

Article

Researching Gender and Disasters of Natural Origin: Ethical Challenges

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Abstract: Ethical issues are very relevant in the field of women's, gender and/or feminist studies. The aim of this article is to highlight the ethical challenges faced by the authors in their research process, with specific reference to two projects on gender and disasters in which they have been involved. In general, we try to avoid sexist bias throughout the complete research process, from the definition of the objectives themselves to the methodology design, where we ensure diversity in the selection of participants in order to take into consideration the variety of voices present in society, especially those of women. Also, when developing our research, we take into account the power relationships involved, both between those who participate in the fieldwork and with the researchers themselves. To counteract the effects of such relations, we have considered people's wellbeing and the humanization of the whole process. Finally, when it comes to the dissemination of the results and their transfer to society at large, we follow the same principles and actively integrate the people involved. Considering these issues benefits the research process and makes the resultant knowledge more ethical and socially useful, in addition to promoting more egalitarian gender relations.

Keywords: gender; disaster; ethics; epistemology; methodology; fieldwork; team analysis



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1. Introduction

Studies from a women's, gender and/or feminist perspective¹ have entailed such an important shift in how scientific information is understood and produced that they have led to a rethinking of the foundation of a large part of our disciplines. By highlighting the relationship between science and power, such studies reveal the ethical dimension of knowledge and require those of us who dedicate our research efforts in this direction to reflect long and hard on how this knowledge is generated and its social usefulness.

Ethical approaches of a more abstract and universalist nature, such as the deontological ethics model and the utilitarian or consequentialist ethics model, which Edwards and Mauthner refer to [1], do not fully respond to the needs of gender-oriented research. Such approaches are grounded as much in honesty, justice and respect for the individuals involved in the research process as in the findings themselves and not so much in the means through which knowledge is produced. These considerations have inspired many of the ethical codes applied in conventional research, including confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent, among many others.

Feminist research does not shy away from such formal and universalist approaches, although simply complying with them is not seen as sufficient from an ethical point of view. On this basis, other models have been developed that are more in line with feminist studies, particularly in terms of feminist ethics and the feminist ethics of care, which emphasizes care and, rather than outcomes, justice or rights; personal experience, context and situation rather than abstract principles; and dialog and negotiation rather than rules and autonomy [1]. Regardless of the ethical model adopted, however, it is undeniable that women's, gender and/or feminist studies involve a shift in paradigm in scientific

terms. And their contributions are crucial to addressing the challenges that arise during the research process. In relation to the ethical dimensions of performing science from a gender perspective, there are at least five key aspects that we have dealt with in our own research: How to generate knowledge that breaks with the androcentric² nature of traditional research? How can power relations that arise during the scientific process be addressed? How should we interact with the people involved in such research? What kind of knowledge do we generate, and how do we relate to it? What is the purpose of research?

Many feminist scholars have highlighted the androcentric character of a large part of scientific production to date [2,3]. Biased science poses two ethical problems: it generates, on the one hand, an area of ignorance with respect to the phenomenon under investigation and, on the other, a body of knowledge that is of no use to people suffering discrimination. Since the 1990s, numerous researchers have aimed to eliminate not only androcentric bias but also other biases based on factors such as race/ethnicity or social class, among others. In this way, scientists have put faith in bias-free knowledge, to use the term coined by Burke and Eichler [4]. From a methodological point of view, guidelines have been developed for the conducting and publishing of research that is free of gender bias, such as the Sex and Gender Research Guidelines (SAGER), developed through the collaboration of a group of experts from the European Association of Science Editors (EASE).

Another key aspect related to the feminist way of performing science is a clear commitment to dealing with the power relations that are produced during the research process, particularly between researchers and those taking part in this research [5,6]. More recently, the need to avoid epistemic extractivism has been highlighted [7], that is, ensuring that scientists do not take advantage of the knowledge of the social groups they investigate. Some concern has also been raised about the power relations that may exist within the research team, leading to discussion on how to subvert them. Attempting to mitigate both types of hierarchical relationships mentioned here has a clear ethical dimension, in that it seeks to balance the position of those involved in the various phases of research, regardless of their position on the social scale or within the research team.

From a feminist perspective, another important aspect consists in acknowledging those involved in the research and how they are treated. This approach requires us to consider at least two issues. The first is that individuals' participation in research should not result in them experiencing harm of any sort. This practice, of course, is part of conventional studies, which recognize the importance of guaranteeing confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent, as well as respect for human dignity and the safeguarding of the rights of vulnerable people, among other issues [8]. When conducting gender studies, it is important not to harm participants and, in line with feminist ethics, to emphasize care and responsibility for all the individuals involved in the research process [1].

