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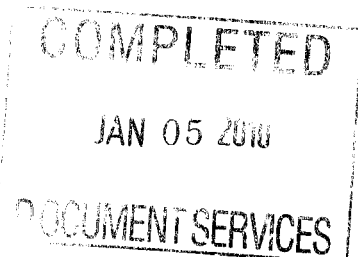
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MAINSTREAMING GENDER PERSPECTIVES IN NATURAL DISASTER MANAGEMENT*

Carolyn Hannan

While initial approaches to natural disasters focused on technological and engineering solutions, following the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) in the 1990s there has been increased recognition that many of the worst effects of natural disasters are directly linked to human behaviour, including settlement patterns and land use. The linkages between sustainable development and natural disasters are more clearly recognized today. Development practices which ignore natural hazards can contribute to environmental vulnerability. They can also hinder the achievement of sustainable development since disaster responses and humanitarian assistance absorb significant amounts of resources which would otherwise be allocated to development efforts.

Adequate responses to natural disasters must be multidisciplinary and inter-sectoral to adequately address both environmental impacts and social and economic disruption, including loss of life, injuries, and loss of livelihoods through the destruction of resources and property. While this recognition of social dimensions has resulted in increased attention to the importance of community involvement and ownership, gender perspectives have not been given adequate attention in policies and strategies to prevent and respond to natural disasters.

Incorporating gender perspectives in work on natural disasters requires a sound understanding of the gender perspectives in relation to environmental management in general, as well as of the specific gender perspectives in disaster risk management in the impact of disasters, and in emergency management/responses.^{1/} Ways and means of addressing these gender perspectives in the development of policies, strategies, action plans, and programmes need to be identified and put into operation.

INTERGOVERNMENTAL MANDATES ON GENDER EQUALITY AND NATURAL DISASTERS

Although *Agenda 21*,^{2/} adopted at the United Nations Conference on the Environment in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992, did not focus strongly on natural disasters, the increasingly important issue of natural disaster management was given greater attention at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg ten years later.^{3/} Chapter 24, "Global Action for Women Towards Sustainable and Equitable Development," called for countries to take urgent measures to avert the ongoing rapid environmental and economic degradation in developing countries, which generally affects the lives of women and chil-

dren in rural areas suffering drought, desertification and deforestation, armed hostilities, natural disasters, toxic waste, and the aftermath of the use of unsuitable agro-chemical products.

The *Yokohama Plan of Action*, adopted at the Yokohama World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction in 1994, called on Member States to stimulate community involvement, including that of socially disadvantaged groups. It also called for efforts to empower women and to include them as well as men in all stages of disaster management programmes and in capacity building.

The *Beijing Platform for Action*, adopted at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women,^{4/} recognized the differential impact of environmental disasters on women and called for greater investigation of relevant gender perspectives. It called on Member States, the United Nations system, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to systematically incorporate gender perspectives into environmental management and natural disasters.

The outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the United Nations General Assembly (2000) noted that the social and economic impacts of natural disasters and epidemics — and particularly the impact on women, gender relations, and the achievement of gender equality — remained relatively invisible as a policy issue. Women's roles as subsistence producers and users and managers of the environment were highlighted. The special session recommended that Governments should be assisted in developing gender-sensitive responses to humanitarian crises arising from armed conflict and natural disasters.^{5/}

An Expert Group Meeting on “Environmental Management and the Mitigation of Natural Disasters: A Gender Perspective,” was organized in Ankara, Turkey, from 6 to 9 November 2001, by the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (UN DAW) and the Inter-Agency Secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR), to support preparation for the forty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women in 2002, which focused on environmental management and the mitigation of natural disasters.^{6/}

The set of recommendations subsequently adopted by the Commission recognized that women play a vital role in disaster reduction, response, and recovery; that disaster situations aggravate vulnerable conditions and that some women face particular vulnerabilities; and that women's strengths in dealing with disasters and supporting their families and communities should be utilized to rebuild and restore their communities and mitigate against further disasters. Member States called for actions to protect and promote women's rights, enhance their capabilities, and ensure their full participation as well as to ensure their access to information, education, and all economic opportunities in relief and recovery projects. They also called for efforts to fully incorporate gender perspectives into all actions, to collect sex-disaggregated data, and to document good practices and lessons learned.

