

## **Gender equality, Women's Autonomy and Policies Related to Disaster Risk Reduction.**

Natural disasters and hazards have been at unprecedented levels of strength and destruction in recent times. As we continue to grapple with the wide ranging implications of climate change, it is imperative that there is an understanding amongst policy makers, disaster risk reduction stakeholders and service providers that different groups of people have different coping capacities. There are a plethora of factors that influence one's ability to be resilient to the effects of disasters. These include socioeconomic status, age, gender, as well as migration status in some instances.

Once this foundational basis of understanding is attained, it then facilitates the efficient and effective mainstreaming of gender considerations and principles into public policy. In Latin America and the Caribbean, we are very susceptible to disasters due to our geographical locations. This means that we must be proactive in terms of assessing the type of policy implementation that will empower vulnerable groups.

There are certainly barriers that exist in regard to integrating a gender perspective into public policy. One such barrier is gaps in relation to individual and institutional capacity to mainstream gender and disaster considerations into planning and policy making. There tends to be low levels of cross-sectoral knowledge amongst the respective focal actors and agencies. This is largely due to disaster management and gender equality practitioners not having the necessary exposure and technical training in cross cutting and related sectors, which would ensure that policy planning encompasses all of the critical considerations needed for impactful implementation. Measures must be taken to ensure that gender and disaster risk reduction practitioners have the tools and the capacity to fully understand and meaningfully integrate the core principles of both fields into policy.

Furthermore, another barrier to gender responsive disaster risk reduction policy creation and implementation is the distorted and inaccurate perceptions of the role that gender plays within the disaster risk reduction process. Gender considerations in some instances are viewed as specific action that can be taken during or after the onset of a disaster, as a kind of "add on" or "extra" measure. However, gender should form a prominent part of all disaster risk reduction processes from a conceptualization, planning and implementation standpoint. It is essential that a gendered lens be used to assess the impact that all planned action will have on various subsets of people, and this will ensure that the needs of vulnerable groups are being met at every stage.

Additionally, another barrier to integrating a gender perspective into disaster risk reduction policy is a lack of diversity in relation to who the leaders are within the disaster management and policy making spaces. There is a dire need for more women to be provided the opportunities to take a leading role and to have their influence and voices be amplified. This will ensure that there is adequate representation for vulnerable groups, and their priorities would likely be reflected in the policies created, as a result.

Moreover, it would be remiss of me if I did not mention the global health pandemic that we are currently grappling with and the complex challenges that it poses to gender responsive disaster risk reduction and policy making. COVID-19 has certainly been a barrier to integrating a gender perspective into public policy because its impact has been multidimensional and intersectional in nature. It has affected the socioeconomic landscape of our region with high levels of unemployment and job instability due to various lockdowns and measures, and has had a particularly detrimental effect on women leading single headed households. One of the most major impacts of covid 19 has been the fact that it reinforces existing inequalities and leaves those vulnerable unequipped to cope with the most basic aspects of daily life, and these challenges are only compounded when disasters or hazards strike. It is therefore incumbent upon policy makers and disaster risk reduction practitioners and institutions to ensure that our policies, plans and actions are inclusive and aimed towards empowering those most vulnerable.

Disaster risk reduction policy making going forward must be gender responsive, as well as transformative and innovative. This is important, as we are acutely cognizant of the fact that we are dealing with the dual challenges of a global health pandemic and increasingly destructive natural disasters. We must continue to not only discuss, but move to implement disaster risk reduction policies which will promote gender equality and women's autonomy. We must also hold ourselves accountable and ensure that we continue to work diligently to achieve disaster risk reduction that is impactful for all.