

In Turkey, women are feeling the worst aftershocks of the earthquake, which could lead to dwindling trust in government

March 31 2023, by Willow Kreutzer and Stephen Bagwell



İskenderun, Hatay Turkey—February 6, 2023: Iskenderun, one of the places most affected by the 7.7 magnitude earthquake centered in Kahramanmaraş. Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

When natural disasters strike, [women and girls tend to experience disproportionate challenges and heightened risks](#).

They are much more likely than men to experience [sexual violence](#) and [health problems](#). Women and girls also [face greater professional](#) and educational setbacks.

So it should come as no surprise that challenges continue to mount for women in Turkey and Syria following a [7.8 magnitude earthquake](#) on Feb. 6, 2023, that [killed more than 50,000 people](#) and [displaced 3 million people](#).

Earthquake survivors in Turkey also include [356,000 pregnant women](#) who, at the end of February 2023, urgently needed [medical care](#), according to the United Nations. Some women have had to give birth to their [children in collapsed buildings](#).

Women are also more likely than men to be [left out of government policies](#) and programs responding to the disaster, often forcing them to migrate away from [disaster zones](#). Death rates are higher during disasters for women even in some cases of [rich countries](#), due in part to such factors as women not wanting to leave the home during an emergency.

We are [scholars of human rights](#) and [political science](#). It is important to keep in mind that as natural disasters take a disproportionate toll on women, these crises also tend to shift women's political attitudes. While the disproportionate impact of disasters on women has been well documented, a lesser-known imbalance is how such crises tend to shift political attitudes.

Research shows that [women's trust in government declines](#) after a natural disaster, while men's political trust increases—in both poor and rich countries.

In [countries like Turkey with multiple disasters](#) a year, studies show that [women's trust in government](#) will likely decline over time. This includes their trust in [government institutions](#), as well as their trust in those with power in government—political leaders, parties and parliament. When women do not see those in power as meeting their needs and trying to support and protect them, their trust wanes.

Why women are more vulnerable post-disaster

There are a few main reasons why women tend to feel the worst effects of a natural disaster.

First, societal expectations placed on women as the main caretakers in the household in both more and less economically developed countries are [exacerbated following a disaster](#).

Women are often tasked with collecting and carrying food and water to their families, for example, as well as tending to their [children and other family members](#). Women's responsibilities as the primary caretaker often place them in dangerous settings after disasters, either traveling through rugged terrain to reach water and food or staying in unstable housing structures [to cook and help their families](#).

Second, governments tend not to prioritize women's particular health needs. Pregnant or nursing mothers may be unable to receive routine care, leading to an increase in risk of death or disease to [both mother and baby](#).

While there are some international relief groups and projects that [focus on providing menstrual health care](#) to women following a disaster, this kind of [response is not common](#).

Third, women are more likely to be living in poverty, with [fewer](#)

[economic alternatives than men](#) following a disaster. They are slower to return to work, [if they can at all](#), and are often denied government relief under the assumption that their [husbands will support them](#). This further decreases women's overall safety.

A series of earthquakes in Turkey

Following the February 2023 earthquake, [advocacy groups](#) and relief response agencies voiced concern that women and girls in Turkey were left in hastily constructed refugee camps that did not have [access to safe bathrooms, clean water](#) or [period products](#).

Women and especially young girls living in temporary shelters are at a higher risk of [gender-based violence](#) and early child marriage, according to humanitarian agencies like Plan International. This is especially true if women [do not have designated areas](#) separate from men—as is the case in Turkey.

The Turkish advocacy group [The Women's Coalition](#) has asked the government to remove preexisting obstacles to supporting women, like ending [bans on popular social media sites](#).

This is because social media can play a [vital role](#) in coordinating relief and rescue efforts, and these [bans are actively keeping](#) women and LGBTQ organizations from connecting with people and providing assistance in earthquake-affected areas.

Women and girls may also be wary of asking male relief workers for help with their [reproductive needs](#). Hesitancy to ask for help from male workers extends beyond reproductive needs.

Women's rights activists in Turkey have said that women who were caught naked or without headscarves under the rubble were less likely to

ask for help or [rescue out of fear](#).

Understanding the political ramifications

[People's trust](#) in the government in Turkey is generally low, and data demonstrates that Turkey could be doing significantly more with its available resources to guarantee respect for [human rights](#) overall. For example, [recent reports](#) by human rights groups indicate that Turkish authorities [do not always enforce laws](#) preventing domestic violence, [which is common](#) in the country.

Since people's trust in politics and [government](#) is shaped by lived experiences, we think that solutions to prevent a decline in [trust](#) logically involve minimizing the experiences that cause the decline. While governments can't control [natural disasters](#), they can ensure that their responses are more inclusive of women's needs.

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