

Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
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Statement of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on gender related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change

On the occasion of the International Women's Day 2018, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (Committee) celebrates the adoption of its General Recommendation No. 37 on gender related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change. The General Recommendation is the first interpretive guidance on disaster risk reduction and climate change to be issued by a United Nations human rights treaty body to support the efforts of States parties. The Committee emphasizes that the disproportionate impact that climate change and disasters have on women and girls must be addressed through women's empowerment and by achieving substantive gender equality. The integration of gender perspectives within climate change and disaster risk reduction programmes is a unique opportunity to guarantee sustainable socio-economic development and climate resilience for populations that are most impacted by these changes even though they have contributed least to greenhouse gas emissions. It is essential that the substantial contribution that women are already making to disaster risk reduction and climate resilience be acknowledged. Their role as food producers and their knowledge and skills in climate adaptive agriculture should be incorporated within gender-responsive policies, legislation, plans, programmes, and budgets. All policy design, strategy development and implementing activities on climate change and disaster risk reduction should fully involve women at every level as equal partners in order to save the planet from some of the biggest threats of the twenty-first century.

The adoption of the General Recommendation also comes at a crucial juncture following the acceptance by the international community of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Climate Agreement in 2015. This triad of international frameworks concerning disaster risk reduction, sustainable development and climate change complements the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (Convention), which integrates a gender component into policies and programmes on disaster risk reduction and climate change. This General Recommendation, therefore, places the Committee at the forefront of ensuring the accountability of States in their efforts to integrate a gender perspective into climate change and disaster risk reduction strategies while implementing other relevant frameworks.

Climate change and disasters affect women and men, girls and boys differently, with many women facing disproportionate risks and impacts on their health, safety and livelihoods. Situations of crisis exacerbate pre-existing gender inequalities and also compound intersecting forms of discrimination that affect disadvantaged groups of women, particularly women with disabilities, to a different degree or in different ways than men or other women.

Women and girls constitute the majority of the population affected by disasters and climate change. However, they are not inherently more vulnerable than men nor should they be stereotyped as such. Vulnerability is constructed socially, economically and culturally through the distribution of power, wealth and resources. For instance, gender-based violence against women and girls is common in humanitarian crises and may become acute in the wake of disasters where there is heightened physical and food insecurity as well as impunity for perpetrators of violence. In this regard, the Committee recommends that States parties develop policies and programmes to address existing and new risk factors for gender-based violence against women – including domestic violence, sexual violence, economic violence, human trafficking and forced marriage - within the context of disaster risk reduction and climate change. Furthermore, the Committee recognizes that climate change and disasters, including pandemics, influence the prevalence, distribution and severity of new and re-emerging diseases. The susceptibility of women and girls to disease is heightened as a result of inequalities in access to food, nutrition and health care as well as social expectations that women will act as primary care-givers for children, the elderly and the sick.

The General Recommendation seeks to ensure that women's human rights as enshrined in the Convention are respected, protected and fulfilled at all stages of climate change and disaster prevention, mitigation, response, recovery and adaptation. The Committee recalls its statement on Gender and Climate Change adopted during its forty-fourth session in August 2009 and notes that several specific international frameworks, which govern disaster risk reduction, climate change, humanitarian assistance and sustainable development, explicitly address issues of human rights, particularly gender equality.

The Committee notes that more recently, the international community has made concerted efforts to coordinate policies on gender equality, disaster risk reduction, climate change and sustainable development. Some policy documents, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, integrate these various objectives into their frameworks. However, much remains to be done at the national, regional and international levels to align policies. Programmes of action, budgets and strategies need to be coordinated both across sectors (trade, development, energy, environment, water, climate science, agriculture, education, health, planning) and at different levels of governance (local, sub-national, national, regional and international) in order to ensure a human rights-based and effective approach to disaster risk reduction and climate change.

The need for concerted efforts cannot be overemphasized as the adverse impacts of climate change and disasters are trans-boundary. In the General Recommendation, the Committee underscores that States have obligations both within and outside their territory to ensure the full implementation of the Convention, including in the areas of disaster risk reduction and climate change mitigation and adaptation. Measures such as limiting fossil fuel use, reducing trans-boundary pollution and greenhouse gas emissions and promoting the transition to renewable energies are regarded as crucial steps in mitigating the negative human rights impact of climate change and disasters globally. Any steps taken by States to prevent, mitigate and respond to climate change and disasters within their own jurisdictions and extraterritorially must be firmly grounded in the human rights principles of substantive equality and non-discrimination, participation and empowerment, accountability and access to justice, transparency and rule of law.

The innovative and urgent character of the Committee's General recommendation is echoed in the theme for International Women's Day 2018, which celebrates women's role as agents of change in rural and urban settings. The Committee wishes to underscore that indeed the time is now #TimeisNow to press for progress #PressforProgress on issues of gender equality to confront the global challenges of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change.