Situated knowledge is another of the key elements of feminist research. Donna Haraway [9] points out that universal knowledge does not exist, as any knowledge gained is always influenced by the context and the social position of the participants. From this perspective, then, it is clear that women are not a homogeneous group, and it is, therefore, essential to acknowledge their diversity. Some studies take this issue into account through the practice of intersectionality, which aims to address the complex structures of oppression that simultaneously act in multiple ways on people, especially women [10]. From an ethical standpoint, both situated knowledge and intersectionality make it possible to bring to an end the notion of a universalist view of reality and generate scientific results that are more impartial, more contextualized and more sensitive to the multiple axes of inequality that exist, thereby avoiding the imposition of a dominant perspective.

Finally, feminist studies attempt to gain knowledge that helps to combat social privilege, particularly related to gender [11–13]. In ethical terms, such knowledge is transformative in as much as it challenges the social norms and structures that perpetuate inequality. At the same time, it promotes dialog between academic and social production, and this exchange of knowledge can be of great assistance in designing public policies that generate more egalitarian social models [14].

The aim of this paper is to explain how we have incorporated these five key aspects into research projects on gender and disasters of natural origin that we have developed in recent years and the ethical challenges that we have to face. Disasters are tremendously disruptive phenomena, in that they disturb the social order and the lives of those involved. A disaster, such as an earthquake or volcanic eruption, generates high costs in human, economic and social terms, which translates into the loss of lives; the destruction of homes and infrastructure; an emotional impact; and the reinforcement of preexisting inequalities, among many other effects. As such, the affected population is in an especially vulnerable situation, which constitutes an added ethical challenge when conducting this type of research.

2. Methodology

On the basis of the feminist assumptions outlined above and shared by the authors of this article, along with the members of the research group GENESYS (Gender, Economics, Health and Society), to which we all belong, this paper attempts to show how the ethical aspects described can be put into practice. Specifically, we explain the ethical challenges that we have faced and how we have addressed them in two projects dealing with gender and disasters of natural origin that we have carried out over the last five years.

Between January 2017 and September 2021, our research activity was developed within the framework of GENDER Project (Gender, disasters and risk), grant number FEM2017-86852-P, funded by the Spanish Research Agency. Since September 2022, we have been participating in GENDER-IN Project (Gender and disaster risk management: comparative analysis and recommendations for intervention), grant number PID2021-126195NB-I00, funded by the same Agency. In both projects, we have tried to identify the gendered impacts of various disasters that have occurred within the Spanish and Latin American context, as well as to understand the lived experience of men and women during and after these events and to analyze the incorporation of a gender perspective in disaster risk management. The specific events studied in the two projects were six earthquakes with epicenters in Puerto Plata (Dominican Republic, 2003), Yoro and the Caribbean Sea (Honduras, 2007 and 2009, respectively), the Chilean Sea (Chile, 2010), Port-au-Prince (Haiti, 2010) and Lorca (Spain, 2011), along with the eruption of the Tajogaite volcano on La Palma (Spain, 2021).

To achieve the objectives proposed in our research projects, a mixed-methodology approach, i.e., using both qualitative and quantitative data, was employed. To quantify the impact of the earthquakes that occurred in the Dominican Republic (2003), Honduras (2007 and 2009) and Haiti (2010) we applied a multi-criteria analysis—based on microeconomic data from the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) carried out by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)—as well as econometric methodologies.

In terms of qualitative data, we carried out a documentary analysis of different DRR (disaster risk reduction) plans and conducted focus groups with people from the affected populations studied, as well as interviews with technical staff and decision-makers. The documentary analysis allowed us to identify whether or not the gender perspective was taken into account in the different DRR plans. As part of the GENDER Project, we have held eight focus groups in Dichato and Coliumo—two communities affected by the 2010 Chilean earthquake and tsunami—and in Lorca (Spain)—affected by the 2011 earthquake—in order to find out about the experiences of men and women directly involved in these events. In the case of the GENDER-IN Project, 46 people who were either technical staff, decision-makers or socio-community leaders were interviewed to determine whether or not a gender perspective was integrated into the response to the Tajogaite volcanic eruption (2021).

In the research described above, we have relied on an interdisciplinary and international team, which has allowed us to observe and understand the different dimensions of the social reality of the disasters in question, as well as the context within which the phenomena occurred. Initially, the team was made up of 13 experts in sociology, economics, psychology and social work from three universities: the Latin American Faculty of Social

Sciences (FLACSO Uruguay), the University of Concepción (Chile) and the University of Oviedo (Spain). For the GENDER-IN Project, the team increased to 20 members; the educational institutions represented now include, in addition to those mentioned above, the University of La Laguna, the University of Valladolid and the FECYT (Spanish Foundation for Science and Tehcnology) (all of them in Spain), FLACSO (Dominican Republic) and the University of Chile (Chile), while the disciplines covered have extended to include geography, anthropology and political sciences.

