

Weaving women's skills to build resilience to natural disasters

Empowering women through education, training and awareness-raising is quite a journey. I started more than 25 years ago training local government officials and staff in mainstreaming gender in local development. Our women's organization, Women Enablers Advocates & Volunteers for Empowering & Responsive Solutions (WEAVERS), then expanded to marshalling women and community-based organizations towards economic empowerment, reproductive health, peatland restoration and disaster risk reduction.

In the Philippines, women are more vulnerable to natural disasters than men, mostly because many of them don't have their own source of income. When Super Typhoon Yolanda hit the country in 2013, many men perished from staying in their homes to protect property. In the municipality of Palo in the province of Leyte, the widows were left with nothing, not even a source of income. For them, the only path to resilience was to learn skills to earn their livelihood.

Resilience and recovery in the face of natural disasters is all about being prepared. But how can women prepare for disasters when they cannot ensure there is food the next day? It is essential that disaster risk reduction management (DRRM) plans are linked to providing employment and income opportunities for women's economic empowerment. Women need skills to take part in the country's economic activities and they need access to information and technology, to find out where the opportunities are, how to get financing, and how to upgrade their products and services.

Disaster preparedness should come from individuals, communities, and from government officers who are expected to have consultative skills, empathy and compassion. On paper, the law says DRRM plans should include the participation of women. However, the consultative mechanisms tend to be dominated by the community elite - the ones who are available because they do not have to earn an income to feed their families for the day, or they do not have small children or sick family members to take care of. A market vendor who must sell her goods from sunrise to sunset cannot participate in the government's consultations, which only take place during weekdays.

This lack of flexibility makes it impossible to hear the voices of marginalized women. However, it is key that women themselves – coming from different sectors and representing different ages - articulate their issues when facing natural hazards. Women and girls have specific needs that many planners and decision-makers will not be able to consider. For instance, until a few years ago, when the government was preparing relief assistance packs, sanitary napkins and underwear were not included.

As a women's organization deeply involved in community engagement, we don't have the time to document what we do. This is where research comes into play, gathering data and experiences of women on the ground, to inform policies and programmes. We need research projects that can be applied and utilized, not the type of research that will just remain on the bookshelves. I like reading statistical results – national demographic surveys, family income and expenditure surveys, poverty surveys – because that is the basis for developing empowerment projects. Qualitative reports also help us in our work as they are very useful for identifying the shortfalls women face in post-disaster recovery.

Disasters are location-specific, and the responses vary. In our region, we now have the knowledge to recover from those events. Knowledge, however, is not enough. There should be resources to build back better. But those in other regions who have not experienced a disaster will start from scratch and must be supported in terms of preparedness.

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