SASAKAWA USA
Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA
米国笹川平和財団

Women, Mental Health, and Disaster Risk Reduction: A Narrative Report

Ms. Anjana Dayal de Prewitt
Director for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, American Red Cross, National Headquarters

The reflections and accounts in this paper were drawn from select engagements held during the Sasakawa USA Emerging Experts Delegation (SEED) program on Strengthening Disaster Risk Reduction through Women, Peace and Security in July 2024. The program brought U.S. Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) experts to Japan to learn about Japan's progress in implementing Women, Peace and Security (WPS) in the disaster context by meeting with national and local governments, the private sector, and civil society organizations who work on these issues. This paper highlights the delegation's engagements with academics at the forefront of research in DRR and gender in Tokyo. The delegates also participated in a field study in Tohoku and Noto to meet with local government officials and community leaders affected by the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and the 2024 Noto Peninsula Earthquake, and identified challenges, successes, and areas of opportunity for the U.S. and Japan to strengthen their respective and collaborative gender-inclusive disaster response efforts.

Introduction

The Sasakawa USA Emerging Experts Delegation (SEED) program selected a delegation of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) experts from various U.S. government and non-government

agencies to visit various parts of Japan and meet with government officials, civil society representatives, academics, and community leaders that are working to integrate a gender perspective into their work on DRR. The visit was carefully planned so that the delegation could meet with a variety of people who were directly related to DRR and/or WPS in the Japanese context. As a result, the trip helped the delegates to gather substantial information on the subject through in-person dialogues, field visits and storytelling. However, more time is needed to fully understand the context in a comprehensive manner.

Women's involvement in DRR is pivotal, particularly given their unique vulnerabilities and roles within communities. This report delves into the intersection of gender, mental health, and DRR, focusing on the challenges women face and the strategies needed to empower them. The report draws on a range of qualitative and quantitative data, including observations from the SEED program trip, where various stakeholders discussed these critical issues. The purpose of this report is to document what was learned and provide recommendations on how to strengthen the Disaster Risk Reduction field from a gender lens.

Background: Women and Disasters

Disasters disproportionately affect women due to pre-existing gender inequalities. Women are often more vulnerable to the impacts of disasters due to social, economic, and cultural factors that limit their access to resources and decision-making processes. For example, in many societies, women are primary caregivers responsible for children, the elderly, and the disabled, which can hinder their ability to evacuate during a disaster. Furthermore, women are more likely to live in poverty, making it harder for them to recover from the economic impacts of disasters.

The situation is further complicated by the mental health challenges women face during and after disasters. The psychological impact of disasters can be profound, particularly for women who may have pre-existing mental health issues due to gender-based violence, discrimination, and other forms of oppression. Addressing these challenges requires a gender-sensitive approach to DRR that considers the unique needs and experiences of women.

General Observations

- Based on the briefing from the U.S. Embassy staff, this is a good time for the U.S.-Japan alliance given the geo-political situation in the region. The alliance feels natural as it is based on shared values. There is a potential for building a long-term partnership for DRR and facilitating cross learning from a gender mainstreaming perspective.

- In general, there is an interest in WPS work in Japanese government, but more deliberations are needed to articulate concrete strategies in various departments, especially as it relates to DRR.

- Expectations about assimilation vs. acculturation were not clear. All in all, there seems to be an expectation of assimilation from longer-term foreign residents. However, familiar coping mechanisms are often required to recover from the impact of disasters. Therefore, it is important that host populations and leaders create safe spaces for migrant women to be able to practice coping strategies they are familiar with from their home countries.

Observations from Japan: Gender and Disaster Risk Reduction

During the visit to Japan, several key observations were made regarding the role of women in DRR and the mental health challenges they face:

1. *Women's Role in DRR*: While women's roles in the disaster management community are growing, they remain minimal in many areas. Traditional cultural norms and a lack of leadership opportunities continue to hinder women's participation in DRR. In meetings, women are often presented as assistants rather than leaders, reflecting broader societal attitudes towards gender roles.

2. *Mental Health and Psychosocial Support*: Mental health is a serious issue in Japan, with high suicide rates for both men and women, and a lack of adequate support for those dealing

with mental health challenges.[1] Women face significant stress during disasters, with limited access to culturally appropriate coping mechanisms. The need for better coordination among government and non-government agencies to address the mental health and psychosocial needs of women was emphasized.

Japan has one of the highest suicide rates in the world, with women particularly affected. Data from the World Health Organization (WHO) indicates that the suicide rate among women in Japan is 14.3 per 100,000, compared to a global average of 8.0 per 100,000. The stress and trauma associated with disasters can exacerbate existing mental health issues, leading to an increase in suicide rates.

In Japan, the interlocuters shared that reports of domestic violence and sexual assault surged in the aftermath of the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to protect women and girls during disasters.