3. Ethical Challenges in the Process of Research Focusing on Gender and Disasters of Natural Origin

In line with the feminist approaches outlined above, we understand ethics as a guiding principle of all research processes. As such, ethical considerations have formed part of our research group's discussions since the initial conception of each of these projects, guiding the choice of topics to be studied and the population involved, as well as the theoretical approach adopted. Ethical issues have also influenced the definition of the research objectives, the techniques employed, how the research was conducted—including the working dynamics of the team itself—and the dissemination of the results. In the following sections, we focus on the challenges that we consider most relevant to our research on gender and disasters and explain the decisions that were made in these circumstances.

3.1. Avoiding Bias in Research into Disasters of Natural Origin

When analyzing scientific production on gender and disasters, it can be seen that the scientific knowledge in this field is still very limited. Entering the terms (disaster* AND natural) into the Web of Science (WoS) database provides 119,514 results while using (gender* AND disaster* AND natural) reduces the number of results to 1721. Research papers focusing on gender and disasters of natural origin in fact represent only 1.43% of the total number of articles on this type of event (search conducted on 21 December 2023).

In a similar vein, the literature on gender and disasters is unevenly distributed around the world. Figure 1 shows the data for the top ten countries in terms of the number of publications dealing with this issue: the United States (37.36%), China (10.75%), the United Kingdom (8.31%), Australia (7.55%), Japan (4.53%), Canada (4.24%), India (3.78%), Italy (3.37%), Germany (3.08%) and Bangladesh (2.67%). These ten countries generate between them 85.65% of the global scientific production with respect to gender and disasters. Almost six out of every ten publications in this area of research come from four English-speaking countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada. Furthermore, a little over two out of ten works come from four Asian countries: China, Japan, India and Bangladesh. The geographic regions with the lowest number of publications are Africa (6.62%) and Latin America and the Caribbean (4.47%), which suggests a strong colonial bias in high-impact publications.

Starting with the scant scientific production across the world, but particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as in Spain, we decided to delimit our two research projects to catastrophic events that occurred in these particular geographic areas. We also, as reported above, employed mixed methods in both studies, an approach that some feminist authors consider to be more flexible and more appropriate to this type of research and its ethical requirements [8]. We also used a comparative approach, in contrast to the greater part of the literature, which generally focuses on a single country and/or catastrophe and uses a single technique to conduct research.

From the point of view of the population affected by the disaster under study, we began by paying close attention to the men and women directly concerned in order to understand their lived experience of the disaster, as well as the problems and needs that arose in the face of the event (GENDER Project). Next, we completed the analysis by focusing on the work of the other agents involved in disaster risk management, technical staff, decision-makers and socio-community leaders who directly intervened in the management of the catastrophic event through the associative network (GENDER-IN Project). In both projects,

we have focused on the people affected, both individually and collectively, through their participation in associations or social movements and tried to understand how they were impacted by the decisions taken by other actors involved in disaster management and how they relate to them.

