

Gender Equality and Disaster Risk Reduction Workshop

Welcoming Remarks

Elaine Enarson
August 10, 2004

How wonderful to see you here at last! It feels like a huge homecoming. I wonder, does home always have a physical dimension? For many years, I've taken the retrograde position that 'communities' must to some degree be embodied with time for sitting together, looking eye to eye and touching. But I must say that my work on gender and disaster (and I'm thinking especially of my earliest work with Maureen Fordham in the US and Madhavi Ariyabanu in Sri Lanka) is challenging that view.

So...I give in and rejoice. In fact, we **are** a community of people who care at once about making life safer and making life more just, with all the short- and long-term changes that implies for social, economic, political, cultural and environmental change, and most especially for our intimate relationships as women and men

If only we had more time, I would stop here and ask each of you about your expectations for this week together. Failing that, here are my own three (passionate) hopes:

A. First, I hope we all enjoy every minute.

We all left so much behind to be here! You left your families, colleagues, friends, children—perhaps a lot of clutter and unwashed dishes too, who knows?! We know how precious your time and energy are (and of course the money you and your organizations have invested in this meeting) and thank you for it.

By “enjoy” I mean I hope you all enjoy the opportunity to

- compare—and find difference as well as common ground
- criticize—and offer alternative ideas
- question—question others and be self critical
- disagree—and then perhaps agree to disagree and move on
- connect—perhaps for lifetime, a decade, definitely for a week

The beauty of an open workshop is just this kind of blending of ideas, backgrounds, experiences, knowledge and values...though of course the difficulties are obvious! We Have tried to strike a balance in how we spend our time here, drawing in each of you to capture your knowledge and enthusiasm without turning you away with an overly scripted agenda. Let us know how it works.

B. Second, I hope we make the most of every minute.

There is urgency to our work—and you don't need my lecture on the whys and hows of increased vulnerability and rising costs of all kinds to disasters of all kinds. Each of us knows the facts but everyone in this room is here because this is not just academic work but personal commitment. We know the faces and stories behind the statistics.

There is momentum on our side—and we must ride this wave. The second World Conference on Disaster Reduction is 5 short months away and there are people in this room—including the director of the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction—who are ready to work with us to carry our knowledge and concerns forward to that meeting in January of next year in Kobe, Japan. Part of our work will result in a Call to Action that will be an advocacy tool for Kobe and other venues. Additionally, the Beijing+10 assessment from the international women's community is coming up next spring as well. Each of us involved in professional associations with scheduled meetings and events that we can impact if we try.

Each of us lives in a particular community but often, or so I have noted, we work in splendid isolation from others around us with common concerns. I'm thinking of myself in Denver with its active environmental justice movement involving many women of color working against toxic contamination. If only because of unbearably high costs of all kinds with each passing year the pressure to move toward a more inclusive and prevention oriented approach to disasters grows—and this, too, is an open door for us.

So...How do we make the most of our time here?

This workshop is about implementation. Like most of you, I have been in many rooms with many people sharing more or less common ground and seen a great many ideas expressed, applauded—and forgotten.

I am aware of at least six interdisciplinary/multi-sectoral conferences in the last 12 years specifically on this subject—in Costa Rica, in Australia, in Pakistan, in British Columbia, in Miami, in Ankara and now here in Honolulu—not counting in-house workshops such as those conducted by InterAction or the ILO or on a single topic such as women's health in emergencies. We have had decades of dialogue, for example in the humanitarian relief community through Oxfam, the Sphere Project and other leaders, and more and more scholarly attention to gender and disasters. **Gender is on the agenda now.**

Four years ago in Miami, I spoke with some of you about our meeting as a moment for building the scaffolding that would support and structure our work on women and gender in disasters. Today we do have a solid foundation in place; we do not have to recreate the wheel. In fact, with some exceptions, the resolutions and recommendations we come up with are strikingly familiar. We have called for:

1. an approach to disasters reflecting everything we have learned about gender, development and disaster—and that's a lot
2. an approach to disasters based on prevention—that is, on reducing structural and social vulnerabilities and mitigating hazardous conditions and events and preparing as best we can for the extreme events that will surely come
3. an approach to hazards, risks and disasters based on gender analysis—so we have the knowledge and history we need when difficult decisions are made about resource management , social planning and living with risk
4. an approach to disaster balancing, if you will, structure and agency...that is, an approach based on understanding of women's and men's very real gendered vulnerabilities, harm and needsbalanced with equal understanding of how women alone and together, and women working with the men in their lives, use their knowledge, leadership, connections, assets, experience, ideas and resources to make life safer, not only at the community level but also in the professions and sciences and disaster management organizations
5. an approach recognizing the diversity of the world's women and the divisions among us and the complex ways gender relations are interwoven with other forms of social power such as ethnicity, caste and class, age, citizenship, ability, sexualities
6. an approach that does not allow post-disaster reconstruction to rebuild vulnerability but capitalizes on this moment of opportunity to make changes altering the fundamental balance of power between women and men so that women and girls are better able to confront and survive the disastrous events of the future .. and help others do the same
7. and we have called consistently for an approach to hazards, disasters and risk that unites women and men in the creation of more just and sustainable and disaster resilient ways of living.

Lofty goals—yes? To be a bit more concrete, in past meetings we have identified the need for:

1. full and equal participation for women in decision-making at all levels and in all phases and sectors
2. leadership roles for grassroots women, for example in community-led mitigation projects and gender-sensitive vulnerability assessments and design and reconstruction of housing and social networks and the distribution of relief resources

3. governmental and institutional support for capacity building efforts such as non-traditional skills training and leadership development for women
4. gender awareness training and curriculum development to promote ‘mainstreaming’ organizationally—and the targets, benchmark, evaluation and monitoring that are the essential ingredient
5. research on the root causes of gender-based vulnerability, gender specific data and action research in collaboration with women’s and community groups
6. gender-fair practices and policies in the design, implementation and evaluation of disaster projects, from mitigation and preparedness to relief to rehabilitation and reconstruction and back to mitigation
7. attention to practices and policies that reduce violence of all kinds against girls and women in disaster contexts and protect and promote women’s and men’s health and well being in gender sensitive ways
8. gender-aware early warning systems and engendered awareness, education and training approaches that bridge gaps of culture, literacy, language and other differences
9. media outreach and collaboration to tell a complex story about women and men in disaster
10. family friendly and gender fair policies and practices in emergency response work

And the list goes on. In your workbook you’ll see some of these compiled for your review.

How do we get there from here?

This is not a week about wordsmithing “Additional Recommendations from Hawaii”—though we will certainly construct a Call to Action. I hope this is a week for “Breaking Through in Hawaii.” If we have the scaffolding or the architecture of the work before us in hand...this week we need to catapult over it. On the plane over, I thought how much we are like those teams of engineering students in their timed competitions, working in with odds and ends of tools and materials to build the very best Incredible Flying Machine. We need to be every bit as quick, creative and resourceful. We, too, must figure out together how to catapult over known obstacles, evade roadblocks, make end runs around stop lights, circumvent dead ends, use momentum, draw up plans—and test them, be bridge builders and translators....and perhaps fly through brick walls....! In short, we need to brainstorm about the **how** not the what or why.

How do we do this? Partly by frankly assessing specific action steps keeping us from enacting our shared vision: What are our current resources as group and a movement? What have we learned to do well? What has not worked particularly well and why?