3. *Challenges in Policy Implementation*: Despite Japan's Basic Policy on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women, there are significant challenges in implementing these policies at the local level. One issue is the top-down approach to policymaking, where national policies are imposed on local actors without sufficient consultation or consideration of local contexts. This has led to a lack of trust and collaboration between national and local stakeholders, hindering the effective implementation of gender-sensitive DRR policies.

4. *Gender-Based Violence*: Disasters have been linked to an increase in GBV, exacerbating the mental health challenges faced by women. The stress and trauma associated with disasters can lead to higher rates of domestic violence, sexual assault, and other forms of GBV. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach that includes both prevention and response measures, such as providing safe spaces for women and ensuring

[1] "Number of Suicides in Japan Rises in 2022," Nippon.com, March 27, 2023, https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-data/h01624/; Yoneatsu Osaki et al., "Suicide rates during social crises: Changes in the suicide rate in Japan after the Great East Japan earthquake and during the COVID-19 pandemic," August 2021, National Library of Medicine, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8674964/.

access to mental health and psychosocial support services.

5. *Women's Leadership*: Despite the challenges, there are examples of strong women leaders in the disaster management community. For instance, a woman-led café was established in Yokohama to provide a space for other women to provide a safe space for women/mothers who were isolated community and needed some rest and nourishment while someone took care of their child. This demonstrates the potential for women to play a more active and visible role in DRR, provided they are given the necessary support and opportunities.

   Despite efforts to increase women's participation in DRR, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions. The Japanese government has aimed to increase the proportion of women on national disaster reduction committees to 30% by 2025 but as of 2023, only 10.8% of these committee members are women.[2] This lack of representation limits the effectiveness of DRR policies and programs, as women's perspectives and needs are often overlooked.

Case Study: The Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami

The Tohoku earthquake and tsunami of 2011 provides a stark example of the challenges women face during disasters, as well as the importance of gender-sensitive DRR strategies:

- *Impact on Women*: The disaster had a devastating impact on women, particularly those in rural areas who were already marginalized. Many women lost their homes, livelihoods, and loved ones, leading to significant mental health challenges. The disaster also exacerbated existing gender inequalities, with women facing higher rates of unemployment, poverty, and GBV in the aftermath.

- *Mental Health and Psychosocial Support*: In the years following the disaster, mental health and psychosocial support services were expanded to help those affected by the disaster, including women. However, many women reported feeling isolated and stigmatized, and

[2] "Disaster management in Japan needs a more gender-inclusive approach. Here's why," United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, August 30, 2024, https://www.preventionweb.net/news/disaster-management-japan-needs-more-gender-inclusive-approach-heres-why.

there were significant gaps in the provision of culturally appropriate support. This highlights the need for more targeted and accessible mental health services for women in disaster-affected areas.

- *Women's Leadership*: Despite the challenges, women played a crucial role in the recovery process. Women's groups and networks were established to provide support and advocacy for women affected by the disaster, and several women took on leadership roles in the rebuilding of their communities. These efforts demonstrate the resilience and strength of women in the face of adversity, as well as the importance of supporting women's leadership in DRR.

Recommendations for Enhancing Women's Roles in DRR in Japan

To address the challenges identified, several recommendations were made for enhancing women's roles in DRR and addressing their mental health needs:

1. *Increase Women's Participation in DRR*: There is a need for greater representation of women in disaster management committees and other decision-making bodies. This can be achieved by setting and enforcing quotas for women's participation, as well as providing training and capacity-building opportunities to empower women to take on leadership roles. For example, the Japanese government can require 50% representation of women in disaster management committees at the local level. There is an opportunity for elderly women, younger women, girls, women with disability, and women with foreign nationality at all levels to include their voices in planning for disasters so their specific needs are considered and met in a timely fashion.

2. *Address Gender-Based Violence*: DRR strategies must include measures to prevent and respond to GBV during and after disasters. This includes providing safe spaces for women and girls, ensuring access to legal and psychological support services, and raising awareness about the issue among communities and local leaders. There have been reports of increased gender-based violence and domestic violence after disasters in Japan. Women's support groups can be formed in communities prior to disasters to support and

provide protection to each other in the wake of an emergency.

3. *Improve Coordination Among Stakeholders*: Better coordination is needed between national and local governments, as well as between government agencies and non-governmental organizations, to ensure the effective implementation of gender-sensitive DRR policies. This includes developing clear guidelines for gender equality in disaster planning, response, and recovery, and involving local leaders and communities in the policy-making process. During the visit with the representatives from Central Japan Railway Company (CJRC), it was clear that CJRC had good response mechanisms in the case of an emergency but no coordination with any mental health support organization to provide counseling and/or psychosocial support to the staff or the passengers.

4. *Promote Gender-Sensitive Research and Innovation*: More research is needed to understand the specific needs and challenges faced by women in disaster-affected areas, as well as to develop innovative solutions to address these challenges. This includes exploring the potential of technology, such as artificial intelligence, to enhance DRR strategies, as well as promoting collaboration between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to develop evidence-based approaches to gender-sensitive DRR.

