Beijing+10 - Women and Disaster
Looking back on my experience of the Great Hanshin Earthquake
Kuniko Funabashi

Beijing+10, Women, and Disaster

Beijing+10 (the 49th Session of the Commission of the States of Women (CSW)) was held for 2 weeks from February 28 to March 11, 2005. One of the highlights at the Beijing+10 was an in-depth discussion on women and disasters. One of ten resolutions adopted at the CSW was on integrating a gender perspective in post-disaster relief, particularly in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami disaster, which was one of the most devastating disasters in history. They focused not only on women as victims in natural disasters, but also positively evaluated women’s roles in these events.

Moreover, it is highly notable that the resolution “Integrating a gender perspective in post-disaster relief efforts, particularly in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami disaster,” includes sexual violence at the site of disasters. I was profoundly impressed by this as an indirect victim of the Great Hanshin Earthquake as well as a person who had been involved in support activities after the tsunami.

On December 30 2004, immediately after the occurrence of the tsunami, I was attending a meeting with the members of Peace Boat (a non-governmental organization in Japan, for details visit http://www.peaceboat.org/english/) and other non-governmental organizations to discuss how to provide emergency assistance. We had decided to send some people including a staff member of Peace Boat to the site on New Year’s Day. After coming back on January 6, 2005, we had a reporting session on 8th. For the meantime, we decided to provide water purifiers to purify well water, which was polluted by sea water. I immediately started fundraising at work and in the community. About that time, I received an email from Sri Lanka saying “women are at risk after Tsunami.” According to the email, sexual violence against women occurred at temporary shelters in disaster areas. This email reminded me about the Great Hanshin Earthquake.

The Great Hanshin Earthquake and Myself

For several months after the Great Hanshin Earthquake occurred, people were talking about rapes and sexual assaults happening in dark streets with no streetlights in Kobe. However, I have never seen media coverage regarding this type of sexual violence.

It is said that when “WOMEN’S NET KOBE” held a meeting titled “No Tolerance for Sexual Violence - Earthquake and Sexual Violence” in July after the earthquake, they received various information. But both Hyogo Prefecture and Kobe City have never cared about such information, and neither of them conducted any survey to research actual situations.

My eldest and third eldest sisters who both lived in Higashinada district of Kobe were affected. My high school also suffered heavy damages. My eldest sister’s house, which was very important to me, was completely destroyed. Her younger son saved her from being crushed under their furniture. Due to this catastrophic event, her younger son suffered from severe “manic depressive disorder” and unfortunately he committed suicide two years ago at the age of 41.
After the earthquake, he and my eldest sister sheltered themselves at my second eldest sister’s house in Yokohama, but it was difficult for two families with different lifestyles to live together. This caused secondary damage to the second eldest sister who took care of them; she became mentally unstable. Consequently, my eldest sister and her son moved to city-provided housing in Matsudo City where I live. My third eldest sister’s house was build with reinforced concrete and it could be repaired (it took 10 million yen to repair it). There were many casualties in her neighborhood.

Lessons of The Great Hanshin Earthquake

What can we learn from the Great Hanshin Earthquake after 10 years? Who suffers most by natural disasters? First of all, it is reported that elderly women living alone were affected most by the Great Hanshin Earthquake. The elder women who were victims of the earthquake were living in cheap housing complexes due to expensive deposits in the Kansai area and the difficulties of finding a guarantor.

Secondly, although everybody feels the tremors of an earthquake equally, the consequences are not equal. The difference emerges in the relief and recovery process.

Thirdly, the earthquake revealed a discrimination against women. At that time, many Japanese men left most of the restoration activities in the community to their wives. They did not care about their family due to their role as “corporate soldiers.” Actually, regardless if they were “corporate soldiers” or not, they let their wives do the rebuilding of their community.

Considering the importance of women’s roles in the restoration activities at the affected areas and in contribution to their families and communities, one of the resolutions adopted at Beijing+10 states that a gender perspective is essential in women’s participation in the policy-making, relief and restoration process.

