

Written Statement from International Council of Women

The 66th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women

“Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes”

14-25 March, 2022

The International Council of Women, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with The United Nations Economic and Social Council, has been committed to advancing women’s equal rights and empowerment since its establishment in 1888. The International Council of Women firmly believes that the attainment of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls are indispensable keys to facilitating progress toward sustainable global development.

The International Council of Women welcomes the Priority theme of the 66th Commission on the Status of Women, which puts the focus on the crucial issue of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes, and stresses the importance of ensuring that a gender perspective is fully integrated into them. We also welcome the Review theme “Women’s economic empowerment in the changing world of work” (Agreed Conclusions of the 61st Session) at a time when the world of work is facing disruptions caused by the COVID pandemic and seeks to rebuild better. This is, indeed, an opportune moment to implement constructive measures that will lead to women’s equal participation in the world of work. The International Council of Women firmly believes that the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women in all aspects of life are effective ways to combat poverty and to stimulate development and social change in the world.

We should remind ourselves that 26 years ago, in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, it was recognized that “the environmental degradation and disasters affect all human lives and often have a more direct impact on women... the United Nations General Assembly identified natural disasters as a current challenge...and emphasized the need to incorporate a gender perspective in the development and implementation of disaster prevention, mitigation and recovery strategies”.

However, one must ask what has really taken place in the ensuing 26 years? Why is gender equality still a goal towards which women’s organizations throughout the world are still fighting to reach? Among many other issues of concern, there are various issues related to the impact of climate change on women. Some of these include natural disasters, health, population growth, urbanization, migration, household composition, conflict and violence.

Climate change adversely affects the land and consequently, food security (which encompass food availability, food accessibility, food utilization and food system stability), biodiversity and ecology, and water resources. In many developing countries, women, who account for 45-80% of food

production (UN-Women), who are responsible for securing water, food and cooking fuel and who are more dependent on natural resources for their livelihood, face disproportionate impacts from climate change. Climate change has resulted in a reduction of their agricultural output, leading to lower income, food scarcity and higher prices which affects their economic well-being. The increasing frequency of floods and droughts due to climate change affects the availability of clean water causing increased risk of contaminated water resources, leading to lower fish populations, less accessible fresh water sources for domestic and productive use and an increase in disease, even mortality. Environmental degradation also causes people to migrate in search for better living conditions, but human migration, in turn, further intensifies the loss of biodiversity and ecosystems. Incidentally, the World Food Programme estimates 20 % of the world's people will face extreme risk of hunger by 2050 globally due to climate change; notably, among these people 70% are women...

Moreover, when there are natural disasters women continue to prove their roles in managing disaster cycles, despite the fact that most of the women, particularly those living in rural and remote areas, lack access to information regarding floods, earthquakes, cyclones, tsunamis, etc. The women, all too often, are uneducated in life saving skills; and are generally excluded from policy-making positions. In addition, they are the major victims of health disorders due to the effects of climate change. Water borne diseases, malnutrition, and psycho-socio-economic problems have, indeed, a major impact over women and girls. In that context, UNDP experts' research reveals that disasters reinforce, perpetuate and increase gender inequality, especially in the developing world.

Meanwhile, the potential contributions that women could offer to the formulation of environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes are often overlooked, and female leadership in building community resilience to disasters is frequently disregarded.

Consequently, the International Council of Women fully supports and calls attention to the UNDP's Eight Point Agenda (of December 2015) for Women Empowerment and Gender Equality in Crisis Prevention and Recovery. This Agenda, which emphasizes the need to promote gender equality in disaster risk reduction initiatives, is still of actuality today more than ever... Environmental and disaster risk reduction as indicated, that delivers gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, is a cost-effective win-win option for reducing vulnerability and sustaining the livelihoods of whole communities.

Furthermore, over the years, it has been recognized that women play a vital role in environmental and disaster reduction, immediate response and recovery, and in natural resources management. However, there is a need for enhancing women's capacities and institutional mechanisms to respond to disasters at both the national and local levels in order to enhance gender equality and women's empowerment.

The International Council of Women, therefore, urges all stakeholders to join efforts in taking effective actions to accelerate implementation of their environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes by:

- Ensuring the full participation of women in sustainable development decision-making and disaster reduction management;
- Ensuring women's equal access to information as well as formal and informal education on disaster reduction, including gender-sensitive early warning systems;
- Empowering women to take effective action in times of crisis;
- Designing and implementing gender-sensitive economic relief and recovery projects and ensuring equal economic opportunities for women, taking into account the loss of land, housing, and productive assets, and with a special focus on women in remote areas;
- Developing and improving physical and mental health programmes, services and social support frameworks for women who suffer from the effects of climate change and environmental disasters;
- Building capacity of women's organizations and community-based networks;
- Taking measures to empower women as producers and consumers in order to enhance the capacity of women to respond to disasters;
- Mobilizing resources for climate change and environmental disaster preparedness, prevention, risk reduction, resilience and recovery; and
- Mainstreaming a gender perspective in the promotion of sustainable development initiatives and into all climate change, environmental and disaster management initiatives.

Towards these ends the International Council of Women and its affiliates throughout the world, will continue to be engaged in eliminating deep-rooted gender inequalities, and would be pleased to develop effective cooperation with UN-Women, United Nations specialized agencies, civil society organizations, central and local governments, to work jointly with them-in developing a holistic approach for the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes.