

Gender identity and disaster response in Nepal

Kyle Knight and Courtney Welton-Mitchell

Agencies need to be mindful of the special needs of LGBTI victims of disasters in order to enhance protection and minimise unintended harmful consequences of relief efforts.

Although there is a need for more research in this area, there is evidence to suggest that LGBTI persons may be discriminated against during disasters in various ways: being perceived as lower priority for rescue efforts; families with same-sex partners being excluded from distribution of food and other basic supplies; and difficulty visiting injured partners and claiming the bodies of deceased loved ones. A recent study of relocation efforts following floods in southern Nepal in 2008 found that the needs of some LGBTI communities were indeed overlooked and, for some, relief efforts resulted in unintended harmful effects.

Central to the emergence of Nepal's LGBTI rights movement in the early 2000s was the widespread state violence perpetrated against *metis*, male-bodied feminine-presenting people who have been alternatively characterised as gay men or transgender women. In the flood-prone Sunsari district, *metis* are usually referred to as *natuwas*, meaning 'dancers'. *Natuwas* typically migrate to Bihar during the wedding season to dance at the ceremonies and engage in sex work. Elements of cultural and religious pluralism – and even reverence – combined with substantial legal progress in recent years mean that many *natuwas* (and other LGBTI-identified



Kyle Knight

A Nepali transgender woman holds up her citizenship certificate, which identifies her as male. She has struggled to access services as a result of the discrepancy between the document and her current appearance.

people) live openly in their families and local communities, some with partners.

The 2008 flood in Sunsari and Saptari districts affected an estimated 70,000 people and displaced 7,000 families. In the aftermath of the flood, many *natuwas* were relocated to areas far away from the border, thus making the migration to Bihar prohibitively dangerous (longer distance, more exposure) and expensive. In addition, no longer living in communities in which they were known meant that some experienced increased discrimination and heightened safety concerns. Lack of informal support networks and fear of organising or attending LGBTI-friendly groups in unfamiliar places left many feeling very isolated.

Some *natuwas* reported discrimination in the relief process. “When the district leaders came to hand out food supplies, my family got half of what other families got,” explained Manosh.¹ “They told my parents that ... the family didn’t deserve the full portion because they had a child like me.”²

Another *natuwa* was distressed when she was relocated to a plot of land far away from her previous home. “We are safe when we are in the communities who know us and have seen us as we are,” she said. “But when we have to start in a new place, it doesn’t matter if the government gives us money or a house – we are not safe and we have to hide again.”

For people whose gender might be questioned in administrative processes, daily transactions can be difficult and stressful. In situations where insecurity is heightened – such as in humanitarian emergencies – discrepancies between gender presentation and documentation can make people like *natuwas* targets of increased scrutiny and humiliation, abuse or neglect. One of the central challenges for displaced LGBTI people is the multiple document checks one encounters along the way. Passing through check points, registering in relief camps, seeking medical attention, and enrolling in school are some of the

points at which documentation can become an issue, especially for transgender people or people who do not identify or present as the gender marked on their documents.

In addition, many administrative and material relief systems are disaggregated by two genders – male and female – and there is a dearth of attention paid to transgender or gender-variance issues.

Disaster-prone Nepal, with its new protected legal status for a ‘third gender’ category³ presents a compelling case of how legal recognition can enhance protection for LGBTI people in emergencies. In addition, agencies working in such situations should consider the following measures:

- requiring staff involved in relief efforts to participate in appropriate sensitivity training
- ensuring displaced LGBTI disaster victims have access to social support and safe places to lodge complaints and raise safety concerns
- providing documents that allow gender-variant people to be acknowledged as such
- taking into account informal economic activities, including sex work, when designing relocation programmes in order to protect the livelihoods of people like *natuwas*.

Kyle Knight kylegknight@gmail.com is a journalist in Kathmandu, Nepal. Courtney Welton-Mitchell Courtney.Mitchell@du.edu is an Assistant Professor in the International Disaster Psychology programme in the Graduate School of Professional Psychology at the University of Denver.

1. Not her real name

2. <http://tinyurl.com/ODIHPN-Sept2012-Knight-Sollom>

3. Nepal’s Supreme Court ruled in 2007 that the government should issue ‘third gender’ citizenship certificates for people who do not wish to be identified as male or female; implementation of this policy started in January 2013. The third gender category is labelled ‘other’ on official documents.