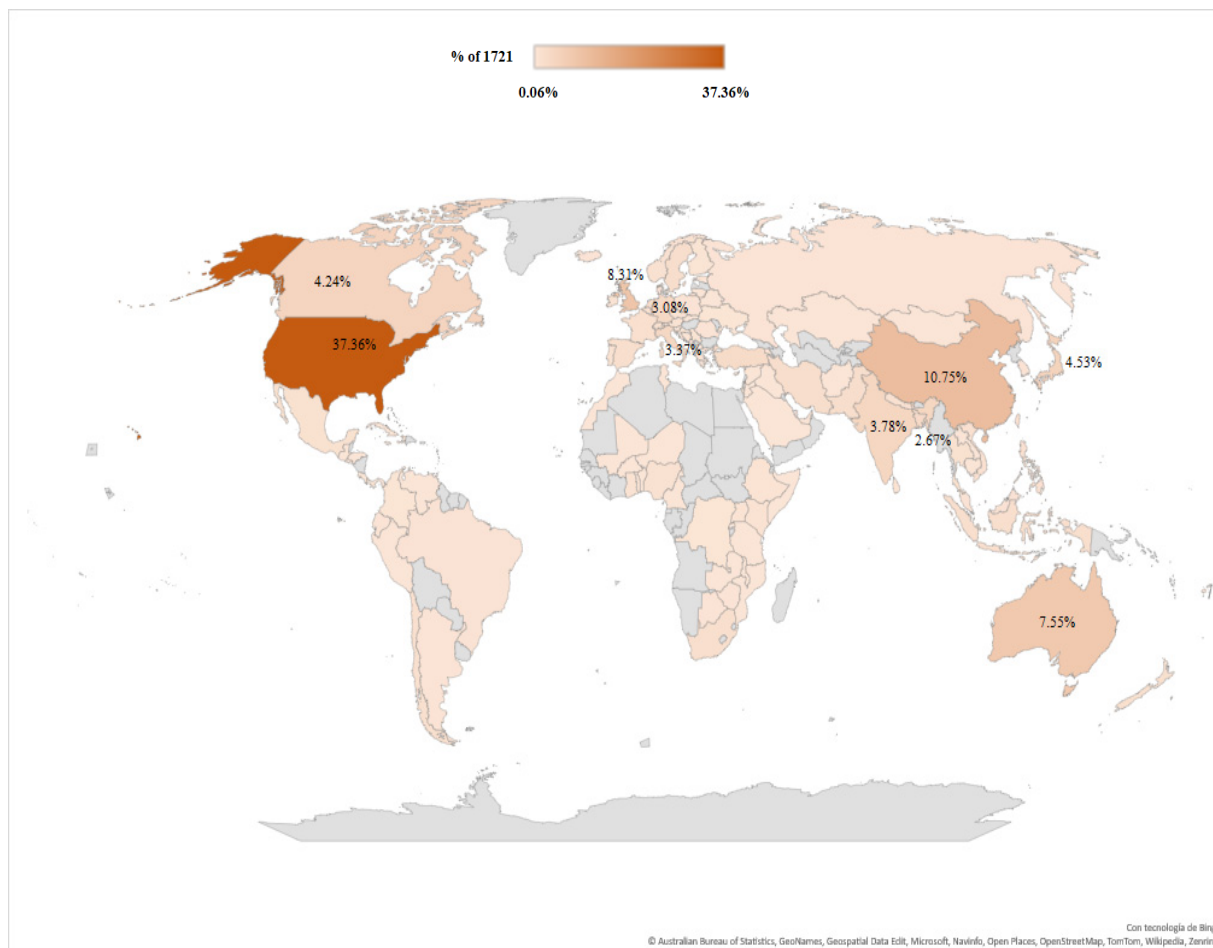


Figure 1. Territorial distribution of WoS publications using the search terms (gender* AND disaster* AND natural) and percentage relating to the top 10 countries in terms of scientific production. Source: produced by the authors based on WoS search on 21 December 2023.

The theoretical approach guiding our research also involved ethical implications that needed to be taken into account. Many studies on gender and disasters focus only on analyzing the vulnerability of the population. In our case, and with the aim of avoiding the revictimization of the affected population, we set ourselves the explicit objective of studying their agency at the individual and collective levels. That is, we not only tried to understand how people behave in the face of a disaster of natural origin but also the participatory experiences developed through neighborhood and/or community organizations that already existed prior to the disaster, as well as those that emerged as a result of it. By adopting this double perspective, we have been able to include themes that are not typically covered in this area of study. This is illustrated by the case of women taking the lead in rescuing people and goods [15,16]. We have, likewise, identified the active participation of women in the management of emergency aid and the functioning of temporary shelters, in contrast to the marked passivity of men in this phase [17]. And while we have also observed that men have a fundamental role to play in rebuilding homes according to their traditional gender roles, in certain contexts, women adopt an active position that challenges these roles [17].

Finally, it should be noted that the practice of using non-sexist language has governed all phases of the research process. We believe that this is an ethical issue, not only because it provides visibility to those who are not named but also because this practice seeks to not reinforce sexist stereotypes and imaginaries. Likewise, in the reference list, we try to recognize the intellectual property of women by using the given names of the authors in order to correct the bias that may automatically lead us to think that the author is male when only the initial of their first name is mentioned alongside their family name. In fact, it is often the case that the formal referencing requirements of journals themselves expressly forbid the use of authors' first names. After pointing this out to some editorial boards, in some cases, we have been allowed to include their given names, contributing to increasing the visibility of female authors.

3.2. Dealing with Power Relationships in Research

As we have previously pointed out, feminist methodology involves dealing with the power relations that may arise during the research process. In social science, we have been aware for some time that those who carry out the research and those whose circumstances are studied are not in the same position. Studies from a women's, gender and/or feminist perspective have attempted to balance this relationship in various ways, with Ann Oakley's position being one of the most influential in this sense. This author asserts that personal involvement in research is not a bias but the condition under which people get to know each other [5] (p. 58), and she recognizes that the interdependence between researchers and research participants is reciprocal in as much as the former also depends on the latter being willing to contribute their memories and stories of their lives [6] (p. 209).

