

Press Release, August 31  
International Disaster Reduction Conference

## **Gender, Governance, and Global Sustainability**

**Davos, Switzerland** – *Women already bear the brunt of the world's natural and man-made disasters, and some risk experts among them say they need a much stronger voice in post-catastrophe rebuilding efforts. This message transcended all others from an all-female panel addressing the weeklong International Conference on Disaster Reduction (ICDR) meeting today.*

"We must examine disasters through a gender-sensitive lens," insisted keynote speaker Maureen Fordham, programme leader for Disaster Management and Sustainable Development at Britain's University of Northumbria. According to reports on the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, females accounted for three of every four fatalities – and this figure may also apply to most other catastrophes in Third World areas. But such a statistic fails to cover women's mistreatment in temporary relief camps afterwards. Dr. Fordham says it's often hard to locate precise data breaking down victim details of such catastrophes by gender. That's a gap she hopes to see bridged immediately.

So does a member of the Swiss parliament, Zurich-based Barbara Haering, who also advises the Swiss government on foreign policy issues. She sits on the board of the Berne-based Swiss Peace Foundation (SPF) known as "swisspeacer". It compiles early-warning reports of looming conflicts in 13 developing countries for the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). "Gender-neutral research leads to gender-blind findings," Dr. Haering told her audience. She pointed out one such example emerging from post-tsunami studies. "Due to cultural patterns, girls aren't taught to swim, so they're more exposed to danger than boys are in such a disaster."

Sometimes, Dr. Fordham noted, even post-disaster relief facilities become the site for thugs to prey on women and girls. She called female residents of makeshift camps "more vulnerable yet more resilient" than males based on recent case studies.

Dr. Haering's studies bear out this finding. Part of the "dark picture" in the aftermath of disasters, she said, is that sexual violence rises in the normally chaotic camp settings as hooligans take control. In addition, Dr. Fordham observed a "sadly familiar" pattern in post-disaster relief scenarios – especially in Third World countries which limit females to traditional household roles. Women's menstrual cycles remain a secret social taboo, the British researcher said. National relief agencies not only neglect women's sanitary needs but may even harass women when providing hygienic articles. However, this situation appears to be improving.

According to Helena Molin Valdes, deputy director of the Geneva-based UN Secretariat for the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR), the UN too comes in for criticism. The architect and city planner said the UN had been slow to apportion posts to women and promote them. It remains "a boy's club with a glass ceiling," she told the IDRC. That is, it excels at "talking the talk" about gender equality, but its leisurely pace of acting on these policies leaves women in all its agencies frustrated.

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Another panelist, Ursula Oswald Spring, the Munich Re Foundation chair on social vulnerability (UNU-EHA), told conferees that “We’re too soft” in the eyes of the world’s male population. The Mexican panelist said women need to assert themselves at all levels of society.

In the context of reducing disaster risks, Oswald Spring pointed out that women now account for 70 percent of Africa’s farming force – an indirect result of male migration following disasters ranging from civil war to natural hazards like flooding. This happened in Chiapas, Mexico, where disastrous floods destroyed 40 percent of the coffee plantations. After the loss of their cash crop, many male farmers left for the USA, leaving the land to women to cultivate. Such patterns leave the IDRC in search of answers to the shifting role of women as post-disaster survivors.

The IDRC follows up the 2005 United Nations-sponsored conference held in Kobe, Japan – a gathering on combating natural disasters largely restricted to government officials. The Davos meetings also address man-made catastrophes such as war and terrorism. Those attending include nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector. Four organizing partners are cosponsoring the IDRC: the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR), the Global Alliance for Disaster Reduction (GADR) and the Global Disaster Information Network (GDIN); and it is locally organized by the Swiss Federal Research Institute WSL, Davos. IDRC organizers say a follow-up conference modeled after the Davos framework will meet in Harbin, China, in 2007.

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