Following the tsunami disaster in South-East Asia at the end of December 2004, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) prepared a statement,^{7/} which stressed the need to identify and address the gender-specific needs and vulnerabilities of women and girls in all humanitarian and recovery responses. The Committee noted that there are gender perspectives to be taken into account in relation to impacts on both a long- and short-term basis, including in relation to health, security, and

livelihoods. Proactive steps were called for to ensure that women and girls living in the affected communities as well as local women's groups, and women community leaders and government officials, are full, equal, and effective participants in all relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction efforts, including the distribution of assistance. The Committee called for particular attention to specific vulnerabilities to gender-based violence, sexual abuse, and trafficking in the context of disasters. The Committee encouraged the use of ongoing efforts as a window of opportunity to ensure that the promotion of gender equality is a central pillar in the reconstruction and development of the affected communities, and that a gender perspective is integrated into all humanitarian efforts.

At its 49th session in 2005, the Commission on the Status of Women also adopted a resolution on natural disasters, including tsunami,^{8/} which urged governments to integrate gender perspectives into all phases of their planning for disaster preparedness and responses to natural disasters, and to ensure that women play an active and equal role. Member States strongly urged that necessary measures, including the development and implementation of gender-sensitive codes of conduct, be taken to protect women and girls from sexual exploitation and abuse and other forms of violence in the context of natural disasters, and that appropriate care and support be provided for those exposed to such violence. They called for training on the protection, rights, and particular needs of women and girls and for efforts to promote gender balance and gender sensitivity among representatives and staff. Gender-responsive programming and the allocation of resources in post-disaster relief, recovery, rehabilitation, and reconstruction efforts were also recommended.

The World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Kobe, Hyogo (Japan) in 2005 called for a gender perspective to be integrated into all disaster risk management policies, plans, and decision-making processes, including those related to risk assessment, early warning, information management, and education and training. It also urged the promotion of gender and cultural sensitivity training as integral components of education and training for disaster risk reduction (DRR).^{9/} The secretariat of the ISDR subsequently produced a guide for implementing the *Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2010: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters*.^{10/} The guide highlights the fact that gender is a core factor in disaster risk and in the reduction of risk. It calls for the use of gender-differentiated information to ensure the effective targeting of interventions at the most vulnerable groups; the use of gender assessments; the disaggregation of data by sex and the development of gender-sensitive indicators; the involvement of both women and men; and the use of gender-balanced teams.

Building on this work, in 2008 a new publication of the secretariat of the ISDR further demonstrated the importance of incorporating gender perspectives into DRR as well as the important links between DRR and climate change adaptation.^{11/} The publication highlights initiatives that have successfully incorporated gender perspectives into DRR interventions and emphasizes women's knowledge, capacity, and leadership, including their role in community decision making. The publication is an important source book of promising practices for mainstreaming gender perspectives into policies and programmes.

Most recently, the Commission on the Status of Women considered climate change as the emerging issue for its 52nd session in March 2008.^{12/} The Commission highlighted the fact that climate change is not a gender-neutral phenomenon and that women, particularly indigenous women, are among the most vulnerable to its effects. Because of the

responsibilities that women have for household food security, provision of water and energy, and income-generation activities, drought, deforestation, and erratic rainfall have a disproportionate impact on the well-being and livelihoods of women and their families. The withdrawal of girls from school to assist women in the heavier burdens resulting from the effects of climate change will have long-term impacts on women's empowerment. The Commission highlighted the fact that women are not just victims of climate change, but are also powerful agents of change. They have unique knowledge and expertise for both preventing, and addressing the effects of, climate change. Increased decision-making roles for women in sustainable development, and in the responses to climate change, were called for.

GENDER EQUALITY PERSPECTIVES ON THE MANAGEMENT OF NATURAL DISASTERS

Much of the attention to women and gender perspectives in relation to natural disasters has been in the context of discussions concerning women's vulnerability. Research has tended to focus on emergency response and management, in particular on the differential impacts of emergencies on women and men. There has been less attention to gender perspectives in the critical element of risk assessment and management. The role of women in prevention and in developing coping strategies in the aftermath of disasters has often been overlooked. As a result, many important capacity-building and other initiatives in disaster prevention and management bypass women and the effectiveness of the initiatives are significantly weakened.