One way forward is to ask harder questions. With thanks to you for your thoughts, here are some examples from the Commentaries sent in by many of you in this room. Your comments raised such questions as:

- What does it mean to call for seeing internally displaced families as an asset not a liability? What would it look like? How could we help it come about?
- How should we respond to increases in sex work and trafficking in disasters and to intersecting crises such as HIV/AIDS? What connections must we make? Are there any connections to avoid?
- If gender awareness is seen as a western feminist imposition of academic.... how did it get this way? How do we talk about this and challenge this?
- Do “stakeholders” have a gender? What does this mean? How do we engender all actors—and budgets as well.
- Why did women after hurricane Mitch in Nicaragua “chose not to” focus on engendering the disaster agenda? And what are the unanticipated consequences of women focused projects?
- Why do future emergency responders and planners being trained in the US sometimes “refuse to acknowledge the heightened vulnerability of women”? What is not being said or heard?
- Is providing men with traditionally “female” skills in rehabilitation efforts as important as developing a broader range of skills among women? Why don’t we promote this equally?
- When we call state funding community development such as women’s neighborhood groups, what do we lose—or is government support always necessary?
- “Is just attending several meetings for making community risk and resource maps or action plans anything to do with empowerment?”
- Are quotas desirable, for instance among community trainers—always? never? where and when?
- How do we move from a gender policy widely seen as “outside there, and not right here”—safely lodged in headquarters, or an action plan but not operational?

- Is ‘enhancing women’s organizations involvement’ something outsiders can do? do well? ever?
- Are micro-credit loans a burden or an asset to women in crisis?
- How can “negative comments and stereotypes among people who have not necessarily worked with each other in the past” be overcome at the local level? How do we move from “bridge building” rhetoric to reality?
- Under what conditions or through what mechanisms can a guild or association of voluntary women working toward preparedness be integrated into local governing bodies?
- Why do experts in disaster and risk management dispute violence against women in North American disasters and accept it elsewhere?
- What changes are needed and in what domains to require that emergency management training include social vulnerability coursework?
- What can be done at the organizational level to replace the dualist approach of disaster **or** development—with gender expertise firmly lodged in the ‘development’ camp?
- How do we “successfully communicate the benefits of gender equality” to reducing risk, for example the link between gender discrimination and female malnutrition rates? When is knowledge power?
- If low-income women in the US are “easily manipulated out of resources” available to them through FEMA or insurance without strong advocates...to quote: “how can we facilitate this type of education at the grassroots level?”
- What led to the failure of the Women in Emergency Management Association in Australia? What can be learned?
- How sustainable are grant-led projects such as Working with Women at Risk (a vulnerability assessment project several of us in the room worked on in the Caribbean)? Why are some post-Mitch women’s initiatives still on-going? How long will the Women’s Neighborhood Network Project in Ukraine last? What sustains Women for Development in Armenia?
- How adaptable is the GROOTS model of peer learning and demonstration projects?

- And from the US, can the newly emerging risk reduction and all-hazards approach survive the massive transfusion of money and political capital to a quite different vision of Homeland Security?

Like those engineering students, we will need to be quick, creative and collaborative to address these and other practical questions with enormously important political implications.

C. My last and short-winded hope for the workshop is that not a single one of us leaves without making a commitment of some kind to continued work.

The door is wide open for us to influence the debate at Kobe during the Second World Conference on Disaster Reduction. Do you have time to give to the Gender and Disaster Coordinating Group that will write up our ideas as a Call to Action? If not, how else can you help?

What in your area of work or in your home country would help move our agenda forward? Demonstration projects, or new networks, or advisory councils or media outreach or curriculum development or public education projects or electronic conferences or action research projects or ...more meetings?

What will make the Gender and Disaster Sourcebook more useful? Can you help?

What can be done to better utilize the potential of the G&D Network? Can you help?

Will your organization ever take up these kinds of issues? If so, how? How can others help? How can we integrate **our** concerns into the work of those—perhaps across the street from you at home—who are organized around parallel issues? What can we learn from them?

Should we think this week about forming some thematic Working Groups? If so, how would we work and on what specific issues?

Do we need more meetings? (Please comment on the Evaluation Sheet)

D. Finally—and from the heart—who made this wonderful meeting possible? And with that I'll add my thanks to our funders, supporters, volunteers and again to all of you for making the time to come. I look forward to working with you.