Within the research group, we reflect on this issue from two angles: in terms of the direct interaction with informants and with respect to the dynamics between the members of the research team itself. In the GENDER Project, we conducted focus groups, a technique particularly suited to recovering the collective memory of the disaster as it consists of facilitating a discussion between individuals from the affected population. This technique was also found to be particularly suitable for addressing issues of power in the sense that, during the process of collective negotiation and construction of meaning, the facilitator has less control over how the discussion evolves than in other techniques, such as interviews [18]. From a gender point of view, however, this technique also presents an important ethical challenge in terms of ensuring that all participants contribute equally. In this sense, given that our objective was to analyze the impact and lived experience of the population affected by earthquakes in Chile (2010) and Spain (2011), we decided to run focus groups that were exclusively composed of either men or women. This separation enabled us, on the one hand, to mitigate power relations developing within the groups and, on the other, to more clearly establish the similarities and differences in the lived experiences of men and women, as well as the processes of the reproduction and alteration of traditional gender roles [16,19]. In a similar way, social class was another factor taken into consideration in the design of the focus groups, as the participation of people from very different socioeconomic backgrounds in the same focus group can make it difficult for some individuals to participate in the discourse, as well as potentially creating power relations within the group itself. Apart from these two issues, age, marital status, number of children, living arrangements, tenure with respect to home and employment situation were also taken into account in the design of the focus groups in order to incorporate discursive diversity and intersectionality. In terms of sexual and gender identity, none of the focus group participants reported having a non-binary sexual/gender identity. In relation to ethnicity and race, because of the high proportion of people from the migrant community in Lorca, we actively sought to incorporate their voices. However, this was complicated by the fact that many migrants left the area after the disaster, most likely as a result of having no longer-term ties to the territory. That said, some people with a Roma ethnic background did participate in the Lorca focus groups, while in Coliumo and Dichato, none of the participants made reference to their ethnicity/race. It is true, however, that according

to the Chilean census, the proportion of indigenous people living in the area is not high (11%) and is even below the national average [20].

In the GENDER-IN Project, for its part, the most appropriate technique was in-depth interviews with technical staff, decision-makers and socio-community leaders who participated in the management of the eruption of the Tajogaite volcano on the island of La Palma (Spain, 2021). The use of this technique has enabled us to reveal information about the experiences, perceptions and learning of the various agents involved in disaster risk management, as well as how their actions were carried out during the eruption and the extent to which these actions took into consideration, or not, gender issues. In order to reduce power relations between interviewer and interviewee as much as possible, we did not strictly follow the conversational mode suggested by Ann Oakley [5], although we did try to make the interviews as relaxed as possible, leaving space for the interviewees to express their emotions and feelings.

In a similar way, in the projects we have developed, we have not only taken into account power relations throughout the research process but also within the research team itself. We consider this last factor to be particularly important in a group such as ours—interdisciplinary, international and made up entirely of women who are at different points in their professional and personal lives and with different ways of working. From the outset, we were aware that the research team's composition, consisting of individuals from Latin America, the Caribbean and Spain, may affect our work and interactions due to the colonial relations between these territories. For this reason, we sought out formulas that recognize the knowledge and trajectories of each individual from the different countries. In this sense, mixed working subgroups were established to include colleagues from different disciplines, positions in life/career and/or territories. This attention paid to diversity was an attempt to achieve equality in participation between group members, as well as to value the specific contributions of each member. In addition, this method of collaborative knowledge production has been crucial in developing analyses that are more complex and complete than those created by a single researcher from a single discipline and/or territory, as we will explain in more detail later.

Another aspect to which we have paid attention in our projects is that of leadership, considering from the beginning that this should be a shared responsibility. As the research became more extensive, more people joined the coordination, each of them being at a unique point in their research career and coming from different locations. By working in this way, we were able to integrate views from both the Global North and the Global South in the most horizontal manner possible. We also gave newer researchers a bigger role in the decision-making process, explicitly acknowledging their contributions.

In addition, the use of public funding presented an ethical challenge. Funding agencies demand transparency in terms of how money is spent, but we feel we went beyond this requirement in line with research on gender differences in the spending patterns of men and women [21], as well as on funding in emergency and/or humanitarian contexts [22,23]. In our research practice, we have been extremely careful in our use of funds, treating them as if they were our own, even though this requires us to spend more time finding the best deals when purchasing materials and making travel reservations, for example. We are also concerned with ensuring an equitable distribution of resources among the researchers participating in the projects. Although in both projects team members do not receive financial remuneration for their work, operational expenses linked to an individual are covered, for example, attendance at conferences or the translation of articles, among other costs. For this type of expense, we work on a rotation basis, but we also take into consideration the circumstances of those team members who are in the early stages of their research careers and need to strengthen their CVs. In other words, we try to distribute funding not on the basis of treating everyone the same but on the basis of the different starting points of each individual in the team.

3.3. *Humanizing the Research Process and Focusing on Care*

Another ethical challenge of particular relevance in social and health sciences is the consideration of the wellbeing of the people involved in the research. In these disciplines, where a large part of the knowledge generated comes from information collected through fieldwork or experiments that require the participation of individuals, sensitivity toward this aspect is of greater importance than usual. We believe, however, that humanizing the research process and placing the individuals involved at its center is essential in all scientific contexts. It is, therefore, crucial that disciplines that are more technical in nature do not exclude themselves from this reflection. On the other hand, we understand that this ethical duty is not limited to a single stage of the research but rather should pervade the whole process and concern all participants, including the researchers themselves.