RISK ASSESSMENT AND MANAGEMENT

Adequate attention to gender perspectives in risk management (including risk assessment) requires a broad focus on gender equality in relation to natural resource management. To understand the impact of natural disasters — the losses and costs for both women and men and their potential for recovery after disasters — it is necessary to increase awareness of the interactions of women and men with the environment. Both women and men are actively involved in the use and management of natural resources in developing countries. There are, however, important differences and inequalities between women and men in access to, and control over, resources, as well as in relation to knowledge of the resource base. Women and men may use different resources in the same environmental context, but they may also use the same resources in different ways.

Such differences have been well documented in various parts of the world. In forests, for example, women and men may depend on the same trees and shrubs for their livelihoods but may use them in different ways and for different purposes. Women may collect leaves, twigs, and small branches for fuel for domestic use or collect fruits and berries while men may cut down the trees for poles for building, for making tools or for firewood to sell in towns. In the area of fishing, women and men often also perform completely different activities. Men may be involved in fishing from boats while women are often responsible for the treatment of the catch — smoking, drying — and for marketing.

Women may, however, also fish from the shore and women are heavily involved in shrimp production in many areas.

Women's roles in natural resource management have generally been less well understood compared with men's, with the exception of some areas such as water supply, fuel-wood supply, and food crop production. Women's roles in cash-crop production (often as a critical source of labour) have usually been underestimated, particularly where men have control over the products of the labour. Wetlands development policies and strategies also often totally ignore the fact that women as well as men utilize, and are dependent on, the wetland resources. This can have negative effects on both women's livelihood strategies and the sustainability of wetlands.

Natural disasters — both slow-onset disasters and major disasters, including erosion and other forms of soil degradation, pollution of freshwater, shoreline erosion, flooding, loss of wetlands, drought, and desertification — impact directly on women in their roles as providers of food, water, and fuel. Climate change can also impact on women's productive roles since the physical impacts of global warming — rising sea levels, flooding in low-lying delta areas, and increased saltwater intrusion — can jeopardize sustainable livelihood strategies. Food security and family well-being are threatened when the resource base on which women rely to carry out their critical roles and obtain supplementary incomes is undermined.

In rural areas in many parts of the world, women's insecure land tenure can cause unsustainable practices and be a critical factor in constraining their potential for recovery in the aftermath of disasters. Greater attention should be given to land tenure in research on gender and sustainable development, and in relation to its implications in the context of climate change and natural disasters.

Effective risk assessment and management require the active involvement of local communities and civil society groups to ensure the decreased occurrence of disasters and reduced losses and costs when they do occur. The knowledge, contributions, and potential of both women and men need to be identified and utilized. Because gender perspectives are not always taken adequately into account in environmental management, women may not be consulted and involved to the same extent as men in natural disaster management programmes. Women's considerable knowledge of natural resources and their contributions to environmental management are often under-utilized. Women may not receive information on hazards and risks and the links to natural resource use and environmental sustainability to the same extent as men, which could reduce their potential to contribute directly and indirectly to ensuring environmental sustainability and disaster prevention.

Although there are clear indications of a positive shift from a purely technological response in early warning and information systems, there is still much to be done before the responses adequately incorporate the relevant social perspectives, including gender equality perspectives. The social context needs much more attention if adequate early warning and prevention systems are to be developed and losses and costs to individuals, households, and communities are to be reduced. The particular roles, responsibilities, and needs of women may provide valuable information for developing effective early warning and information systems.

In some contexts, access to information will not, however, be sufficient for women to be able to respond adequately. Because of gender-specific constraints — including lack of access to decision making, lack of capital of different forms (financial, physical, human,

and social) and socio-cultural restrictions on mobility — women may need additional support in order to be able to effectively act upon such information/warnings.

DIFFERENTIAL IMPACTS OF NATURAL DISASTERS ON WOMEN AND MEN^{13/}

The level of risk in relation to natural disasters is determined by both physical and social factors. Physical factors determine the probability of occurrence of floods, drought, landslides, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, storms or cyclones, as well as the intensity of such hazards. Social vulnerability to disasters — particularly in relation to the level of impact — is increasingly the focus of attention as the importance of human action and social status in natural disasters has become more evident. Social vulnerability is determined by a number of factors, including hazard awareness at the individual and community levels; condition of infrastructure, including housing standards; legal systems regulating important issues such as housing and transport systems; community organization; and effectiveness of public policy and administration, particularly related to recognition of susceptibility to natural disasters, development of preventive strategies, and organization of responses to disasters.

