

Note for General Discussion on Gender-related dimensions of Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change

Impact of disasters and Climate Change on women and girls as well as the untapped potential of women in disaster mitigation and management of climate change from a Caribbean perspective.

Distinguished members of the CEDAW Committee.

In the small island developing states of the Caribbean, climate change is manifested by more frequent and devastating weather events such as flooding, tropical storms, hurricanes, and droughts. We have already begun to experience the predicted exacerbation of the frequency and intensity of the yearly hurricane season; of longer dry periods and increased frequency of droughts, which threaten agriculture, livelihoods, sanitation and ecosystems.

The most dangerous hazard of all is the rise in the sea level which is predicted to rise up to 0.6 meters in the Caribbean by the end of the century, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. This could actually flood low-lying areas, impacting human settlements and infrastructure in coastal zones and increase the risks of saline water penetrating into freshwater aquifers, threatening crucial water resources for agriculture, tourism and human consumption.

Impacts

From my experience, I would like to suggest that there are at least **six key areas** in which women and girls are impacted as a result of disasters and climate change. These I would draw to your attention, for consideration. Briefly they are:

- The particular challenges posed for women as a result of loss of assets and disruption of livelihoods and employment opportunities;
- Disempowerment of women from the decision making processes following disasters;
- Increasing inequality exacerbated by disasters and climate change and its negative impact on poor women and girls.
- The negative impact which migration may have on women and girls;
- The inadequate collection of data regarding the social dimensions of the impact of disasters, that speak to the differential effects of the event on women and men, girls and boys, acts as a constraint to informed policy making; and
- Lastly, the discussions on financing for DRR mitigation and CC adaptation for Small Island Developing States, on debt restructuring, debt forgiveness/relief and alternative mechanisms of financing, that take place without women's perspectives being heard.

Before I discuss these areas of impact however, I would wish to state that the women I have encountered in the Caribbean following disasters are by no means victims of disaster and climate change, nor do they see themselves as a vulnerable group. Be sure, they have suffered from the ill effects of the disasters just as their male counterparts, they have lost loved ones, their livelihoods and their homes. They however, are proud hard working farmers, hucksters, shop owners, traders, and manufacturers of, or contributors to, the production of agricultural products - coconut oils, bay oils, cocoa sticks, castor oils, soaps, spices, natural jewellery, and art and craft for the local and export markets. They know their entitlements and have displayed tremendous resilience in the face of disasters, which should be given greater support.

They are engaged in providing services in the tourism sector either formally through hotels, resorts or informally as own account workers.

They can be found as heads of households working their farms, producing short term crops, managing tree crops, livestock or poultry or as partners supporting families in agriculture, forestry and the fishing industry.

They understand the significance of forest and water conservation. They know of the dangers of destruction of mangroves and the resulting coastal erosion, of sea level rise and the salt water intrusion and damage to natural aquifer's and ground water sources.

They seek access to resources, both financial and technical, and a greater voice in the decision making on disaster risk management and climate change adaptation, so as to improve their production processes and to safeguard their livelihoods, for the sake of themselves and their families.

Impacts

- A. Let me begin with the issue of women's enjoyment of their economic rights following a disaster.
 1. The labour market data suggests, that invariably the sectors of the economy in which high proportions of women work in Caribbean SIDS are often the most affected as a result of a disaster: agriculture (some 47% of the workforce in Agriculture in Jamaica is female) and tourism (roughly 60% of the Tourism Sector workforce is female in the Bahamas).
 2. Women working in these sectors are usually the first to lose their livelihoods following a disaster and not as quickly able, as their male counterparts to re-enter the labour market after a disaster as they generally do not possess the skill-sets most in demand required for recovery, following a disaster. These skill-sets include, but are not limited to: masonry, carpentry, electrical, tiling, and roofing. For women these are still the non-traditional skills that they are not usually encouraged to pursue.
 3. Women do not often possess the required land titles necessary for credit. Much of their work is house based and characterised as 'backyard' economic activities which may

be destroyed as part of destruction of the housing sector. These two factors reduce their status as candidates for financing following a disaster. They are repeatedly overlooked for re-training in climate-smart agricultural techniques, and marginalized from seed and plant distribution.

4. More significantly women are not able to move freely from one part of the country to another to seek income earning opportunities following a disaster. The crisis of women's lack of mobility is as a result of their reproductive roles and the 'care burden' following a disaster which sees many women responsible for family health, sanitation and care of the injured and elderly. This is even more of a constraint when women hold the position of main income earner as the head of the household. (among household heads that were affected in the recent Tropical Storm Erika in Dominica, data suggested that women headed households comprised some 35% of households affected.)