In relation to fieldwork, we apply the usual ethical considerations that are typically contemplated in qualitative research to ensure that no harm is caused to the people involved. Specifically, we meet the requirements of the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Oviedo, the institution responsible for the two projects described in this article. The guidelines require us to provide information about the aim of the research, to guarantee the anonymity of the participants and to ensure that their involvement is voluntary and informed. In each project, respondents formalized their agreement by signing an informed consent document, although, from an ethical point of view, we also went further than simply applying the formal requirements. As previously stated, being aware of the particularly vulnerable situation of the study populations, we aimed to ensure that their participation did not cause them to revisit any traumatic experiences they may have had during or following the disaster and/or to be revictimized in any way. We understand that science cannot be understood in terms of a utilitarian ethical model, where the main concern is that the outcome of the research is of benefit to society, without paying any particular attention to the method employed. On the contrary, in our projects, the means are of great importance, and we have placed the people involved at the center, including the interviewees, focus group participants and those conducting the work, following, in this sense, a feminist ethics of care. Research is not only a simple academic or professional issue; rather, it has a relational component that needs to be considered. It is, therefore, essential to ensure the wellbeing of those involved in this process and that the relations developed are based on trust, comfort and safety. In particular, we need to achieve high-quality interactions, as scientific results are, to a large extent, determined by the way in which the research process is implemented.

In the GENDER Project, when designing the fieldwork, one of the central ethical debates was related to the appropriate time that should elapse between the destructive phenomenon and the research itself. Since the objective was to collect the experiences of those directly affected by the disasters, it seemed reasonable to leave a considerable time lapse between the two events. Certain peer reviewers expressed reticence in evaluating our articles based mainly on their view that people's memories could be negatively affected by the passage of time. We do not share this view and, even if this were the case, we would have still prioritized the participants' wellbeing.

Regarding the GENDER-IN Project, we again discussed how much time should pass after the eruption of the Tajogaite volcano (La Palma, Spain, 2021) before carrying out the fieldwork. In this case, we decided that a two-year interval would be sufficient, as we focused on the experiences of technical staff and decision-makers, whose discourse was connected to the experiences and functions carried out in these professional positions. It is, however, true that the people interviewed also formed part of the affected population, and this double role (as professionals and people affected) required us to take particular care during the interviews.

The fieldwork in both projects implied a significant level of commitment for those who carried it out due to its complexity and ethical considerations related to the vulnerable situation of the majority of those involved. The technique of focus groups is particularly appropriate because its members create their own collective discourse through their in-

teraction, and each participant can decide how deeply and intensely they want to go into their own experiences. For the interviews, a guide was created that allowed participants to choose whether or not to discuss specific themes. During the focus groups and interviews, the team members practiced active listening, respected silences and were flexible with the rhythm of the sessions, allowing sufficient time for emotional release and recovery. Participants were given the option to leave the focus group and pause or abandon the interview; however, none of them chose to exercise this option. In the feedback received after the fieldwork, respondents did not report any feelings of unease, and in fact, some of them actually expressed gratitude for the opportunity to discuss their experiences, stating that the conversation had been liberating or even therapeutic.

Humanizing the research process entails addressing the needs of all participants, including scientists. This involves taking into account at least two main aspects: on the one hand, the impact that conducting the fieldwork has on researchers and, on the other, the difficulty they face in balancing the personal, family, work and social spheres. In any project, fieldwork is usually one of the most challenging phases, and in disaster studies, it is even more so since, as we have already explained, it involves direct interaction with people who are faced with situations that make them particularly vulnerable. Repeatedly listening to these lived experiences may also affect the emotional state of those conducting the interviews and focus groups. For this reason, following the same approaches as earlier, a strategy of taking care of the researchers was implemented. At the end of each day, researchers held informal meetings to share the information they had heard during the day in a relaxed atmosphere, which also provided an opportunity for emotional release.

Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged in our societies that there is not an equal distribution of caring responsibilities, which fall principally on women and, with respect to the researchers, clash with the high demands of academia [24]. Therefore, in our team, composed entirely of women, we are especially aware of the work overload experienced by our members. To address this issue, we have attempted to allocate work on a supportive, negotiated and consensual basis, taking into account what is an acceptable workload for each team member at each stage of the project. Within this distribution of tasks, we have considered the personal circumstances and responsibilities of each team member (pregnancy and childbirth, family responsibilities, personal or family illness, mourning, etc.), as well the professional circumstances of each person (multiple employment obligations, job insecurity and management responsibilities outside the projects, among others). Individuals have at times assumed varying degrees of workload, and we have been flexible and understanding of each person's circumstances while remaining collectively responsible for the development of the projects and their results. This approach does not ignore the fact that disagreements and even conflicts may arise at any point in the research process. However, by being aware of this possibility and the reasons behind it, some of these issues can be prevented. Similarly, when problems do arise, we try to deal with them in a collective and negotiated way, a practice that has so far enabled us to resolve them in a consensual manner.

