

Heads above Water: Gender, Class and Family in the Grand Forks Flood.
By Alice Fothergill. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004.
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Historically, disaster scholarship has often taken a male-dominated stance while overlooking female perspectives. Also, classic understandings of vulnerability adopted a “one size fits all” approach, implying that disasters resulted in indiscriminant impacts on everyone. Prior to the 1990s, there was virtually no integration of gender issues in disaster research. Even though scholars have started to shed these older veils and to examine the complexities of disaster vulnerability as they vary for men and women, people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, and across social classes, existing knowledge in this area is still lacking. Alice Fothergill’s work adds to this much-needed body of literature and encourages a shift in focus by examining women’s specific experiences in the flood of 1997 in Grand Forks, North Dakota, and East Grand Forks, Minnesota.

Fothergill uses ethnographic research methods to tell the stories of women’s everyday experiences after the Red River flood. The goal of her study is to document and understand the stories of these women and identify how they create and recreate meaning in their daily lives. She achieves this goal by interviewing 40 women for two years following the floods. Twenty of the women were interviewed a second time to measure change in attitudes longitudinally. She specifically examines commonalities and differences of women’s flood experiences, how they negotiate the public, private, and community spheres of social life, women’s coping strategies for dealing with downward mobility, and how they create a sense of self.

One of the most important elements of Fothergill’s book is the cogent integration of sociological theory and discussion of social roles, role accumulation and negotiation, stigma, and culture. One of the major factors contributing to women’s increased vulnerability is directly related to the social roles they occupy. While some scholars have asserted that traditional gender roles are suspended in disaster events, others have argued that there is role carryover, and still others contend that traditional gender roles are reaffirmed. Fothergill finds that the social roles women occupied in the Red River Valley prior to the flooding influenced their disaster vulnerability. Also, after the floods, women experienced role accumulation and were constantly balancing these additional roles through a process of negotiation. For most women, household roles were not suspended, yet traditional divisions of labor were not necessarily solidified either. Rather, women maintained a complex balance of multiple roles, both traditional and nontraditional. Interestingly, this negotiation and accumulation of social roles led to the development of an increased sense of self for many

women. As Fothergill writes, "Fulfilling their roles made the women more valued in society because the completion of them suddenly became so much more important to the social order and the maintenance of societal stability" (p. 52).

A second fascinating aspect of Fothergill's book is a discussion of social mobility, which has received very little attention by disaster scholars. Specifically, many women in the Red River Valley experienced downward mobility following the floods. Also, women felt stigmatized by their need to accept charity. The acceptance of charity and the women's sudden drop in social status stood in direct contrast to their typically middle-class norms and traditions of giving and contributing to the public good. Fothergill finds that middle-class women had a slightly more difficult time coping with the losses associated with the floods than working-class and lower-class women. Middle-class women "were accustomed to a certain lifestyle and a certain amount of economic fairness" (p. 62). This demonstrates the importance of social class in women's ability to cope with and recover from the floods. Downward mobility appeared to cast them out of their middle-class status, and accepting charity confirmed that they were no longer part of the middle class.

A third important component of Fothergill's book is a discussion of women's roles in recreating domestic culture. Women felt that it was necessary to recreate the domestic culture that existed prior to the floods. The most important area of domestic culture to recreate for the women of Grand Forks and East Grand Forks was place. For these women, their homes were viewed as sacred places that enhanced sense of self. During the floods, women who were without their homes felt as if they were out of place. "Women spoke reverentially of their lost homes because their homes were more than buildings; they were places with meanings and memories" (p. 174). By recreating their homes, as well as time and objects, these women were able to increase their sense of self and reclaim a domain that they closely identified with.

This is a very valuable book, filled with powerful narratives of women's experiences during and after the Red River Valley floods of 1997. It is also a good example of how to situate ethnographic accounts of women's flood experiences in sociological theory. This book should be required reading for all students and researchers interested in the sociology of disasters. It will also be useful for scholars and students in the areas of inequality and gender studies.