

Speech by H.E. Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan
High-level Partnership Dialogue: Mobilizing Women's Leadership in
Disaster Risk Reduction
The 3rd UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai

Four years have elapsed since the Great East Japan Earthquake. Japan is a country that has faced up to countless natural disasters over the ages. Having endured many harsh experiences, we have become keenly aware of the fact that the power of women is also essential for disaster risk reduction and reconstruction.

Women's leadership in times of disaster

The following words were part of a declaration made by a group of women from Iwakiri District of Sendai City during community disaster risk reduction drills in the year before the Great East Japan Earthquake. "Who are the people most important to you? If there were something you could do to protect the lives of those most important to you, would you not start doing it right away?"

In all regions of Japan, it was predominantly men who participated in disaster risk reduction drills. However, if a massive earthquake were to strike during the day, most of the people at home would be women. A woman's perspective is therefore essential for community disaster risk reduction efforts.

It was with this concept in mind that the women of Iwakiri District exchanged opinions with one another.

What needs to be done to be prepared before a potential disaster strikes? When a disaster does strike, what must be done then? The women in the community worked to reach a common understanding about such matters.

The next year, the Great East Japan Earthquake struck. The earthquake itself was massive, registering an Upper 6 on the Japanese seismic intensity scale, and the huge tsunami inundated 35 percent of the

community. Many of the people affected were forced to evacuate their homes and live in evacuation shelters.

The women who created the aforementioned declaration believed that “Women must also take proactive action in times of disaster,” and they engaged in efforts as leaders and staff after disaster struck.

They operated evacuation shelters, making sure that the concerns of all the women and the elderly were heard, that privacy among the evacuees could be ensured in the shelters, that powdered baby milk was provided, and that efforts were made to listen to those people who find it difficult to speak up.

The role of women in caring for evacuees

“What stopped me from contemplating suicide was the female police officer from the Metropolitan Police Department’s “Bond Team” who came to see me. We became very close, and she would listen to what I had to say and take me out for walks too, which really saved me. I am deeply grateful to her.”

This passage was written in a letter from a person in the evacuation shelter who was partially paralyzed and who was looked after by a member of the Metropolitan Police Department’s “Bond Team.”

Immediately after the Great East Japan Earthquake, this police team, consisting mainly of female police officers from all over Japan, was dispatched to the regions that had been worst hit by the earthquake and tsunami.

These female police officers spent a great deal of time making their way around many local communities, listening to the stories of the people affected by the disaster who were facing all manner of difficult circumstances. Many of those affected were saved by this attentive psychological care that women are able to provide.

The role of women in restoring livelihoods

Following the Great East Japan Earthquake, I have visited Tohoku 22

times. During these visits I have met with many women.

Last month, I visited Kesenuma City, which suffered extensive damage from the disaster. Kesenuma is a port city, and there is a long tradition of maintaining fishing nets and knitting sweaters for fishermen. Needlework holds a special place in the hearts of women in the region.

Making the most of this tradition, following the disaster, a hand-knitting workshop was set up. Thus a sustainable enterprise that also made use of local culture was born. Presently, over 30 people engage in hand-knitting every day, creating high value-added hand-knit sweaters that are tremendously popular.

This is an example of how women's unique perspective and ideas can restore livelihoods.

The role of women in rebuilding communities

It is said that women are more susceptible to being affected by disasters and are therefore among "the vulnerable." As unforgivable as it may be, reports have shown that cases of violence against women tend to increase in the ensuing turmoil following a disaster.

However, women possess the wisdom and knowledge needed to protect their families from disasters. Furthermore, they are capable of providing attentive physical and psychological care for the victims of the disaster, who have to face up to many different challenges following the disaster.

The power of women is absolutely indispensable for restoring communities that have been devastated by disasters, and each time I visit the disaster-affected areas, I meet women who are working hard to promote local activities, despite being victims of the disaster.

"I would like to continue to provide support in close harmony with the concerns and feelings of each and every person."

One of the women who visits affected areas in Miyagi Prefecture as an advisor had this to say.

I intend to make sure that the strength of such women is drawn upon in order to reduce disaster risk and recover from those disasters, as well as to ensure that each region can stand up on its own in the post-disaster phase. We believe that women's leadership is indeed essential in order to stand up to disasters.

Women's participation in ordinary times

If you cannot do something in ordinary times, then you certainly cannot do it at the time of a disaster.

The local governments across our nation have organized Prefectural Disaster Management Councils, have drafted Disaster Management Plans, and are taking measures in ordinary times in order to prepare for disasters that may occur. A decade ago, in about half of the Prefectural Disaster Management Councils, there were no women participating.

However, now women are represented in all of the Prefectural Disaster Management Councils. We are currently creating a structure in which women will be participating in the decision-making processes regarding disaster risk reduction even in ordinary times. We are also seeing an increase in the participation by women in local firefighting organizations.

Japan's contribution toward ensuring greater participation by women

We want to share Japan's experiences with the international community. At last year's UN Commission on the Status of Women, the representative from Japan stressed the need to give careful consideration

to women at the time of disasters and the importance of the role played by women when society responds to natural disasters. In fact, our appeal received wide-ranging support from many countries and was adopted as a resolution.

We are launching concrete projects in nations around the world.

In Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and other island nations of the Pacific Ocean, there are many natural disasters, such as typhoons and volcanic eruptions. Seemingly every year, heavy rainstorms wreak damage, and rivers overflow and cause water saturation damage in many regions.

We have dispatched experts in the field of community disaster risk reduction to conduct training focusing on women over a three-year period. The women community leaders who received that training had an opportunity to learn the basic information necessary for disaster risk reduction.

Now these women have become leaders and are carrying on their own activities to spread knowledge about disaster risk reduction to other women in their communities.

In 2013, the Philippines was struck by Typhoon Yolanda, which was the highest class of typhoon. In order to assist in the recovery and reconstruction following that disaster, Japan provided cooperation focusing primarily on assistance to women.

Prior to the disaster, the women of that region played an important role in processing agricultural products, such as milkfish and meat. In order to ensure that women could restart their work in that area as quickly as possible, we not only reconstructed the processing plants, but we also built childcare services so that we could assist women in returning to their jobs soon after. Furthermore, employees of Higashi-Matsushima

City in Miyagi Prefecture, which suffered damage during the Great East Japan Earthquake, provided advice such that the opinions of the residents, especially women, would be incorporated into the reconstruction plan.

Today, I announced Japan's new cooperation initiative for disaster risk reduction. Under this initiative, over the next four years Japan will train 40 thousand officials and people in local regions around the world as leaders who will play key roles in disaster risk reduction and reconstruction.

One of the major projects that will be undertaken through this initiative is the launch of the Training to Promote Leadership by Women in Disaster Risk Reduction. Furthermore, at the World Assembly for Women in Tokyo (WAW! Tokyo), to be held this coming summer, one of the themes will be "Women and Disaster Risk Reduction." That event will provide a forum to stress to the whole world the importance of women playing a leadership role.

Conclusion

No matter how much the ground shakes, we will remain calm in our hearts.

Those are the words spoken by women from Iwakiri District, whom I referred to at the opening of my remarks. In order for us to create a society that is truly resilient and able to withstand natural disasters, it is essential that we make women the driving force behind such efforts.

This is something that I think we all need to bear in mind and focus on.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.