3.4. Creating Situated and Collective Knowledge

In our research team, we start from the premise that we cannot achieve knowledge that is universal; rather, feminist knowledge is situated and influenced by the context and social position of those involved and by the dynamics generated by the process itself. This approach has led us to reflect on a number of challenges that have ethical implications: How do we carry out research that respects the territory and the population affected by a disaster of natural origin? How can we produce knowledge that faithfully captures the experience of the protagonists? And how do we address the issue of diversity in the analysis of disasters?

Feminist methodology provides us with some clues in this respect, which we have adapted to our own research practice. At the beginning of our projects and particularly with respect to preparing for the fieldwork in the localities of Dichato and Coliumo (Chile, 2019),

Lorca and the island of La Palma (Spain, 2019 and 2023, respectively), we collected together all the available sociodemographic data. However, accessing data disaggregated by sex was not always possible, as much of this information is only available in aggregated form. In our attempt to understand the context, we did not limit ourselves to quantitative data. Instead, we also relied on the knowledge of team members who were more familiar with the territory and topic under study. In this sense, the interdisciplinary and international nature of the team has been fundamental to enabling us to have a comprehensive and diverse view of the phenomena under investigation.

This vast knowledge of the context, together with the importance of addressing diversity, guided us through the research process and was particularly important in the design of the samples for the focus groups and interviews. When considering their composition, we were expressly looking for plurality, both in the affected population and in the technical staff and decision-makers involved in disaster scenarios. To achieve this, we identified key agents operating in each territory and established relationships and alliances with them. These agents helped us to select people to take part in the research, and this collaboration enabled us to include the diversity of voices and experiences that we were looking for. In fact, for this reason, the samples in both projects differed from those in other studies, which mainly focus on individuals who are notable because of their position in the power structure (people appearing in the media, politicians, managers, etc.). This approach has enabled the participation of people who have played less visible but often equally important roles in the disaster and its management while taking into account social diversity.

Nevertheless, perhaps what best defines our research is the importance given to the creation of collective knowledge. This way of tackling research has an ethical dimension, in that it incorporates different perspectives; gives equal value to contributions coming from different hierarchical positions; and mitigates the biases that may well arise when a single academic, from a single discipline and/or territorial reality, works in isolation. We work in a collective way both in the design of our projects and in their methodological development, including the design of the fieldwork, although what is perhaps most worthy of note is the procedure followed in the analysis of the qualitative data.

Some of the researchers had previous experience with “team analysis”, which had been carried out as part of an international project and improved on over the years. In this approach, a team of researchers works together to interpret the data rather than individuals acting independently, as is usually the case in most research projects [25] (p. 39). The procedure followed by our team involved the initial participation of three researchers in the creation of lists of codes to codify the qualitative data. These lists were trialed with other colleagues and validated, reaching a sufficiently high level of agreement (around 80% in both projects). Following this, a session was held with the colleagues involved in the codification process with the aim of agreeing on the criteria so that the subsequent work could be carried out individually but in a coordinated way. Next, the subgroup that had initially created the list of codes was charged with resolving, in periodic meetings, discrepancies linked to each coder. Once the codification was completed, the interpretative analysis of each code was carried out by subgroups of experts in the field who came from diverse disciplines and territories. In this way, we tried to generate collective knowledge that went beyond the simple perspective of each analyst examining the data on their own. This type of analysis transcends that conducted in studies involving only researchers from a single country, which is quite a common practice in international projects despite it not allowing for particularly in-depth comparisons to be made. Our model is far more costly in terms of time, but we believe that it is more respectful toward the discourse of the participants in the focus groups and interviews, as well as toward the work of the research team members, and as such, it is more appropriate for dealing with comparative research.

3.5. Generating and Sharing Transformative Knowledge

Finally, feminist research has a fundamental ethical dimension, in that it seeks to produce knowledge that promotes an egalitarian society. In our research into gender

and disasters, we try to understand not only the impact the disaster has but also the experiences, worries and needs of the affected community. This knowledge is not of interest to us purely due to our desire to investigate; rather, it is valuable in terms of informing the development of comprehensive disaster risk management plans that reduce the risk of future catastrophes occurring and preventing the inequalities that accompany them. Similarly, feminist research in this area of study can influence the response to a disaster in such a way that not only are existing social privileges not reinforced but opportunities for the reconstruction to be more equitable can be identified.

From a feminist perspective, we are aware of the importance of scientific knowledge being incorporated into public action in order to be useful to society. On this basis, we understand that sharing the results of our work socially is as important as scientific production per se, even if this process is not always easy and also involves ethical issues. On the one hand, it should be taken into account that the message to be conveyed, including the language and images used, as well as the channels employed, needs to be appropriate. On the other hand, if we want the results of our research to reach and be understood by the community, it is wise to identify the social agents involved and include them as participants in the research process.

