worth noting that the rescue actions of women are directed towards other women or people with care needs such as children, older people and foreigners, but not towards men with no dependency needs. The type of rescue actions that women involve themselves in, although playing an essential part in rescue efforts and clearly reflecting women’s capacity for agency, go publicly unnoticed compared to those undertaken by men. Paradoxically, when women act beyond the narrow margins of the traditional gender roles, they receive recognition and greater visibility, as it can be seen in this example, which is particularly telling because despite both the speaker’s parents being teachers and acting in the same way, he places the emphasis squarely on his mother’s behaviour:

P7: My mother, in this situation, was giving class to some children and she got really anxious. It was a very, very difficult situation. Fortunately, she had the courage to get all the kids out. Take them to a piece of wasteland. My father did the same (Women, medium to high socioeconomic level).

In this testimony, his mother’s bravery in protecting the students in her school is highlighted as well as the anxiety she must have felt, while the reference to his father’s actions is very matter of fact and lacks any reference to bravery or to anxiety, probably because it is not relevant in terms of the masculine discourse, and the father’s courage is considered a given. This double process of invisibility related to the reproduction of traditional gender roles and the overexposure of what challenges them has been revealed before in other situations [56].

If we consider the analysis conducted as a whole, it can be seen that traditional gender roles are very much in evidence in terms of the actions undertaken by women during rescues. On the one hand, these are linked to their care role, and on the other, they are deemed to be additional or secondary to those enacted by men. This latter aspect is clear in those situations where women are rescued by men and/or follow their instructions, while, notably, the reverse does not happen. At the same time, we have been able to demonstrate that a disaster provides an opportunity for the transformation of gender roles, as has also been observed in previous studies [6,7,38,39]. In practice, women as well as men are involved in saving lives, in particular those of people in their immediate area who are dependent on them, and rescue actions in such situations illustrates not only women’s agency, but also the fact that their manner of rescuing others is in contrast to the hegemonic masculine model. Rescue, for women, is not restricted to saving someone; it involves caring for and accompanying the rescued person, and this task is frequently organised collectively, with women making use of the informal networks to which they belong [6,7]. However, it seems that rescues by women do not achieve the same public recognition as those by men, and when their actions are made visible, they are treated as something surprising, unexpected, outside social norms. This issue reflects the double standard at play in attributing value to the actions of men and women, greater value being placed on male rather than female actions and capabilities. In summary, the analysis carried out in this work has permitted certain important conclusions to be drawn, which lead to a better understanding of the actions of both women and men when confronted by an

emergency.

6. Conclusions

The analysis of the focus groups demonstrates that at the time of the catastrophe, men and women's perceptions and actions coincide, although important differences are also seen that are in line with traditional gender roles. As this work has shown, in line with previous research, there is great similarity in how women and men experience the fear of facing the danger inherent to a catastrophe, worrying about loved ones and undertaking similar actions to rescue family and neighbours [45]. However, our analysis also reveals the unequal distribution of social roles and tasks, which reproduce the discursive universe and the usual symbolic representations associated with the rescue of people. The differences can be identified both in the distinct actions taken by men and women in terms of rescuing others and in the time and space in which they are enacted and the ends that motivate them.

Men who experienced the earthquake appear as the fundamental protagonists of the rescue phase. Just as has been observed in other studies, focused mainly on professional and volunteer male emergency service personnel, their actions involve are characteristic of hegemonic masculinities [15,17,32]. A large part of the men's discourse concentrates on the action of the rescue, which is often narrated in an epic form, with explanations of the details surrounding the risk that they take to save lives. Although certain of the rescue actions are carried out in the sphere of the family or the immediate neighbourhood, others occur in public spaces, thus gaining greater visibility. Furthermore, on many occasions, those who are rescued are women, both known and unknown, which also helps to reproduce the symbolic imaginary of the hero.

Women involved in the earthquake rescue, for their part, deal with this phase differently. On the one hand, the data analysed demonstrate that their role is often reduced to them being mere receivers of male assistance and orders given by men. These nuances, far from being insignificant, in fact play a substantial role in the systems of gender relations. This is not only because the active role taken by women in rescue actions is not made visible, but also because it masks their capacity for decision making in emergency contexts and ignores their capacity for organisation and resilience.

In the complex web of gender relations there are small breakpoints that speak to the need to overhaul the traditional and stereotyped conception of rescue and to review the notion of rescue itself in light of the contributions made by women. Their rescue actions, although sometimes involve the use of strength, are usually accompanied with verbal suggestions and longer-term support and care of those who are rescued. And, finally, it should be noted that rescues initiated by women often have a community component and involve coordination with other women [8,9].

This article shows how rescue carried out by women is not very visible, either in the academic literature or the social imaginary, since it does not adopt the characteristics of the men's rescue actions, which act as a model. Although women's interventions may seem lesser and secondary compared to those of men, in practice they are revealed as being equally important. What happens is that, as is the case in other aspects of female actions, since they are performed by women relegate them into invisibility. Consequently, widening the conceptual limits of what defines the rescue of people, and the times and spaces in which it is carried out, would contribute to generating a change in social perception with respect to the role of women in catastrophe scenarios which is more in line with the reality on the ground. Lastly, it is food for thought that in the men's focus groups there is not a single testimony referring to a transformative process in terms of gender roles and nor is there any appearance of non-hegemonic masculinities in the rescue of people. Although the analysis was limited to those involved in the earthquake and the rescue of individuals, it opens up new lines of investigation. We are conscious of the fact that in the rescue phase following a catastrophe there are more actors involved beyond those immediately affected by the event, and it would be interesting to analyse the actions of personnel from the emergency services and the third sector from a gender perspective. In addition, performing the same analysis with respect to goods rather than people would provide a valuable complement to this work and throw light on whether the tendencies in the behaviour of women and men found here are replicated in other areas.

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