5. *Inclusion and Recognition of Diverse Women*: Even though Japan is mostly a homogenous country from a cultural perspective, there is diversity in terms of age, gender, sexual orientation, ability and nationality. The policies that support gender equality can be strengthened by incorporating the specific needs, strengths, and interventions for the diverse group of women in the country. There was very little mention of the LGBTQ community, including transgender and lesbian women.

6. *Strengthen Mental Health and Psychosocial Support*: Governments and non-governmental organizations should work together to improve access to mental health and psychosocial support services for women affected by disasters. This includes providing culturally appropriate support, such as faith-based counseling and community-based psychosocial support groups, as well as addressing the stigma associated with mental health issues. A

workshop could be designed that builds on local positive coping mechanisms and strengthens natural support systems. One notable example witnessed during the visit was a café owned by a woman leader that provides respite to mothers with young children who come to get a hot meal and a break while volunteers from the community took care of their young ones. Staff care can be improved for disaster responders in terms of training and actual space to practice self-care rather than only messaging about it as reported by a local responder in one of the meetings.

Recommendations for Enhancing Women's Role in DRR in the United States

1. *Incorporate DRR as Part of Social Responsibility*: One of the observations in Japan was that DRR was included in different aspects of life due to the high frequency of earthquakes. For example, children practice drills in schools and business leaders had a coalition around DRR. In light of increasing natural disasters exacerbated by climate change, it is crucial for the United States to integrate DRR into its social responsibility framework. This approach not only protects communities but also enhances resilience, fosters sustainable development, and promotes social equity. Vulnerable populations often bear the brunt of disasters. Incorporating DRR into social responsibility initiatives ensures that marginalized communities receive the support and resources necessary to prepare for and recover from disasters, promoting equity and inclusion. DRR is closely linked to sustainable development goals. By embedding DRR into social responsibility, the U.S. can work toward building resilient communities that can thrive in the face of adversity.

2. *Develop Community-based Psychosocial Support Activities to Enhance Resilience*: We witnessed a few good examples of community members engaging psychological and social recovery from past disasters. For example, during our trip to the tsunami-affected area, community members shared their experiences with visitors, which in turn helps them to heal from the trauma. The café for mothers of young babies mentioned above is another example. Developing community-based psychosocial support activities is crucial for enhancing disaster-related resilience in U.S. communities. By focusing on awareness,

training, peer support, structured programs, and collaboration with mental health professionals, communities can create a robust support system that fosters emotional well-being and strengthens resilience in the face of future disasters. Investing in these initiatives will ultimately lead to healthier, more resilient communities capable of thriving even amidst challenges.

Community-based psychosocial activities could be developed in partnership with mental health professionals, higher education institutions, spiritual leaders, and other interested community members. These activities are usually built on existing positive coping mechanisms that are culturally appropriate and have been practiced by community members for years.

Conclusion

Women are disproportionately affected by disasters, yet they also have the potential to be powerful agents of change in DRR. Addressing the challenges women face, including mental health issues and gender-based violence, requires a gender-sensitive approach to DRR that recognizes and responds to the unique needs and experiences of women. This includes increasing women's participation in decision-making processes, improving access to mental health and psychosocial support services, and addressing the root causes of gender inequality.

Japan provides valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with gender-sensitive DRR. While progress has been made, there is still much work to be done to ensure that women are fully included and supported in DRR efforts. However, there is learning from Japan that can also help the U.S. to strengthen its DRR efforts in the wake of the increased frequency and magnitude of natural disasters in recent decades. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this report, governments and organizations can help to create a more inclusive and effective approach to DRR that empowers women and enhances their resilience to disasters.

Ms. Anjana Dayal de Prewitt wrote in her personal capacity. The views and interpretations expressed by the author are solely her own.

Ms . Dayal de Prewitt is currently serving as the Director for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion for the American Red Cross, National Headquarters. In addition to the American Red Cross, she has had the opportunity to work with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC), International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) and Save the Children U.S. in various leadership positions in the last two decades. She has worked in over 30 countries in humanitarian settings affected by disasters and armed conflicts, where she designed and managed complex programs and budgets, and led high performing teams. She has developed program guidance and strategy pertaining to Community based Psychosocial Support, Child Protection, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. She has a bachelor's degree in psychology from Lucknow University (India), a master's degree in Sustainable Peace from UN Mandated University for Peace (Costa Rica) and Certifications in Humanitarian Diplomacy from IFRC/Diplo Foundation (Switzerland) and Peace Leadership from Euphrates Institute/Centre for Executive Education at the University for Peace. Most recently she was appointed as the Senior Fellow at the King Center: The Center for Non-violent Social Change for 2023-2024. In addition to her two books, Gudia: A Defiant Doll (English) and Papa Ke Joote (Hindi), her work has been published in various peer reviewed journals and books. She is a polyglot, speaking English, Hindi/Urdu, and Spanish.