The costs of natural disasters are not distributed evenly across populations. Poverty plays a key role as poorer segments of the population can face greater exposure to negative impacts due to risk factors such as poor housing, vulnerable location of farms and settlements, and limited access to information, as well as constraints to the development of effective preventive or coping strategies. Certain groups of the poor may be more vulnerable because of specific constraints, such as female-headed households, people with disabilities, older persons, and street children.

Disaster responses of individuals and groups tend to mirror the status, roles, and social situation of these individuals and groups in society. Because of their continuing subordinate position in many societies, women in general may be subjected to specific vulnerabilities — of which one of the most important is the limited access to information, training, and capacity building, as well as to opportunities to put forward their priorities and needs in decision-making processes at the household and community levels. The fact that women have limited access to decision making and leadership positions hinders their involvement in the “public” sphere and restricts their contribution to disaster prevention and to emergency response and management.

Existing gender inequalities regarding the enjoyment of human rights, socioeconomic and political status, access to, and control over, resources, access to education, health, safe shelter, and other services, and access to safety nets, as well as exposure to violence, can place women in even more vulnerable situations in the context of natural disasters. Gender-specific vulnerabilities in disaster contexts which have been documented include socio-cultural norms which restrict mobility or impose impractical dress codes, and confinement to the home for large parts of the day (either because of the division of labour or the practice of seclusion); and, in some parts of the world, poor physical condition due to poor health, malnutrition, overwork, and lack of physical exercise. Women in special situations — older women, women with disabilities, pregnant or nursing women, as well as women with care-giving responsibilities for children, disabled and older persons, and

the sick, including people living with HIV/AIDS — face particular constraints in disaster situations.

The gender-specific impacts of natural disasters and other emergencies have been relatively well documented in some contexts. Natural disasters increase women's economic insecurity through the loss of essential productive resources, such as land, gardens, equipment, and animals. The loss of jewelry, utensils, and other traditional forms of capital can be a severe economic setback for women in many areas. Women in informal sector work, such as street vending, child care, and domestic work, or owners of small home-based businesses, may lose their jobs and have no means of securing compensation in existing recovery programmes. These women usually have fewer chances than men to find other sources of work. Credit programmes established may also overlook their needs.

In addition, women's workloads often increase dramatically because of their assuming more family, community, or care-giving responsibilities. Collection of water, fuel, and food may become significantly more difficult. Queuing for essential supplies or medical services may take long periods of time and reduce the time available for other important work. Girls may be forced to drop out of school in order to take over some women's tasks. If local schools are closed, girls may have more problems than boys in attending distant schools, particularly if there are transport problems or insecure routes to school.

Migration of men and youths may increase as a result of natural disasters and loss of jobs locally. This may lead to an increase in de facto female-headed households with limited supply of adult labour and insecure sources of income. Displacement and resettlement of communities as a result of natural disasters also involves specific problems and constraints for women, related to the division of labour and their responsibilities for family welfare. Access to shelter, supplies of energy and water, sanitation facilities, schooling, and community services can become more difficult and increase risks to personal security, particularly where women and girls have to walk long distances from settlements and camps.

Gender-based biases and stereotypes, as well as heavy work burdens and sole responsibility for many household activities, may result in women not being able, to the same extent as men, to seek medical treatment for physical or psychological problems. In situations where men cannot gain access to adequate counseling and other forms of stress support, the insecurity and anxiety that results from natural disasters may result in increased violence against women and children, including sexual violence. Sexual exploitation may also increase in the aftermath of natural disasters because of the vulnerable situations of many women and girls.

EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND RECOVERY PROGRAMMES^{14/}

Overlooking the contributions, priorities, and needs of women can hinder an effective emergency response and a full recovery process. Since the contributions of women at the household level and in the informal sector are not recognized in many contexts, the losses women experience in natural disasters are not always identified and taken into account in recovery programmes. In terms of economic recovery, women's contributions in the

informal sector and at the household level can be critical. Efforts to move beyond humanitarian assistance and relief programmes to more long-term development programmes must be informed by a gender perspective in order to be effective in securing sustainable, people-centred development for all.

