Recognise the strength of women and girls in reducing disaster risks

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October 13 marks the UN International Day for Disaster Reduction and the ASEAN Day for Disaster Management. Across Vietnam and around the world, events are being held to raise awareness of the need to reduce the risks disasters pose and create safe communities, cities and countries.

Every year we are reminded that Vietnam is highly prone to disasters such as floods, typhoons, droughts and landslides. According to the 2012 climate risk index produced by the organization Germanwatch, Vietnam ranks sixth in the world on climatic risks. Over the past two decades, climate related disasters have caused an average annual loss of USD 1.8 billion and an average of 445 deaths every year. With climate change, extreme weather events will only increase.

While we can’t eliminate these disasters, we can reduce the extensive damage they cause. One way is to ensure that all Vietnamese people, regardless of gender, social status or age, are involved in identifying solutions and that relevant policies and actions are informed by needs and community knowledge.

This message echoes this year’s theme for the international day: “Women and Girls, the [in]Visible Force of Resilience”. Representing half the world’s population, it is essential to make full use of the experience and knowledge women and girls have when addressing disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation.

Too often, women and girls are portrayed as just passive victims of disasters. Yet women and girls have unique skills and expertise which must be used and reflected in national policies and actions. In 2004, news spread of eleven-year-old schoolgirl, Tilly Smith, who raised the alarm to save about 100 tourists from the Asian tsunami. Remembering a recent geography lesson about tsunamis, Tilly spotted signs that something was wrong and persuaded her family and other tourists to flee the beach just before the tsunami struck.

We also need to understand better the different ways in which men and women, girls and boys, are affected by disasters and climate change. In Vietnam for instance, women make up the majority of the agricultural labour force and are therefore more affected by the impacts of climate change on farming. Women also rarely hold land titles. This means that following a disaster, many women cannot independently ask for social welfare funds to reconstruct their houses or re-establish their livelihoods. They are also more at risk of harm during flooding because girls are rarely taught to swim.

Vietnam already has a legal framework in place to address gender equality. In the area of climate change, the National Target Programme to Respond to Climate Change stresses the importance of gender equality as a guiding principle. It also highlights that the potential climate change impacts on women risk undoing the many achievements made on the Millennium Development Goals.

Yet women continue to be under-represented in the formal institutions that deal with disaster risk management, such as the Committees for Floods and Storm Control, the Search & Rescue Committees, the army and the People's Committees. Disaster response continues to be seen as men’s work.
In some provinces, such as Phu Yen and Binh Dinh, the provincial Women’s Unions are now official members of the Provincial Committee for Flood and Storm Control and Search & Rescue and play an active role in relief and recovery work. However, in most provinces this is not the norm. And at the national level, the Women’s Union is not yet a member of the Central Committee for Floods and Storm Control. This effectively excludes the voice of half of Vietnam’s population.

At an event in Hanoi today, organized by the Central Committee for Flood and Storm Control, the Women’s Union, the Disaster Management Working Group and the UN in Vietnam, these issues are being addressed.

One of the important ways to address the representation issue is to formalize the membership of the Women’s Union at all levels in the Central Committee for Flood and Storm Control and increase the number of female members in the Committees for Flood and Storm Control at all levels to a minimum of 30 percent. This would help to ensure women’s active involvement and participation.

The UN in Vietnam is committed to ensuring that the voices of men and women, boys and girls, are included in discussions on managing and responding to disaster risks. We will continue to work with MARD to support the National Programme for Community-based Disaster Risk Reduction and with the Women’s Union at all levels, promoting women’s participation in decision-making processes. We will also support Vietnam to develop more concrete action plans on gender equality, under the framework of the ASEAN Agreement for Disaster Management and Emergency Response.

Nations and communities cannot become resilient and reduce disaster related risks if they ignore half of their population, comprising of women and girls. All efforts are needed to put women and girls at the centre of disaster risk reduction policies and action.