

Speech of Dr. Zhao Baige- IFRC Vice President
Theme “Women and Aid, women, on whom disasters and crisis inflict a disproportionate amount of suffering and women, essential provides of relief and assistance”

I am delighted to be here, and I am particularly pleased to address all of you on behalf of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. I would like to congratulate the organisers of DIHAD for putting the critical issue of women’s experiences of disasters in the spotlight. The issues that are raised here - the disproportionate suffering of women; the capacity of women affected by disasters as well as women humanitarian actors; and violence against women during and in the aftermath of disasters - require our urgent and collective attention and response.

As we sit here today, millions of lives and livelihoods are being affected or threatened by disaster or crisis - from the typhoon in the Philippines to the ongoing crises in Syria, South Sudan and the Central African Republic.

The data and the statistics are alarming; women are many times – the figures range from four to 14 - more likely than men to die in natural disasters; women and children are much more likely to experience violence during and after disasters; and both women and children are

disproportionately affected by conflict as casualties of violence, as internally displaced persons and as refugees, with women and children representing approximately 80% of refugees in the world.

Furthermore, in developing countries, it is estimated that one in five women of child-bearing age is likely to be pregnant during any given crisis, affecting access to reproductive health care, levels of infant and maternal mortality, as well as women's mobility when it is necessary to flee a hazard.

Women, girls, boys and men of different ages and backgrounds experience and respond to disasters in different ways; they have different resources to draw upon and different coping strategies. It is imperative that we take into account those different needs and capacities. For example, listening to Syrian women and girls who have fled Syria without husbands/male family members who have stayed behind or have been killed, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and Jordanian Red Crescent understood the 'double burden' that Syrian women experience; that is, their need to take on a productive role of ensuring household basic needs are met in addition to more traditional reproductive roles. And, all of this in the face of increasing threat of violence with the breakdown of social order, separation from family members, harmful coping mechanisms, lack of access to helping/supportive health, psychosocial and other services.

Last November, the IFRC participated in a UK Government-led initiative on protecting women and girls in emergencies.

Together with the governments, UN Agencies and NGOs present, we acknowledged that violence against women and girls is aggravated in all disasters and crises and recognised that prevention of and response to violence against women and girls in emergencies is life-saving and, as such, should be prioritised from the outset of an emergency together with all other life-saving interventions.

We committed to a core set of principles and operational actions to strengthen our collective efforts to promote and protect the rights of girls and women of all ages and abilities and create a safer environment for them during and in the aftermath of conflict and natural disasters.

With global attention on the subject of violence against women and girls never more keen, the environment has never been more conducive for us to take concrete and pragmatic action, to coordinate our actions, to scale-up, to do better and to do more to prevent, to mitigate and to respond to violence against women and girls during and after disasters.

IFRC sees violence as one of the greatest humanitarian challenges facing us today. Violence, including violence against women and girls, during and in the aftermath of disasters is predictable and, therefore, is preventable; we must assume that violence increases during and after disasters and act immediately. In recognition of the humanitarian, societal and economic impacts of violence, the IFRC has made violence prevention, mitigation and response

a priority through its global strategy for 2011-2020. Based on the experience of our member National Societies in addressing violence, we support the following actions:

- A shift of allocation of resources. The majority of violence is interpersonal, yet the bulk of resources focus on collective violence. Additionally, prevention is key and must become a greater policy and budget priority.
- A focus on education (both formal and non-formal) as one of the best tools we have for changing mind-sets, attitudes and behaviours by challenging gender stereotypes and discrimination.
- An inclusive approach that involves men and relevant stakeholders within the community is essential to fostering community buy-in and support, which is so critical in addressing sensitive issues such as violence against women and girls and the often tacit social acceptance of violence.
- And, finally, listening to and drawing on the strengths of women, girls, boys and men of all ages and backgrounds within affected communities is critical.

Through the grassroots networks that our National Societies create, IFRC is committed to raising and amplifying the voices of women and girls and all those who are unheard and unseen and to ensuring that their needs and concerns, their aspirations and priorities and their agency are acknowledged, respected and acted upon in all of our actions.

The IFRC brings together 189 member National Societies with over 15 million volunteers and reaches millions of people

each year. That is, 15 million disaster responders who are part of the very communities that are affected by disasters. So when the IFRC talks about enhancing our institutional capacity to address to needs of women and girls in disasters, to address the gender-balance of our staff and volunteers and to respond to and to prevent violence against women and girls in disasters, it is an incredibly large undertaking but also has the potential to have an extraordinary impact.

It is our National Societies' intimate ties to disaster-affected communities that gives IFRC a distinct advantage in disaster response. Our policy, clearly articulated in our Strategic Framework on Gender & Diversity Issues (2013), of seeing affected people through a gender and diversity lens, of addressing intersecting vulnerabilities - including age, disability, economic status, sexual orientation and immigration status, including forced migrants - and a focus on violence prevention and disaster preparedness are unique characteristics of our work in this area.

I would like to share with you a best practice from some of our member National Societies. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent, the Jordanian Red Crescent and the Lebanese Red Cross discovered that if shared or family hygiene kits are given to women, women will deprioritise their own needs and give resources to other members of household. Therefore, to ensure their dignity, women in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon received 'women's emergency kits' to meet their hygiene and protection needs. The contents of the kits

were agreed based on needs assessments and focus group discussions with Syrian women. They include a whistle, a flash-light, headscarves, underwear, etc.

The violence in Kachin Myanmar has caused a number of internal displaced population along the border between China and Myanmar. To address the huge needs of the affected people, a team of the Red Cross Society of China recently visited Myanmar to provide 10,000 relief item-family kits . It is specially considered the female hygienic needs when designed the kit to ensure the woman could received the special concern and care during the violence.

Furthermore, during the relief operation after the Haiyan typhoon in the Philippines, the Chinese Red Cross International Emergency Response Team catered nearly 5000 patients. In line with the operational guide for National Societies indicated in “IFRC Strategic Framework on Gender & Diversity Issues(2013)”, the Red Cross Society of China has balanced the gender in selecting team members for philipines operation. And the access to the reproductive healthcare service and maternal and newborn children’s health have been provided by the team of RCSC. Female patients were offered specialized equipment and private examination room.

The fate of women and girls in disasters, including the predictably higher levels of violence they face, can no longer remain a *Silent Disaster*. There is a groundswell of commitment, resources and attention being directed at this

issue and making it the theme of this conference is an important signal of the intent of all those here. We must maintain this momentum and turn it into practical action on the ground.

I wish you a successful meeting.