B. With regard to the disempowerment of women, in the decision making processes following disasters:

1. The tyranny of the urgent continues to deny women an equal voice with their male counterparts after disasters.
2. In the wake of a disaster, Inter-Ministerial Committees or Cluster Committees may be formed to manage relief operations and recovery. Such Committees consolidate power at the top, which reduces the local authority mechanisms within which women had greater participation and voice, prior to a disaster.
3. As well, because women are the prime care givers in the home and the community, they lack the resource of 'time' and the necessary mobility which participation demands. Meetings are usually held in the capital not in rural districts.
4. Women's Machineries, already situated in a precarious position vis a vis Governance architecture, are rarely included in key decision making clusters. Women's NGO's are often not given status of participation in the decision making processes for recovery and reconstruction either and are usually seen only as humanitarian and relief actors.

C. There is growing concern in the DRM and CC community that one of the negative impacts of disasters is increasing inequality and the negative impact of such inequality on poor women and girls

1. Inequality, both with regard to income and social status is a condition which small states in the Caribbean have inherited as a result of enslavement, indenture ship and colonialism.
2. Newly independent States have sought through numerous social protection measures, such as free education, health care and housing support, to redress those inherited imbalances.
3. The shocks resulting from changes in the global economic environment, the shrinking value of exportable commodities, and the frequency of disasters have left many small states deeply divided between those with access to resources and those without. There is a clear increase in the concentration of income in the hands of a few as reported on

- by WB.¹ Unfortunately poor women who head families are among the group most hard hit.
4. Following disasters, much emphasis is placed on reconstruction of infrastructure (as well it should be) but again and again this is done to the detriment of recovery measures which address the long term social development needs. In addition, those who have resources may be able to benefit from opportunities presented in the recovery process, while poor women with limited resources and voice, are unable to do so.
- D. The negative impact which migration as a result of disasters and climate change have on women and girls;
1. As a result of disaster and climate change, the movement of people from accustomed areas of livelihoods may occur. This migration may be internally - as rural to urban or external- as from one country to another. External migration may be within the Caribbean region or outside to neighbouring countries.
 2. When disaster or the effects of climate change force the migration of the male breadwinner leaving the spouse and children behind, they may suffer difficult times until the male breadwinner is able to send remittances or barrels of goods to support the family left behind.
 3. Unfortunately because of the economic difficulties being experienced even in the developed world , remittances may be difficult to send and abandonment of families have been reported.
 4. When it is external migration of the woman or girl child, the risks and hazards of sexual exploitation and exposure to traffickers pose a serious challenge.
 5. Internal migration has its challenges as well, as the relocation which results, is usually to the poorest urban settings with all the concomitant ills (of overcrowding, disease and gender based violence). Often internal migration forces a women to lose her social capital upon which she was dependent for support networks.
- E. The inadequate data regarding the social dimensions of the impact of disasters, particularly that speaks to the differential effects of the event on women and men, generated following a disaster, acts as a constraint to informed policy making.
1. It bears repeating that much of the data collected following disasters is not disaggregated by age, sex, income, ethnicity, or any key socio demographic characteristics.
 2. Lack of data on informal economic activity leaves many women outside of the distribution of resources during recovery.
 3. Policy makers, unless particularly urged to act differently, make use of the data that is brought before them.
 4. The result is that gender blind policies for medium and long term recovery becomes the norm.

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2014/aug/27/inequality-latin-america-undp>

- F. Lastly, the discussions on financing for DRR mitigation and CC adaptation for Small Island Developing States, on debt restructuring, debt forgiveness/relief and alternative mechanisms of financing, that take place without women's perspectives being heard
1. More has to be done to engage women in discussions on financing for recovery and adaptation measures
 2. Women should be part of the priority setting so that their concerns can be highlighted and supported
 3. Poor women bear a disproportionate burden arising from the circumstance of heavily indebted small island states in the Caribbean yet are outside of the discussions to relieve the burden; and
 4. The economic burden has to be borne by all members of the society equally so the consultation process should be inclusive.

Potential for Women's role in Disaster Mitigation and Management

A great deal of the tasks relevant to disaster mitigation and Climate Change adaptation require community mobilisation and shared indigenous knowledge. Women have been key actors at the community level and possess demonstrated capacities for the transfer of informal knowledge.

There should be an increased role for women in DRR/CCA in the Caribbean not just as recipients of programmes but as shapers and deliverers of initiatives.

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