

**Commission on the Status of Women
49th session**

High-level Plenary

**THE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION
OF RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT SOCIETIES (IFRC)**

**Statement by
Ms. Kate Wood
Special Representative of the IFRC and President of the Canadian Red Cross**

Madame Chairperson,

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is using the opportunity of its statement to the Commission to emphasise the significance of the conclusions of the recent World Conference on Disaster Reduction to the Commission's agenda.

At the Conference, the IFRC highlighted both the special vulnerability of women and girls in disaster situations, and their special capacity to contribute to community resilience and to recovery and development following a disaster.

There are many examples of the contribution women can make in such situations. Experience show that without the deliberate involvement of women in the planning and implementation of preparedness, response and recovery programmes the overall national performance will suffer.

The International Federation's key messages to the World Conference included the need for clear recognition by governments and other stakeholders of the role women commonly play in providing community support after disasters strike. Allied to this is the unhappy fact that women, because of their greater vulnerability, are often the people who suffer most from the very poverty, which affects their communities due to disasters.

We expressed the firm view at the Conference that governments, if they are to prepare effectively for the onslaught of disasters, must reach out to women and other under-represented groups both as beneficiaries and as participants in the decision-making integral to disaster preparedness and response work.

We were, therefore, of the view. that the outcomes represented in the Hyogo Framework for Action would have been improved by a more direct reference to the place women occupy in disaster preparedness and response. The Framework's main references to the place of women in such situations are in the section dealing with training and education opportunities. In our view there should also have been clear references in the General Objectives and the Priorities for Action.

The IFRC will continue to stress this point in its work, and our National Red Cross and Red Crescent members throughout the world will be utilising it in their work as auxiliaries to the public authorities. The Commission may wish to note, in this context, that governments have agreed that National Societies should be represented in national disaster management committees. They hold this role in many countries and regularly seek to ensure that government planning for preparedness and response includes appropriate gender recognition and the involvement of all people concerned, without any discrimination.

The IFRC made the point, in its closing speech at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction that there was much more work outstanding to bring the sentiments of the conference to reality. We said we would use all opportunities at decision-making bodies to emphasise this need, and it is in this spirit that we also raise it at the Commission on the Status of Women.

Madame Chairperson,

The IFRC has been pleased to see the agencies of the United Nations family taking an active part in the development of programmes aimed against sexual exploitation and abuse. This work started some time ago, but its urgency has been given fresh expression by reports of serious abuse in some countries.

Our experience is, sadly, that when people are in situations of acute vulnerability in times of disaster or poverty they are all the more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse. We and our National Red Cross and Red Crescent Society membership urge all governments and others in a position of authority to maintain the strictest standards to protect people from abuse, with particular attention to those whose vulnerability is so acute.

With this in mind, we are particularly troubled by reports of girls whose lives have been ruined by rape and abuse in certain parts of Africa recently. These reports have been documented, and I will not repeat them now. My purpose, though, is to add our further concern that the behaviour, which includes the dehumanising treatment of women and girls, also spreads HIV/AIDS and other communicable diseases.

It destroys individuals and communities alike. It is an issue which demands concrete attention from bodies like this Commission, for it will only be possible to make an effective stand against this behaviour if there is a joint mobilisation of communities led by women, and governments determined to uphold the most basic of laws.

Madame Chairperson,

Our priority for the empowerment of women in disaster situations is not ours alone. We have been pleased by the emphasis the issue has received from a number of governments and international organisations recently. One example was a call in January by the Food and Agriculture Organisation for the empowerment of women so they could play a full role in decision-making about relief. This was in reaction to the situation in countries affected by the Tsunami, and was matched by specific programme objectives for affected women and girls announced by UNFPA at the same time.

The IFRC has mainstreamed the priority for women and girls in its work on disaster preparedness and response (and in all other programmes as well). It has also built internal processes through codes of conduct and other actions, but importantly has undertaken self-assessment and peer review within the processes of the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response. In our view it is important for all organisations to find transparent processes for ensuring that their behaviour matches their rhetoric, and we are glad to support those of SCHR in this highly relevant context.

Our hope is that the Commission on the Status of Women will be able to play a significant part in this matching of action to words. We believe the outcome of the World Conference on Disaster Reduction is a potential starting point for a new approach to this issue, and we look forward to opportunities to develop our thinking with delegations and Secretariat officials.

Thank you.