

The leadership role of women during emergencies, conflict and climate disasters is overlooked, and yet is so important in preparing for and recovering from disasters

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Good afternoon everyone,

I stand here today to talk about the leadership role of women during emergencies, conflicts, and climate disasters, a role that is often overlooked but incredibly vital. Disasters such as devastating hurricanes, brutal wars and crippling droughts caused by climate change, they disrupt lives and reveal weaknesses in our societies. One of the biggest blind spots is how often we ignore the leadership of women in times like these. Women are not just victims, they are problem-solvers, caregivers, and leaders who are crucial to preparing for and recovering from disasters.

Let me tell you about a story I came across that portrays this theme perfectly. In the Philippines, which is hit by an average of 20 typhoons each year, women in rural communities have taken the lead to prepare for these disasters. One inspiring story is that of Marinel Ubaldo, who survived Typhoon Haiyan, one of the deadliest typhoons in history. After experiencing the devastation, Marinel became a climate activist, advocating for better disaster response and planning. She has spoken at global conferences, reminding world leaders of the importance of collective solutions led by women. Amazing, right? Marinel in my opinion is a golden example of women taking charge. When disasters take place, a government's first step of action is safety, of course. Although it is not just about surviving, it's about rebuilding. This step is usually one that is tackled by pouring money and financial aid to physically rebuild. Which of course is vital, but it is usually women that step up to organize their communities. They ensure children continue their education, care for the sick and elderly, and find creative ways to provide food and shelter. This is the step that is crucial for a successful rebuild after a disaster. In Nepal, for instance, after the 2015 earthquake, women's groups played a huge role in distributing aid and ensuring that everyone received help. After all, they knew the needs of their own communities better than anyone else.

Why is women's leadership so effective? It's because women bring a different perspective to the table. They understand that challenges are varied for children, the elderly, and other vulnerable groups. So, their leadership ensures that the solutions are inclusive. Research shows that when women are involved in disaster planning, more lives are saved. Simple as that. A study by the United Nations found that countries with higher female participation in government experienced lower disaster-related death rates. Why? Because women prioritize community well-being and urge for preparedness that saves lives.

That being said, doesn't it seem like women are a large part of these leadership and government roles, and everyone respects these women and trusts their educated opinions without question? I wish I could say you're right. Despite their proven leadership, women often face barriers. Cultural norms, lack of access to education and limited financial resources can hold them back. In many places, women's voices are ignored when decisions are being made. Not only is this unfair, but it's dangerous. Ignoring half the population's input means missing out on half of the solutions. Women are often excluded from critical planning committees or emergency response teams, even though they have the most direct knowledge of their communities' needs. Their absence from these spaces leads to responses that fail to consider everyone. For example, evacuation plans may not account for the challenges faced by pregnant women or single mothers. Which is strikingly more common than you may think.

We need to do more to support and recognize women's leadership in times like these. Governments, organizations and communities must create space for women to lead. This means investing in education for girls, ensuring women have access to resources, and including them in decision-making processes. It also means challenging cultural norms that say leadership is a man's role, a norm that was set by a man. Are we surprised? As the saying goes, "When you empower a woman, you empower a community." Women are already leading, we just need to see them, support them, and follow their example.

In closing, remember that disasters, conflicts, and climate change are challenges we all face. But the solutions will only come if we let everyone lead, including women, because their voices are essential. Let's work together to make sure they are heard.

Thank you.