In our case, we try to ensure that the knowledge generated has an impact at the community level, and therefore, we have not focused the scientific dissemination of our results only on the publication of articles in academic journals, which are generally not accessible to the general public. We have also chosen more inclusive distribution channels, such as magazines that use less technical language, some of which have been promoted by the feminist movement [26]. We have also paid particular attention to presenting our work in various contexts beyond the walls of universities (community associations, libraries, municipal facilities, etc.) with the aim of raising community awareness. As such, we have used social media (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and X) to publish audiovisual content that reaches a wider audience (in terms of age, educational level, social class, ethnicity, etc.) and on an international scale, thus contributing to the democratization of accessing knowledge. Lastly, some of the findings from our work have had media coverage, principally through interviews with members of the research team. In all these actions, we are seeking to ensure that knowledge is not limited to the specialized space of academia, and we have been careful to transmit non-stereotypical images of individuals affected by disasters of natural origin, particularly by making visible the important social role played by women in all phases of the disaster.

As we said before, it is not easy to transmit scientific knowledge to society at large, and in this sense, those of us who conduct studies from a women's, gender and/or feminist perspective know that social movements, particularly feminist movements, are essential allies if we are to achieve an impact that is transformative [27]. In the field of disasters, it is likewise essential to be able to count on the support and/or involvement of agents who participate in reducing and managing risk. In our projects, we have actively sought the support of such stakeholders, who have collaborated at various moments in the research process, especially at the point of drawing up recommendations based on the results. Within the GENDER Project, we ran an international congress that focused on civil society organizations, particularly those from the feminist movement, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations and other agents involved in risk management in different Latin American countries (Argentina, Chile, Spain, Panama and Uruguay). As a result of this event, a Policy Brief was produced, which collected together the principal recommendations from both the congress and the project. In the GENDER-IN Project, which also has objectives with an applied dimension, we are exploring various tools aimed at facilitating the participation of the key agents involved in disaster risk reduction. And, in particular, we are evaluating formulas to increase the impact of our work, such as Citizen Engagement practices, so that the knowledge generated can be transferred socially and will thus be as transformative as possible.

4. Conclusions

This article does not pretend to be an abstract reflection on ethics in the research process but rather aims to bring together our experiences at the moment of addressing the specific ethical issues that we have had to deal with in our research. Both the research team members and the authors of this paper are all social scientists, and we, therefore, do not have specialist philosophical knowledge, which is why writing this paper has been a challenge in itself. In doing so, we have basically relied on women's, gender and feminist studies, all of which introduce a way of understanding and practicing science that has provided us with some of the tools necessary to carry out this task, particularly important in studies focusing on disasters.

As we demonstrate throughout the text, conducting research from this perspective entails diverse ethical challenges that have been taken into account throughout the research process. Our practice has led us to reflect as a team and articulate formulas for addressing gender bias and its relationship with other systems of oppression. In a similar vein, we have made visible and confronted the power relations that often exist in research scenarios, and we have developed approaches that aim to facilitate the most egalitarian participation possible, both in terms of the researchers and the people involved in the disaster (affected populations, decision-makers, technical staff, socio-community leaders, etc.). In our projects, we have paid particular attention to the context within which the phenomena under study were produced and to the incorporation of intersectionality. However, we do not stop at that; instead, we particularly value the production of knowledge that integrates contributions from all the participants of the studies, both those working as researchers in the field and those who are agents involved in disaster risk management, including the affected population. In this way, we seek to generate collective knowledge, which is not limited to obtaining results that are useful to the community concerned; rather, it is built in collaboration with them. By proceeding in this way, we attempt to integrate greater social diversity, including the knowledge of people in peripheral social positions. And lastly, we actively seek to make the scientific results transcend society, being conscious that raising feminist awareness is indispensable in order that the various agents involved in disaster risk management incorporate a gender perspective in their interventions.

In following this approach to research, we do not limit ourselves simply to complying with all the formal and universalist requirements of the deontological ethics model, and we have also gone beyond the utilitarian ethics model since, although we are interested in the results of our research being of benefit to society, we do not ignore the means through which the knowledge is generated. In this respect, we have carried out a global reflection that covers all the research phases, attempting to humanize the process and guarantee the active participation and wellbeing of the social agents involved and taking into account the context within which the knowledge is produced. Specifically, then, we propose the use of approaches that incorporate the principles of feminist ethics and feminist ethics of care, engaging researchers in a continuous learning process—keeping them open to dialog and reflection—and making them aware of their limitations. And all of this is accomplished with the overarching aim of generating knowledge that is more ethical, socially useful and egalitarian.

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Notes

- ¹ We use these terms, which encompass all studies carried out within this approach, in the widest sense, being aware that studies conducted with women are not necessarily the same as taking a gender or feminist perspective. However, by mentioning each of these approaches, we wish to recognize the important contributions they each make and their influence on scientific knowledge, as well as their diversity.
- ² Androcentrism is a vision of the world in male terms, that is, a reconstruction of the social universe from a male perspective. Specifically, it expresses itself in a construction of the ego as male rather than female, with a concomitant view of females as objects rather than subjects, as acted upon rather than as actors [2].

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