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Gender-related Dimensions of Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change

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Keynote presentation

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It is a great honor for me to be given this opportunity to present on recent Japanese experiences of reducing risk of disasters focusing on gender and diversity dimensions, and to offer suggestions for a General Recommendation.

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction rightly points out that ‘*women, children and people in vulnerable situations were disproportionately affected’* by disaster. It also emphasizes that ‘*disaster risk reduction requires empowerment and inclusive, accessible and non-discriminatory participation, paying special attention to people disproportionately affected by disasters. A gender, age, disability and cultural perspective should be integrated in all policies and practices, and women and youth leadership should be promoted*’.

I am here today to share my reflections on how we can put this important principle of Sendai Framework of DRR into practice, based on my experience of human resources development, especially women’s leadership development for disaster risk reduction in Japan.

**Addressing links between gender inequality in normal time and disaster risk**

The Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami (2011) once again revealed that disasters affect people differently. Many factors influence to create different damages and recovery processes among affected people, such as gender, sexuality, age, type and degree of disability, health condition, nationality, language, employment status, family structure, burden of care-giving responsibility, community network.

Women, as well as any group of people with certain attributes, are not essentially vulnerable nor can they be attributed distinct properties of vulnerability. Vulnerability is constructed socially, economically, and culturally through distribution of power, wealth and resources. Macro factors such as demographic changes and urbanization, and policies and programs in socio-economic sectors can contribute to mitigate or aggravate vulnerability of people in certain condition. It is extremely important to understand links between gender inequality in normal time and disaster risk.

In some earthquake cases in Japan especially in urban areas, higher mortality is observed among aged women living alone. Due to their low income level, a result of small amount of pension compared to men, and due to the business customs of rental housing industry, aged women living alone tend to rent old apartment houses which are less earthquake resistant.

Space in evacuation centers were not arranged in the way to keep privacy, and specific relief supply were not enough for women, girls, elderly people, persons with disability and others in vulnerable situations to live with dignity. Lack of emergency response to specific needs aggravated the damage not only of women but also of the family members they care. There were few women in decision-making position among emergency response workers and in community-based disaster management organizations, as well as in the government’s emergency management sections. Thus, it was not easy to reflect women’s needs. Underrepresentation of women in decision-making is a common problem in Japan, in the field of administration and politics, in private business, and in community in the normal time.

Higher rate and longer period of unemployment among women, and high rate of poverty among single mother households after the disaster was another serious issue. The bad economic situation among women workers before the disaster, because of their irregular and unstable employment status and lower wages, is the root causes of this disproportionate damage.

Sexual violence and exploitation, child abuse, domestic violence is recently recognized as an agenda of disaster risk reduction. Some new policy measures such as free hotlines were introduced by the government after the Great East Japan Disaster, but the issue of security during and after disaster is not necessarily taken up in preparedness stage, neither by response and recovery planners and workers.

Addressing links between gender inequality in normal time and disaster risks throughout disaster phases is crucial steps to effectively reducing disaster risks. For this purpose, comprehensive and easily-accessible gender disaggregated data is indispensable. The method of analysis should be developed and introduced to integrate disaster risk reduction and gender equity at the same time into all policy sectors.

Basic information should be collected on disaster experiences of people in specific vulnerable situations. So far, for example, very few research have been done on experience of trafficked women and sexual minorities during disaster.

**Promoting women’s leadership, partnership and enabling environment**

Successful women’s leadership development in disaster risk reduction requires government’s initiative and effective training programs, but they are hardly enough. Many trained women were not easily accepted by the conventional community-based disaster management organizations and volunteer organizations specified to disaster response. Women’s groups which enhanced capacities of disaster risk management hardly collaborate with conventional disaster risk management institutions.

Only adding women and men who received gender and diversity training into conventional disaster risk management institutions is not functional. The system, institution and concept of disaster management should change in order to be ready to accept the idea of gender and diversity perspectives.

Institutional arrangement of disaster risk management should also be reviewed. In Japan’s case, community organizations for disaster management are conventionally established under each residents’ association or neighborhood association. Men in their 60’s and 70’s, retired but active, are the main members. Women of the same generation also participate in activities, but they are seldom engaged in decision-making because of strict gender divisions of labor that characterize this generation. Younger generations with more egalitarian gender attitudes are generally not very interested in disaster management activities.

It would be necessary to build resilience of institutions through collaboration with civil society organizations working on various thematic issues such as welfare, education, human rights, poverty eradication. The government should create ground to nurture partnership between disaster risk management sector and gender equity sector, across the administration, civil society and community.

It is strongly recognized that disaster vulnerability is constructed socially, economically and culturally in the normal time. The policy makers of all socio-economic sectors should be informed with different disaster risks, damages and experience of women and men, avoiding and preventing new and reducing existing disaster risk through the implementation of integrated and inclusive measures.

Women’s leadership development for DRR can be also strengthened by building capacity of professional women in economic, legal, welfare, medical, educational, technological, and political sectors, so that they can have knowledge of gender and diversity dimension of disaster risk in the field of their own expertise.

Activities under disaster risk management should be changed to practically cover all the disaster phases, from preparedness to emergency response, to recovery and mitigation, instead of only focusing on preparing to respond to the immediate aftermath of hazardous events.

**Concluding remarks: Toward more comprehensive disaster risk reduction**

Concluding, let me ask again ‘What does it mean to reduce disaster risk?’ In many countries including Japan, there is no shortage of policy papers committing to disaster risk reduction, but when the words are put into action, they easily turn into structural or non-structural prevention and mitigation of hazards without questioning how our society is producing and reproducing vulnerability. These approaches can surely make it possible for us to manage risks by reducing exposure, but socially, economically, and culturally constructed vulnerability cannot be reduced by these approaches.

More attention should be paid to reducing underlying risk factors in the society, engaging policies in sectors of poverty reduction, care giving, employment, social safety net, community development, to disaster risk reduction.