International Strategy for Disaster Reduction

Third Global Congress of Women in Politics and Governance

Focus on Gender in Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction

Manila, Philippines
19-22 October 2008

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Mission

The ISDR aims at building disaster resilient communities by promoting increased awareness of the importance of disaster reduction as an integral component of sustainable development, with the goal of reducing human, social, economic and environmental losses due to natural hazards and related technological and environmental disasters.

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Excellencies, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my privilege to speak here today.

We are here to examine an issue that at first glance seems both broad and very specific: gender in climate change and disaster risk reduction. First of all, gender, disaster reduction, and climate change, are all cross-cutting issues that impact every part of development. What is more, their specific areas of overlap and linkages with each other, represent key solutions to protecting development gains.

To signal my intent early, the main point I wish to explain today is that disaster risk reduction is an extremely important entry point for helping to mainstream gender issues into climate change work – specifically, into climate change adaptation. To offer this explanation, I have first, a few remarks on how climate change, disaster risk reduction and gender are linked.

We know the risks posed by climate change – intensifying natural hazards, leading to more devastating and frequent disasters, costing more dollars, more lives, and the future of too many people. 80% of all disasters are related with climate hazards– droughts, floods, storms – and these are already on the rise. Climate change adaptation is becoming ever more urgent, and disaster risk reduction is a powerful tool for this task.

In a practical sense, adapting to the increasing risks of climatic hazards, is disaster risk reduction in action. At an international and national policy level, the disaster risk reduction plan adopted by 168 governments in 2005, the Hyogo Framework for Action to build the resilience of nations and communities to disasters, is a ready tool for the task. UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon just a few days ago called on Member State Ministers to ensure that disaster risk reduction and the Hyogo Framework are urgently integrated more strongly into national and international climate change policy – as the first tool out of the box to start work on large-scale climate change adaptation.

So, it has been acknowledged at a high level that disaster risk reduction is an inextricable part of responsible climate change policies and practices. We already know that climate change will increase disasters – there is no reason to wait for disaster to strike. Disaster risk reduction is based on a philosophy of prevention, not reaction. Its bottom line is the need to reduce people's vulnerabilities to natural hazards, whether through better community preparedness and early warning, through more public awareness and political engagement, or through more risk-sensitive development, like what to grow or build, where and how. The way we build, organize and manage our communities, cities and economies, can make the difference between catastrophe, and weathering the storm.

We need scaled up disaster prevention, to cope with the changes already happening and which are predicted to get worse. The role of women in these preventive efforts, is utterly crucial – we need women's leadership at all levels to make decision-making truly responsive and participatory manner. We also need to rigorously apply what we have learnt from gender perspectives, when using disaster risk reduction for climate change adaptation. This is vital to how all of us on this

planet will cope with the increased disasters that climate change and the increasing vulnerability will bring.

I probably do not need to tell you that women are already more vulnerable and disadvantaged compared to men around the world – or that, unsurprisingly, disasters exacerbate gender inequalities that already exist. Women bear the brunt of disasters, and are often left out of disaster management and response plans. But the story of women and disasters is not simply one of victimhood. Women are key to making communities and nations better prepared and more resilient to natural hazards. Women's capacities and strengths cannot be overlooked if we are to take up all weapons in the fight against the effects climate change could have on human society.

Why do women hold so much unused potential in this fight? Women in developing countries are still largely responsible for securing food, water, and energy in homes. Drought is going to be hitting hard in developing countries across Africa and Asia – and collecting and managing water, in so many places, is women's work. Preventing and managing flood, sea level rise, and landslides, takes environmental and natural resource management. And women are key natural resource managers and guardians of environmental knowledge in traditional societies, gathering fuel, food and medicine, labouring in fields, tending to the forests, rivers and shorelines. When it comes to money and assets in struggling communities, women's private or 'unofficial' earnings, emergency food sources, belongings and savings are so often the 'fallback' when the 'official' main source of income - men's work - has been wiped out by disasters.

Indeed, women's forethought is often a kind of crisis insurance. This interesting fact is a symptom of a very specific, real-world gendered distribution of work and labour – in particular, the fact that women's labour and potential contributions to making good decisions for the whole community, is devalued and overlooked under normal circumstances. This is why a gender analysis simply cannot be left out of any assessment of risks, or left out of plans for adapting to natural hazards and climate change. There is no way you can analyse what a society or community needs in the way of survival and development, if you don't incorporate the different ways that women and men work and organize their lives.

