

DISASTERS REVEAL SOCIAL INEQUITIES

Whether in natural or man-made crises, women often face risks that men do not. Sexual assault on women has been a part of war everywhere in the world throughout history. During the civil war in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, sexual assault on women was part of the “ethnic cleansing” war strategy.

Women’s vulnerability is revealed in a different way in natural disasters. The Japanese term “ashiyowa” (weak feet, or slow walker) figuratively refers to women, children, and elderly people, and suggests that they are physically less capable of avoiding risks than men. When disaster strikes, women are more likely than men to become victims because they are often less informed about how to evacuate, are not socially allowed to evacuate of their own will, or are literally “slow walkers.”

Although women constitute half of the world’s population, they are perceived as weaker than men in many societies, and such perception has often resulted in gender inequality. Such social distortion causes discrimination in everyday life, but it is even more visible in a time of crisis.

In 2000, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 1325

to highlight the magnitude of the adverse impact of conflicts on women and children, as well as the importance of women’s role in peace-building. The resolution emphasizes the importance of women’s participation in decision-making not only for building peace and security but also for preventing conflict.

Women’s participation in conflict and disaster prevention is a common agenda for all nations. “Crises often reveal social distortions that are unseen in normal times, exposing inequities and discrimination,” suggests Ms. Akiko Domoto, a former member of the House of Councilors. “Eliminating inequities for women in a time of disaster or conflict requires thinking about our society in normal times,” she says. Ms. Domoto has long been committed to establishing systems to promote women’s social participation.

TAPPING THE VULNERABLE TO BUILD A MORE ROBUST SOCIETY

Why is the involvement of women, and eventually minorities such as older people and people with disabilities, beneficial for peace-building and disaster prevention? Such people can offer different perspectives, and their insights can help

build a more robust society.

Ms. Domoto says that Japan rarely includes women in decision-making forums for disaster prevention or recovery planning. “It’s because people think that it is ‘strong men’s job’ to stand against disaster,” she says. “Therefore, when the Great East Japan Earthquake hit, it was difficult to persuade people of the importance of ensuring privacy using partitions, which is absolutely necessary when changing clothes or diapers.” She says that similar issues have been discussed since the Great Hanshin Awaji Earthquake in 1995, but the same problem happened again after last year’s Kumamoto Earthquake.

But there are signs of improvement. “On the other hand, many women are now actively engaged in efforts to rebuild their communities after the Great East Japan Earthquake,” Ms. Domoto says. She explains that women are as capable as men in crises, but that they are often not viewed that way. There are also signs of change beyond Japan. For example, in Bangladesh during the 1970s, the male-female ratio of cyclone victims was 1 to 14. This happened because women at that time tended to stay at home and were socially isolated, and

consequently they remained uninformed about the need to evacuate as soon as they heard the evacuation alarm, or they did not know where to escape to. Bangladesh undertook initiatives to promote women’s knowledge about evacuation as well as to improve technologies to predict disasters. Such efforts not only decreased the number of victims but also improved the male-female ratio of cyclone victims, which in 2007 was 1 to 5.

Women are not the only vulnerable people who should be heard. “There are children, elderly people, and people with health problems and disabilities, who are, in other words, the weak or minorities in many different ways,” Ms. Domoto says. “If we do not include viewpoints offered by such people into decision-making, vulnerable people will continue to suffer disproportionately in crises.”

When the weak are not left behind in a society, the society is safer for all. To build a society with less distortion and to keep it in good shape, it is essential for us all to speak out and support each other, regardless of gender or age, pursuing a society that is open and comfortable for all.

Gender Issues in Conflict and Disaster

Supporting the weak and vulnerable in our society