To Utilize Resolutions of “Beijing+10” in Communities

In the preamble of resolutions, it is clearly stated that women are the vulnerable in natural disasters. However, at the same time, women take important roles as caregivers for the survivors and as agents to sustain their family and community. It urges (as shown on page 26) governments and institutions to make policies in order to tackle sexual violence and gender-based violence in states of emergency.

Currently, the Japanese government has established the Disaster Prevention Committee in the Cabinet Office as comprehensive and across the office and ministries in order to create measures and policies. Community-based groups also started building disaster prevention groups in each city and town. However, I would like to question how much gender-sensitive perspective is included. There are no gender sensitivities in the report of the Great Hanshin Earthquake 10th anniversary symposium. In order to utilize the Beijing+10 resolution in our community, it is crucial to change the structure of the male-dominated community-based groups.

Kuniko Funahashi (Board member, Asian-Japan Women’s Resource Center)
The Commission on the Status of Women,

1. Urges Governments, in planning for disaster preparedness and responding to natural disasters, to integrate a gender perspective as well as to ensure that women take an active and equal role in all phases of disaster management;

2. Calls on United Nations entities and international and local humanitarian relief organizations to strengthen the gender dimensions of their responses to disaster situations;

3. Strongly calls on Governments and other relevant bodies, in their responses to disaster situations, to meet the needs of affected populations such as food, clean water, shelter and physical security, as well as to provide services such as health care, including reproductive health, psychological health and psychosocial support and education, taking into account the particular needs of women and girls;

4. Emphasizes the importance of developing and implementing sustainable anti-poverty programs led by the Governments of affected countries, that improve access to and control over productive resources for women and girls affected by disasters;

5. Underlines the need to address the gender equality dimensions of livelihood, security, land tenure, land rights, property and housing since they pose major challenges to women, in particular widows, women heads of households, women with disabilities and women who have lost family members in natural disasters;

6. Also underlines the need to give special attention to the vulnerabilities and capacities of marginalized groups of women and girls;

7. Stresses the need to utilize the expertise, knowledge and networks of women to promote gender equality and social justice in the context of disaster relief, recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction and to facilitate women’s access to media and information and communication technologies;

8. Strongly urges Governments, United Nations entities and other relevant bodies to take necessary measures, including the development and implementation of gender-sensitive codes of conduct, to protect women and girls from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse and all other forms of violence in the context of natural disasters and to provide appropriate care for women and girls who have been exposed to sexual abuse and other forms of violence;

9. Urges Governments, United Nations entities and other relevant bodies involved in post-disaster relief, recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction to provide training on the protection, rights and the particular needs of women and girls and to promote gender balance and gender sensitivity among their representatives and staff;

10. Calls on Governments to involve women in all levels of decision-making in disaster situations, including in community-level welfare centers for displaced persons;

11. Also calls on Governments to promote and protect the full enjoyment of human rights by women, including in the context of natural disaster relief, recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts;

12. Encourages Governments and relevant bodies of the United Nations system, and invites donor countries, regional and international financial institutions and civil society involved in relief, recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts to implement gender-sensitive, community-based approaches, so that women can take an active and equal role in all stages and at all levels, and to monitor these through various measures, including the collection and use of sex-disaggregated statistical data to accurately track progress and women’s participation;

13. Urges Governments, United Nations entities and relevant stakeholders to support gender-sensitive capacity-building at all levels of disaster management;

14. Requests Governments of affected countries, the United Nations system, regional organizations and donor countries to recognize the vulnerabilities and capacities of women and girls and to address these through a gender-responsive allocation of resources in their relief, recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts;

15. Requests the Secretary-General to include in his reports to the General Assembly at its sixtyieth session, the gender dimensions of relief, recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts coordinated by the United Nations in situations of natural disasters, including the recent tsunami disaster.

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