Poverty plays a key role in relation to potential for developing adequate coping strategies. Those individuals and households with capital (financial, physical, human, and social) are in far better positions to recover quickly. Poor female-headed households — including those households where women are left alone because of post-disaster migration of men and youths — have reduced potential to develop effective strategies for recovery and sustainable livelihoods.

A rights-based approach is critical in disaster relief and reconstruction processes to ensure that women and men benefit equally. The specific contributions, priorities, and needs of both women and men should be taken into consideration in planning processes and in the allocation of resources. Economic and social rights can be violated, for example, if the health needs of both women and men are not met, and civil and political rights can be denied if women are not consulted and are denied the right to equitable participation, particularly at the decision-making level.

Some of the issues which need to be addressed in emergency and recovery programmes have already been briefly mentioned. Programmes must be developed on the basis of a greater understanding of gender-specific priorities and needs arising from the differential impacts of disasters in relation to: health, education, shelter, food supplies, water and sanitation, energy, and other basic supplies, as well as employment and income-generating opportunities.

A number of critical aspects can be highlighted:

- The specific **health** needs of women and girls should be given particular consideration, specifically those relating to reproductive health and access to sanitation;
- **Psycho-social counseling** should be provided to both women and men, based on recognition of their particular vulnerabilities in emergency situations;
- The increased risks of **violence** against women and children, including sexual exploitation, must be taken into account, particularly in situations where communities are forced to live in camps, and where security can be a serious issue for women and girls as they carry out their responsibilities for collection of firewood and water;
- Adequate **assessment of the roles, responsibilities, and access to resources** of women and men must be undertaken in order to understand the extent of losses and costs to women and men, respectively, and their potential for recovery; recovery programmes and allocation of resources (including credit and alternative employment programmes) must be based on this assessment;
- There must be **systematic gender-responsive analysis of the needs and priorities** at the household level for shelter, water, energy, food supply, psycho-social support, and care of the sick and injured; **adequate allocation of resources must be on the basis of this analysis**, particularly to those activities which are the responsibility of women and girls;
- Consultation processes and efforts to increase community participation and ownership of recovery processes must find the ways and means of ensuring the **full involvement of women as well as men**;
- **Capacity-building and training initiatives should explicitly target women** as well

as men; and

- Women's particular **needs for specific support mechanisms** should be recognized, since the gender mainstreaming approach does not preclude the need for initiatives targeted at women.

Aid organizations, including NGOs, must develop the awareness, commitment, and capacity to incorporate gender perspectives into all dimensions of their work on natural disasters. Women can be marginalized if their contributions and potential are not recognized and all attention is focused on men. The inputs of external actors can unintentionally perpetuate or even exacerbate the differences and inequalities between women and men. Failure to recognize women's productive work in, for example, the informal sector, may reduce their access to critical economic assistance.

Development opportunities can arise in the wake of natural disasters. This can offer unique possibilities for empowering women and advancing their positions within their households and communities, but only if women are perceived as full contributors to the recovery process. Gender stereotypes can be challenged as women take on new roles and learn new skills, both in the household and community. Men's roles may also change as they are required to take on more responsibility for securing basic needs for water, energy, and food and participating in the care of children, the sick, and injured. This can lead to significant changes in attitudes and practices over the long term.

Aid organizations can facilitate this process of change by explicitly recognizing the importance of the more mundane, less visible recovery efforts at the household level, which are usually the responsibility of women, as well as the more dramatic efforts at the "public" community level, most often undertaken by men. Conscious efforts to support the political mobilization of women in the wake of natural disasters in community mobilization programmes can have a significant impact on women's empowerment. Programmes which provide training and credit and are focused on the development of new skills — such as on information communication technologies (ICTs) and new areas of employment — must be explicitly targeted at women as well as men to ensure the development of women's capabilities and a greater recognition of their potential.

Organizations working in this area should develop clear policies, strategies, and action plans, and guidelines on incorporating gender perspectives in emergency situations. Guidelines should highlight the possible gender perspectives which could arise and the ways and means of incorporating these into different phases of emergency operations. While the response should always be context-specific, it is possible to identify generic issues that might arise and questions that should always be asked, relating to the roles, contributions, knowledge, priorities, and needs of women as well as men.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, gender equality issues are significant in the construction of social vulnerability to risk in the context of natural disasters, the differential impact of disasters, and the potential for developing adequate responses to hazards and disasters. Gender-based differences and inequalities interact with social class, race, and ethnicity, and age to put some women and girls in particularly vulnerable situations.

