

A Hidden Truth About Climate Change

by Riane Eisler for The American Forum, December 2009

Studies show that women are 14 times more likely to die in natural disasters. One heart-rending study of a Bangladesh flash flood found that 90 percent of casualties were female.

The Copenhagen Climate Change Conference makes evident potential catastrophic effects of climate change, including its enormous economic and human tolls. It also clearly shows how poor nations in Africa, Southeast Asia, Latin America and island states will suffer most from the inevitable floods, droughts and other weather disasters. But there's more that needs to be made clear in Copenhagen. If we look closely, there's a hidden truth with huge implications that we must bring to the attention of conference delegates to ensure that allocated funds actually protect those most vulnerable to these natural disasters.

Studies show that women are 14 times more likely to die in natural disasters. One heart-rending study of a Bangladesh flash flood found that 90 percent of casualties were female.

Many factors contributed to this high casualty rate which were all avoidable. A woman's role in this Southeast Asian nation, as in most of the Middle East and parts of Africa, is one of dependency -- so of course, these Bangladeshi women were not taught to swim. But perhaps the most important factor was that they lived and died in a culture where women are so rigidly controlled that they aren't permitted to leave their homes without being accompanied by a male family member. When the flash flood occurred, they sadly stayed and drowned.

Such cultural restrictions are inhuman, not only to women, but to children. Yet, their implications for any Copenhagen climate pacts are still generally ignored. Also ignored are studies showing that when women become involved in disaster-response planning and training there are far fewer casualties -- not only of women, but of children and the elderly. One study even found no casualties when women engaged in disaster-response preparedness.

It's incumbent upon us to bring this information to the attention of U.N. officials such as Yvo de Boer, executive secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and to official national delegations and nongovernmental groups attending the Copenhagen meeting. In contributing funds for disaster training and response, the U.S. should insist that a sizable portion be given to women's organizations. This is essential if our monies are to be used effectively and equitably.

We can use the Copenhagen conference as a way of changing restrictive traditions that are egregious human-rights violations (e.g., forbidding persons to leave their home alone is a form of house arrest!). We can also help the U.N. carry through on its promise to

institute gender architecture mainstreaming. This will promote equal partnership between men and women, and show that when we speak of democracy and human rights, we really mean it.