

ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY IN TIMES OF EMERGENCY; REGIONAL COURSE DISCUSSES GENDER RELATED ISSUES IN POST-DISASTER CONTEXT

Interest Story

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BANGKOK, Thailand – In times of disaster, it's imperative that disaster response is equitable and considers the complexities gender relations may present. For women and girls, this requires rethinking health and sanitation facilities, accommodation arrangements and the safety of household responsibilities.

Course revamped: Public Health Emergency Management in Asia

This year offered the first Public Health Emergency Management in Asia and the Pacific (PHEMAP-11) Inter-Regional Training Course since its evaluation and reformatting in 2011 and 2012. Participants of the course analyzed emerging issues that will impact disaster risk management (DRM); from climate change, to the spread of disease, to urbanization and beyond; and then how to strengthen plans for DRM in their countries and communities.

During the course, the role of gender in disaster management was covered and discussed among participants. The discussions led to participants reflecting on how gender equity can be better achieved in their respective home countries.

Dr. Roderico Ofrin, Coordinator of Emergency and Humanitarian Action at the World Health Organization's Regional Office for South East Asia shared his experiences and guided participants towards understanding women's vulnerabilities.

Dr. Ofrin reflected on his experience with a community that was provided with a sanitation unit to use after disaster made their normal facilities inaccessible. It was not until a female aid worker noticed that women were very rarely at the unit that inquiries were made and it was discovered that the women did not feel safe using the unit alone, so they went to the unit as a group twice a day. This meant that many women were left needing to use the bathroom for hours but felt obliged to wait for the protection of the group.

In this case, separate facilities for men and women may have increased vulnerabilities, as women did not feel comfortable washing due to a fear of attack.



At a Community Based Disaster Risk Reduction training program based in Ayutthaya, Thailand, two women participate and represent their communities

Achieving equity in vulnerable societies

“There is a need to recognize the different needs, capacities and contributions of women, girls, men and boys” Dr. Ofrin, said.

During the course he spoke on the need to try to implement gender equality in vulnerable societies before a disaster strikes, enabling women in communities to be considered of equal merit for receiving aid and participating in disaster relief when the time comes.

“ In most societies gender inequality stems from the fact that women must fulfill three main roles, which are unrecognized and undervalued - reproductive, referring to child bearing as well as to their child rearing roles; productive, referring to women's role as income earners in both formal and informal sectors; and community, referring to women's collective work at the community level ”

Dr. Ofrin said in his presentation.

The fact that these roles are undervalued in society is an important aspect to consider – if the work that women were expected to do in many communities held a higher status, it is unlikely they would be deprived of the sustenance to effectively continue in it.

“Working towards gender equality does not mean sameness between men and women, but rather that both can exercise their rights in an equitable process which recognizes that their starting points are different, but nevertheless equal” Dr. Ofrin continued.



Community Action for Disaster Response participant takes the initiative to lead her team in a disaster simulation in Hetauda, Nepal



Asian Disaster Preparedness Center

SM Tower, 24th Floor 979/69 Paholyothin Road, Samsen Nai Phayathai, Bangkok 10400 Thailand

Tel: +66 2 298 0682-92 Fax: +66 2 298 0012-13 E-mail: adpc@adpc.net Website: <http://www.adpc.net>