



HIGH-LEVEL PANEL ON THE OCCASION OF THE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY, 8 March 2005

Gender Equality and Disaster Risk Reduction Sálvano Briceño, Director, ISDR Secretariat (Geneva)

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- I feel very honored to address this important event in the observance of the International Women's Day, on behalf of the ISDR inter-agency secretariat and the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr. Jan Egeland
- Gender equality is not a separate topic, but rather a cross cutting element that needs to be considered in an integrated manner in ALL development projects or activities if we are to achieve sustainable development in our societies.
- Since our mandate is related to disasters triggered by natural hazards, and how to reduce their impact, I am going to focus on this particular topic.
- The so called "natural" disasters -or rather disasters triggered by natural hazards such as floods, storms, droughts, tsunamis, earthquakes and landslides-, continue to claim thousands of lives each year all over the world. The economic losses resulted from these disasters exceed contributions from international development sources in many developing countries, and in some cases they even exceed annual gross domestic product.
- These disasters and their increasing impact is mainly result of unsustainable development practices and processes. In the long term, the future disaster profile, will very much depend on the daily development decisions that we make, such as where and how do we build our cities and villages, how do we manage our scarce water resources, how do we manage the environment, how do we educate our children and how do we communicate and inform the public on these issues. Both women and men have equally important roles in all this.
- The importance of gender equality has been recognized recurrently in many global processes. The Beijing Platform for Action has provided valuable guidance to many other international processes. In particular, on our subject, the

second World Conference on Disaster Reduction (WCDR), which took place in Kobe, Japan 18-22 January 2005, also benefited from the Beijing process. The WCDR stressed the fact that gender perspective should be integrated into all disaster management decision-making processes, including those related to risk assessments, early warning, information management, education and training. The major outcome of the WCDR, the Hyogo Framework for Action, 2005-2015, outlines the different priority areas for action for the next 10 years.

- Women and men are affected by disasters differently and the response to their needs must take into consideration these differences. Women play a primary role in providing assistance to the family and the community in prevention activities as well as during disasters. They are disproportionately affected by disasters and face targeted gender-based violence and exploitation in the aftermath of disasters. Women are often left out of planning for the response and therefore the special needs of women and girls are not met –or met as an afterthought. The special talents and skills of women are not capitalized upon –wasting a valuable resource.
- During the last decade, the number of natural disasters has risen. This increase triggers questions on how women, men, girls and boys are affected differently by these disasters and how each of these groups can play a vital role in assisting the family and the community to return to their normal life. Are we learning from our experiences? Are we documenting what works? I believe we can do much more to thoroughly understand the gender dimensions of disasters triggered by natural hazards.
- Both the humanitarian and the sustainable development communities are striving to meet the challenges faced by the upsurge in disasters. The ISDR secretariat together with OCHA, DESA, UNDP and other partners are planning joint discussions at the upcoming ECOSOC and General Assembly sessions.
- OCHA for example issued in 2004 a gender policy and action plan which provides a firm foundation on which to strengthen gender mainstreaming in disasters. The response to the tsunami offered some new insights to mainstreaming gender into the global response. Gender advisers were sent to the field in the first wave of teams to assess the extent of the damage and plan accordingly.
- In recognition of the importance of gender and disaster risk reduction, participants from 28 countries met at the East-West Center in Honolulu last August, to develop a strategy for incorporating gender-fair practices in disaster risk management. One of the outcomes of the Conference was a set of recommendations, prepared by the platform on Gender Equality and Disaster Risk Reduction, in preparation for the WCDR. These recommendations are all relevant and provide concrete guidelines on how to ensure that gender perspectives are consistently integrated into all aspects of disaster risk reduction:

- 1) **Mainstream a Gender Perspective in all Disaster Management initiatives.** We can encourage civil society and NGOs to mainstream a gender perspective in the promotion of sustainable development processes,

including disaster reduction, preparedness, response and mitigation strategies. We should also target information and resources to non-traditional leaders of social institutions in the civil society community to facilitate education of disaster issues. Build capacity within government infrastructure so that resource allocation reflects gender issues.

