

UNISDR Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction
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Gender and Disaster Network
Official Statement

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, colleagues and friends

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the founding of the Gender and Disaster Network – GDN. The Network was set up in 1997 as an educational and advocacy project initiated by women and men interested in gender relations in disaster contexts.

We wanted to consider the extent of change in gender responsive disaster risk reduction policy and practice over the period since our inception and so GDN volunteers recently carried out a preliminary piece of work identifying key words and dominant terms used in relevant UN frameworks and in related articles and documents through three decades: the 1990's, 2000's and 2010's. We hoped that showing which words were commonly used in each decade would provide an idea of how gender and disaster discourse has changed - for better or worse. You can see the outcome of this exercise at the GDN booth in the Marketplace.

Starting in the 1990's, the Network was formed during – and partly as a response to – the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR). For those (few) of us working on gender and disaster, there was no such thing as a 'natural' disaster and we recognized that much of the failure to recognize and include women and gender dimensions in disaster planning and management (as it then was), was due to the absence, or the subservience, of social scientific analyses and the dominance of a narrowly hazard-centric approach. However, it was the first decade where a coordinated, global disaster reduction (DRR) framework was available and the 1994 'Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action for a Safer World' was an attempt to harmonise policy and practice. However, words associated with this decade show an overwhelming focus on expert-led science and technology interventions and a dearth of contributions from the social science's or from local people in their diversity. Whilst the Strategy documents include reference to 'poor' and 'socially disadvantaged' groups and fleetingly mention the empowerment of women, the focus was mostly on the 'vulnerability' of women, not on their skills, capacities and leadership potential. The decade was largely gender blind despite some notable disasters which revealed gender dimensions in their disproportionate impacts on either women (usually) or men (sometimes). Policy and practice revolved around hazards and when disasters were referenced they were usually referred to as 'natural' and underplayed the role of socio-economic and cultural processes in determining their cause and subsequent impacts.

With the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA), the 2000's demonstrated a further refinement of global policy and practice and disaster risk reduction (DRR), rather than disaster management, became a more frequently used term. The idea that gender played a role in disasters and how people and communities recover gained increasing recognition in the Framework and the related actions, in which 'gender mainstreaming' was often invoked. There was more movement from seeing women as only 'vulnerable' towards the inclusion of terms such as 'women's participation' and 'capacity'. Although needs-based approaches still dominated. NGOs became a significant force in disaster management and risk reduction throughout this decade and the presence and role of communities began to expand.

The 2010's saw the transition from the HFA to the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 (SFDRR). The decade has also seen a number of other landmark agreements adopted as part of the post-2015 agenda, including the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Climate Change Agreements, both of which have a strong focus on gender responsive implementation. This move towards a greater, global recognition of the importance of gender can be seen in a growing understanding that 'gender' includes recognition, not just of women specifically, but also men and masculinity, and sexual orientation through the greater (but still limited) inclusion of sexual and gender minorities. Consideration of women's roles has been strengthened to include 'women's leadership'; and the largely passive, 'gender sensitive' is slowly being replaced by the more active term: 'gender responsive'. Inclusivity and rights are replacing a narrow focus on women's vulnerability and needs. A growing concern with the need for disaggregated data (sex, age, disability and other relevant cultural factors) in disasters is an opportunity to build a stronger gendered evidence base for the next decade.

This quick review has shown a number of areas of progress but we must also highlight how far we still have to go in making sure disaster risk reduction policy and practice is truly inclusive and gender responsive. Continuing and additional efforts are needed especially in places where broader societal progress in gender rights and equity are under threat due to political changes.

The challenge over the next 15-20 years will be to ensure that the momentum we've all worked so hard to achieve isn't lost and we continue to build on it. Gender will continue to play a huge role in how we, as a society, respond to the risks posed by disasters. It is vital that gender equality, gender rights and gender responsive DRR is made real through well informed, forward looking policies and concrete actions at all levels; from the global to the local.

Thank you for your time