On the other hand, women should not only be seen as victims. Women are agents of change, actors, and contributors at all levels. Full understanding of the roles, contributions, and knowledge of women as well as men, in relation to the natural resource base is an essential starting point in working with natural disasters, particularly in terms of risk assessment and management. Emergency responses and recovery programmes must explicitly target women as well as men in all areas of support, based on the recognition that women's involvement is essential to maximizing the potential for sustainable recovery and development, and for the reduction of natural disasters.

A number of concrete recommendations can be made:

- **Policies, strategies, and methodologies** for disaster reduction should be people-centred and based on consultative and participatory processes involving all stakeholders, including both women and men.
- **Multi-dimensional and inter-sectoral approaches** in risk assessment and management and emergency response and management are needed to ensure that critical social perspectives are incorporated in policies, strategies, and action plans, with an adequate focus on gender equality.
- The **added value of incorporating social dimensions, including gender perspectives**, in work on natural disasters needs to be made explicit. This requires moving beyond a focus on women as victims, to an approach which recognizes the contributions and potential of women as well as men.
- The **research** which does exist on gender equality and environmental management, as well as risk assessment, emergency responses, and recovery programmes on natural disasters, should be more systematically **compiled in a form which is useful to policymakers and administrators**.
- **Key areas where research is needed** should be identified and resources made available for research projects, based on **participatory processes** where both local women and men can be involved in identifying vulnerabilities and solutions.
- A better understanding of the **linkages between gender equality, environmental management, and disaster reduction**, and the policy implications of these linkages, should be developed through data collection, research, and improved networking among the different stakeholders.
- **Guidelines** need to be developed on the types of gender-specific questions which should always be addressed in relation to environmental management, risk assessment, emergency response, and recovery programmes.
- Collection of **sex-disaggregated data** should be obligatory in all areas of work on natural disasters. Where such statistics are not available, this should be clearly pointed out as an important gap to be filled.

NOTES

* The views contained in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of the United Nations.

1/ For a good source on this issue, see E. Enarson *et al.*, *Working with Women at Risk: Practical Guidelines for Assessing Local Disaster Risk* (Miami, FL: International Hurricane Center, Florida International University, 2003).

2/ United Nations (UN), *Earth Summit Agenda 21: Programme of Action for Sustainable Development*. Rio

Declaration on Environment and Development (New York, 2002).

- 3/ UN, "Report of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, South Africa, 26 August-4 September 2002" (A/CONF/199/20) (New York, 2002).
- 4/ UN, "Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4-15 September" (New York, 1995), chapter 1, Resolution 1, Annex II.
- 5/ UN General Assembly resolution S-23/3, 10 June 2000, annex, paras. 46, 56, and 86a.
- 6/ UN Division for the Advancement of Women (UN DAW) and the Interagency Secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR), *Environmental Management and the Mitigation of Natural Disasters: A Gender Perspective* (Report of the Expert Group Meeting, Ankara, Turkey, 6-9 November 2001) (New York, 2001).
- 7/ UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, "Statement by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in regard to the Tsunami Disaster in South-East Asia," 26 December 2004; adopted by the Committee at its thirty-second session, 28 January 2005.
- 8/ UN, Commission on the Status of Women, Resolution 49/5, "Integrating a Gender Perspective in Post-Disaster Relief, Recovery, Rehabilitation, and Reconstruction Efforts, including in the Aftermath of the Indian Ocean Tsunami Disasters" (New York, 2005).
- 9/ UN, "Report of the World Conference on Disaster Reduction, Kobe, Hyogo, Japan, 18-22 January 2005" (A/CONF/206/6) (New York, 2005).
- 10/ UN/ISDR, *Words into Action: A Guide for Implementing the Hyogo Framework* (Geneva: UN/ISDR, 2007).
- 11/ UN/ISDR, *Gender Perspectives: Integrating Disaster Risk Reduction into Climate Change Adaptation. Good Practices and Lessons Learned* (Geneva: UN/ISDR, 2008).
- 12/ See <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/52sess.htm#climate>, for details on the expert panel held during the Commission on the Status of Women, including the issues paper, experts' papers, and the moderator's summary.
- 13/ For further information, see, for example, Enarson *et al.*, *Working with Women at Risk*; and UN DAW and UN/ISDR, "Environmental Management and the Mitigation of Natural Disasters."
- 14/ *Ibid.*