- 2) **Build capacity in women's groups and community-based organizations.** We should foster equitable opportunities for participation, including the provision of resources and support for underserved community members. We should also respect and incorporate culture and traditional knowledge, as well as ensure access to information, resources, and funding that will support women and women's group to be active in disaster management and to take leadership roles and responsibilities. Equally important is to integrate issues of poverty and social vulnerability in designing disaster risk reduction programmes to ensure that root problems are addressed and increase opportunities for grassroots groups to participate.
- 3) **Ensure Gender Mainstreaming in communications, training and education.** It is important to develop curriculum standards and introduce formal, non-formal and informal education and training programmes at all levels including in the areas of science, technology and economics. We need to focus on an integrated, gender-sensitive approach to environmentally sound and sustainable resource management and disaster reduction, response and recovery, to change attitudes and behavior in rural and urban areas. Media is an important tool to raise awareness and change behavior and attitudes, and therefore we need to educate the media on their role and the opportunities to use culturally appropriate communication tools to sensitize and educate the public on disaster risk management.
- 4) **Ensure opportunities for women in science and technology.** It is crucial to increase participatory action research in science and technology and increase funding for participatory research through scientific funding agencies, foster greater integration of traditional knowledge into disaster risk reduction programmes, and continue to focus on recruiting and retaining women into science and technology. Also to establish an agenda for gender specific research in risk reduction.
- 5) **Ensure gender mainstreaming in programme implementation, monitoring and evaluation.** It is important to develop policies ensuring disaster risk reduction is gender sensitive and addresses social equity to ensure that these issues are part of international and national disaster risk reduction agendas. In order to monitor the progress, we need to develop benchmarks and indicators to monitor efforts to integrate gender equality and social vulnerability in national and international disaster reduction activities.

- These recommendations have been prepared by the Platform on Gender Equality¹, which is composed of international, regional, national, local, community-based,

¹ More information is available in the gender section of www.unisdr.org and under the thematic segment, cluster 3.4, in www.unisdr.org/wcdr. Also, the "2005 Gender and Disaster Sourcebook" which is a one-stop, user friendly electronic guide will be available in December 2005 through the Gender and Disaster

governmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as academic and research institutions, disaster risk managers and practitioners. Many of these recommendations are not only valid for the topic of disaster reduction, but also for any other development activity that needs to consider a gender balanced approach.

- Gender equality is possibly the single most important goal in the field of disaster reduction as without it no risk and vulnerability reduction can be achieved in an effective and sustainable manner. It is condition sine qua non for the achievement of disaster reduction objectives.
- Much remains to be done however, for effectively implementing the above recommendations. There are many good examples of good practices and increasingly so, but the needs remain much greater and vulnerabilities continue to increase even more rapidly. Un-planned urban growth, environmental degradation and global warming are some of the major risk generating activities currently developing too rapidly.
- Disaster risk reduction remains a low priority programme in the United Nations; it is entirely dependant on extra-budgetary or voluntary contributions. The High-level Panel made a very minor recognition of the issue in a small paragraph and failed to identify the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction launched in 2000 and the recent second World Conference on Disaster Reduction and its substantive outcome, the Hyogo Framework for Action.
- Despite being one of the main obstacles for development in some countries, the annual Human Development Report of the UNDP has not yet addressed this important topic. Moreover, despite it being essential for the achievement of each of the eight Millennium Development Goals, it is referred indirectly in only one of the MDGs.
- Much greater priority continues to be given to conflicts or so called ‘complex emergencies’ despite the fact that disasters triggered by natural hazards provoke much greater and recurrent damage to communities in many more countries.
- Another obstacle we face is the prevailing fragmented approach to programming in the United Nations. We continuously advocate for joint programming but it continues to prove very difficult to implement. The importance of management and leadership in this regard, still requires greater attention.
- Therefore, the gaps remain huge and they can only be filled in with a concerted action of Governments and international organizations, to provide higher priority to these issues, to address them with joint programming exercises and to work in close partnership with non-governmental and community-based organizations, the private sector, the media and other relevant sectors.

I trust these reflections will contribute to keep making headway in the right direction.