



2nd Asian Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction

7-8 November 2007

Technical Group B: Integrating Disaster Risk Reduction in Development

Theme 2: Addressing the Issues of Women and Children in Disaster Risk Reduction

Background Note

(Note: The issues of women and children in disaster risk reduction are distinctly different, but there are some common threads, as both are social issues that touch on vulnerabilities of a significant number of population, which is often ignored. For logistic reasons as well as to distinguish them from scientific, technical and economic issues that are the themes of three other Technical Sessions of the Conference, the issues of women and children have been clubbed in this session).

Gender Issues in Disaster Risk Reduction

Gender relations are socially determined roles that women and men are expected to play in a society. These roles vary within and among cultures and evolve over time. Gender shapes social worlds within which natural events occur. The social worlds are culturally constructed that discriminates against women. In most of the Asian societies women face multiple discriminations – physical, social, economic and psychological – which make them more vulnerable in disasters.

Women are generally labelled as weaker sex, which is reinforced by cultural practices that do not allow them to take up many vocations that demand physical strength. More women than men in Asian countries have been found to be nutritionally deficient, which make them weak and not capable to defend themselves in crisis situations. Socially, women in many societies have been assigned a role of dependency in the different stages of their life cycle – as daughter, wife and mother - which has created an environment of discrimination against women in almost every walk of their life. Skewed sex ratio, as reflected in an asymmetrical gender pyramid, with less young girls at the bottom but and more elder women at the top of the pyramid, is symptomatic of these differences. Gender gaps in health, education, employment and decision making in most of the Asian societies have been well documented. Rising trend of violence against women in many societies is another telling indicator of gender discriminations in societies.

The economic vulnerabilities of women are reflected in poor work participation rate in formal sector, lower wage rate, women's disproportionate work in care economy and women's unpaid work that are not accounted in national economies. Women have also been found to be psychologically more vulnerable as they are emotionally more attached to their families and they tend to get more traumatized in disasters. Women are generally less aggressive and have less opportunities to express their emotions which make them suffer psycho-social stresses after disasters.

Disasters accentuate all these vulnerabilities of women. In successive disasters women have been found to suffer more casualties in deaths as well as in injuries. They are mostly occupied in household work which makes them more vulnerable to building collapse. Burden of work of women increases drastically after disasters – their care functions expand drastically and often they are forced by the circumstances to be the sole bread earners. Number of women headed households go up sharply after disasters. Females drop out rates from schools increase sharply after disasters, as do violence against women, including trafficking and prostitution.

Disasters undermine the capacities of women. Women have intimate knowledge of family and community life and tradition and are excellent risk managers. They play active and creative role in coping with crisis situations and perform the important functions in caring for the victims and in recovering from disasters. But all these capacities of women are hardly recognized and optimally utilized for reducing the risks of disasters. Emergency management has typically remained a male dominated function which has not seriously taken into account the needs, sensibilities and capacities of women.

In the context of disaster risk reduction, recovery and reconstruction, women have been viewed primarily as beneficiaries. On the other hand numerous experiences of women-led resilience building practices from across Asia directly contradict this victim/beneficiary identity of women. In India, the popularly known CHIPKO movement has demonstrated that the women are the best disaster manager and they understand the issue of risk reduction in a more holistic manner. In Bangladesh and in Indonesia the micro credit movements led by women have been able to reduce the risks up to great extent.

It is now evident that women are agents of community resilience rather than mere victims or beneficiaries. Women have organized their communities to undertake physical reconstruction of housing; to plan, manage and monitor community infrastructure and basic services; to create safe spaces to negotiate with authorities; to ensure that information on entitlements reaches communities and to take community feedback on recovery and reconstruction programmes to government and local authorities. When viewed through a gender lens disaster risk reduction programmes present strategic opportunities for women to reposition themselves in the eyes of their families, communities and governing institutions as powerful change agents for disaster risk reduction.

The Hyogo Framework of action 2005-2015 has emphasized that gender perspective should 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. Various innovative tools and methodologies have been developed for mainstreaming gender issues in disaster risk reduction that would be discussed in this Technical Session.

Needs of Children in Disasters

In a world of 6.5 billion people 1.9 billion are children below the age of 15 (29%). Nearly 100 million children are born every year and 5.7 million of the new born die every year before they complete one year Children under 15 are nearly half of all the victims of natural disasters, but the issues of children have received the lowest priorities, probably because they have no voice or constituency.

Children are not miniature adults. They have unique requirements that make them vulnerable in disasters. Unlike adults they depend on external support system to survive. They lack reserves to endure stress. They have immature immune system – they are more likely to contract infectious diseases. These diseases tend to be more severe in children. They develop dehydration, malnutrition and fatigue more quickly

Disaster causes serious disruption in critical stage of development of children. The external support structures break down. Separation from parental protection creates traumatic conditions which may cause irreversible brain injuries. Experiences of death and destruction create long term mental health problem. Unfortunately separate spaces have not been created for children in disaster management. They have to compete with adults to get their share.

It is only in the recent past that international organizations and national governments have started recognizing the special needs of children in disasters. Guidelines have been developed to address these needs, such as

Physical needs (Child safety, food, nutrients, personal hygiene, sanitation, shelter, clothing etc)

Medical needs (special pediatric care, child size equipments, different drug dosages etc)

Psychological needs (trauma counseling, mental health care etc)

Legal needs (protection from trafficking, exploitations, custodial protection, adoption etc)

Educational needs (risk management education in schools, school safety etc)

These guidelines need to be adopted in more and more countries and made part of the disaster preparedness exercise for reducing the risks of disasters for children.

Recently the Asian countries adopted the Bangkok Action Agenda 2007 has identified the following priority areas for action for reducing the risks of disasters for the children:

1. Integrating Disaster Risk Reduction into School Education.
2. Strengthening Disaster Risk Reduction Education for Community Resilience
3. Making Schools Safer
4. Empowering Children for Disaster Risk Reduction.

Themes for discussion

In the context of these developments the following specific themes have been identified for discussion in this session are:

- Disaster and Its Differential Impact on Men and Women: Experience from Asia
- Gender Based Inequality in Humanitarian Assistance, Response and Relief: Case Studies from Asia
- Gendered Identity, Livelihood and Disaster Reduction
- Mainstreaming Gender in Disaster Risk Reduction
- Self Help Group, Micro Credit and Other Tools for Reducing Risks of Disasters for Women
- Trafficking and Violence against Women during Disasters
- Toolkit for Mainstreaming Gender in Emergency Response
- Vulnerability of Children in Disasters
- School Safety Programmers in Asia
- Physical and Mental Health Care of Children in Disasters
- Protecting Children from Exploitation in Post Disaster Situations: Legal and Institutional Issues