COMMENT*

Marion Pratt and Sezin Tokar

The article by Carolyn Hannan highlights the crucial importance of balancing technological and environmental aspects of natural disaster management with social science considerations; in particular, the role and use of gender analysis. The historical analysis of steps taken since the early 1990s to address gender concerns at the international level — through various plans of action, United Nations General Assembly sessions, conferences, and expert group meetings — provides evidence that these issues are being taken seriously. As the author aptly demonstrates, a significant amount of research has been conducted on gender and disasters, and volumes published on lessons learned and good practices; she provides a useful compendium of recommendations at the end of the article. However, the achievement of positive impact and change at the field level, as well as the institutionalization of gender sensitization, still face major challenges.

Constraints to Gender Applications in the Field

The very nature of humanitarian response — urgent and rushed in an effort to save as many lives as possible — does not lend itself to inclusive processes and procedures. The staffs of humanitarian organizations are under significant pressure to respond quickly to address immediate threats to the well-being of the affected populations and show tangible results. A concerted effort to reach the most vulnerable populations, including women-headed households, people with disabilities, widows, unaccompanied minors, and other groups takes extra time and effort, both of which are in short supply in disaster settings. Many among the most vulnerable do not speak English or another western language, effectively cutting them off from communications with international staff who are often the managers of response efforts. On the other hand, too few international responders speak local languages, thus reinforcing communication barriers. Where women are not part of the public sphere, access to them must be negotiated through male leaders. The perspectives of children and youth are often left out because they are not considered to be as valuable as those of adults. Engaging vulnerable populations is achieved by catering to their special needs and interests, holding meetings at times convenient to them, and in an atmosphere where they feel free to express their opinions and beliefs, and then taking the time to incorporate the information they provide into planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation.

Many humanitarian organizations do not have an adequate number of female staff members in positions of leadership and decision making, which can limit opportunities to connect with vulnerable women and other “invisible” individuals. Finally, the variability

within populations is also often overlooked in the rush to respond. Male heads of households do not always — or even often — represent well their family members' needs and interests, and those differences must be teased out. Other variables that need to be examined in order to tailor the response to needs and capacities include age, religion, ethnic affiliation, and socioeconomic status.

Lives and livelihoods of the majority of people in the least developed countries (LDCs) are highly susceptible to environmental fluctuations associated with weather and climate. Even a slight deviation from normal climatic conditions may have significant social and/or economic impacts on the most vulnerable population. Currently, the majority of the populations in LDCs do not have the capacity to cope with natural climate variation from one season or year to the next. Lack of adaptive capacity to natural climate variability will make them highly vulnerable to the potential effects of climate change. The causes of vulnerability may be due to lack of access to information, limited education and literacy, competition for natural resources, environmental degradation, and, ultimately, the lack of sustainable economic development opportunities. The implementation of gender-sensitive programming at the community level — adapted to the given cultural context — is as important as programmes implemented at higher (regional, national) levels. An approach that integrates gender-sensitive disaster management at the community, national, and international levels is necessary to increase the resilience of the most vulnerable populations to natural disasters. However, disaster risk reduction (DRR) alone cannot address challenges that the humanitarian community faces without parallel opportunities for economic development.

Challenges to Institutionalizing Gender Sensitivity

Unfortunately, providing basic needs to affected populations immediately takes precedence over many other concerns, such as the inclusion of a gender perspective or environmental considerations of a disaster response, especially for rapid-onset events. Improvements in addressing the differential effects of disasters on men, women, youth, and children can only be achieved when, and if, humanitarian organizations integrate gender-sensitive approaches and consistently apply lessons learned. There are many opportunities to include gender-sensitive information, such as in-staff orientation materials, guidelines and documents, checklists, training modules, contracts agreements, and field guides. Donor organizations can include gender issues in their scoring criteria and funding guidance. However, high staff turnover in all aid organizations limits institutional knowledge capacity, and each succeeding generation must be trained anew; the loss of experienced staff members reduces the available sources of lessons learned and practical applications.

NOTE

- * The views in this comment are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the US Agency for International Development (USAID).