Gender perspectives have made inroads in disaster risk reduction, in development practice, and in the climate change community – but much more needs to be done. Progress on gender issues in disaster risk reduction, as in so many other fields, has been slow, inconsistent, and dependent on dedicated, passionate individuals. Ultimately, we need to go institutional. Gender focal points, despite their expertise, commitment, and growing numbers and networks, are often marginalised within their institutions. To be blunt, the focal point approach is not achieving what it should be, which is to mainstream gender perspectives into institutions as a whole.

In fact emphasis on setting up Gender Focal Points has resulted, in my relatively young sector, in the opposite of mainstreaming. Appointing sole gender desks and focal points lets organizations or governments as a whole off the hook. And often, the focal point chosen has limited authority or influence. They can also become isolated by their own expertise in women-centred work. Perceptions that their area is 'just women's issues' can marginalise them, when institutions still have not understood that women's issues are ultimately everyone's issues.

How can we change this trend of isolating and ghettoising gender issues? We know that to make effective change on the ground, we cannot just concentrate on one group – but this cuts both ways. Using a comprehensive gender perspective is, I believe, the best way forward, as opposed to both a default 'gender-blind' male-focused approach, *or* the earlier popular 'woman-centred' approach amongst development and humanitarian agencies.

Gender perspective leaders in disaster risk reduction have made a distinct shift beyond a purely woman-centred approach, towards a comprehensive societal gender analysis. This of course has a primary emphasis on the overlooked experiences of women, but also provides a more thorough perspective that can be mainstreamed into overall programmes and practices, due to its emphasis on the different gendered realities and experiences of the whole community - women and men, girls and boys.

To succeed, we also need large-scale and systematic capacity building so that all technical experts also become gender experts, who really understand that the success of their programmes relies on whether they understand how women and men will implement change.

We need to find or convert more male champions of gender perspectives and women's empowerment.

We need to learn each other's languages better or simply use plainer language – too often, gender experts and climate change or disaster risk experts talk past each other without connecting; with vocabularies of hard science on one hand, and social science or social theory on the other.

As national and organizational leaders, we must even stop turning up to forums and making recommendations to others – and instead start walking the talk in our own organizations. We must put our houses in order, so that everyone, from top to bottom, can view their work from a critical gender perspective. Our goal needs to be to make gender focal points unnecessary.

To return to the overall theme of this conference, we also need synergy, not competition, between these three linked disciplines. Let us not fool ourselves; there is competition for donor attention, and this is misguided. Gender and climate change are not competing priorities – they need to be tackled together; and disaster risk reduction is an incisive entry point for linking the two – through adaptation.

Disaster risk reduction is a real and incredibly useful entry-point for doing gender-sensitive climate change adaptation. The way that disaster risk reduction puts gender issues onto the climate change agenda addresses core development concerns, and is a great opportunity for mainstreaming gender. We are talking about survival for agropastoralists and coastal people, through innovative water, drought and flood management that must be implemented by women to have enough impact. We are talking about keeping livelihoods sustainable, income sources diverse, and reducing poverty in the face of disasters, through valuing and building on women's skills, knowledge and work.

The connections are so clear, that I believe, with concerted effort, we can build understanding, political accountability and capacity on this common ground. To start with, we must build capacity, develop trainings, tools and guidelines, and most importantly, build multi-sectoral organizational alliances - so that gender experts understand how to use disaster risk reduction to put gender issues into the climate change adaptation picture; and so technical adaptation specialists understand the importance of gender for their work.

This is rich territory for change, for synergy, for advancing all of these incredibly important concerns in concert, not competition, and for making real change to real people.

Your excellencies/ladies and gentlemen,

To achieve what we collectively aimed for today, we need to take concrete actions in our respective capacity to address the poor understanding of the links among gender, disaster risk reduction and climate change; the lack of genuine political accountability and financial resources for global advocacy and action for gender equality in disaster risk reduction and climate change; and lack of institutional and individual capacity and tools to mainstream gender in disaster risk reduction and climate change.

In concluding, I ask for you to show leadership in this joint cause, and I offer my own commitment to stand beside you.

Thank you.