

WOMEN: PILLARS OF COMMUNITY RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Closing Remarks

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Senator Pia Cayetano, president of the Coordinating Committee on Women Parliamentarians of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU/CCWP), Ms. Khunying Supatra Masdit, founding president of the Center for Asia-Pacific Women in Politics (CAPWIP), colleagues in public governance, friends, distinguished ladies and obedient gentlemen, good afternoon.

It is a great privilege for me to speak before this assembly of leaders and trailblazers who have accomplished a great deal in advancing the role of women in the field of public service. Before anything else, I must salute the organizers of the 3rd Global Congress of Women in Politics and Governance: CAPWIP and its partners, the United Nations International Strategies for Disaster Risk Reduction (UN-ISDR), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations Global Center and Climate Alliance (GCCA), International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), Asian Development Bank (ADB) and IPU/CCWP.

You have completed another gathering rich in substance and fresh insight for advocates of both women empowerment and climate change readiness. I am certain that your discussions over the past three-and-a-half days have yielded the broad outlines of a gender-responsive legislative agenda, alongside concrete calls to action that would enhance the role of women in climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction.

The theme of your Congress has been a source of enlightenment on my part. Most conferences on climate change dwell at length on hard scientific facts, dire consequences, and urgent mitigation and adaptation interventions to avert worst-case scenarios. Gender issues and other nuances are often under-appreciated or overlooked—and are left for communities, stakeholders and managers of climate change response programs to sort out, as subtle operational problems surface in the field.

I must confess my own shortcomings in this regard. Ever since the Philippines' climate change response agenda had been made part of my portfolio last year, I have been interfacing with scientists and other stakeholders who have

abbreviated my learning curve and have shared the burden of advocacy and action in this complex field. Many of these competent and committed professionals happen to be women.

On the legislative front, we have two staunch allies—Senator Pia Cayetano and Senator Loren Legarda, both environmental champions. Two of the five Filipino scientists who took part in preparing the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) are women—Dr. Rosa Perez and Dr. Florencia Pulhin. Alongside this formidable duo is a distinguished Filipina diplomat, Mrs. Bernarditas Muller, our lead negotiator who was also one of the Group of 77+China coordinators during the Bali Climate Change Conference last year. In addition, the core technical staff and the consultative working group of the Presidential Task Force on Climate Change (PTFCC)—as well as its technical working group, the Inter-agency Committee on Climate Change—are dominated by women.

Being surrounded by all these intelligent and strong-willed women has perhaps given me the illusion that gender is a non-issue in the local climate change circle. That false impression quickly dissipated, however, when the PTFCC technical team began developing our response framework from a holistic standpoint. Circumscribing the action spheres of adaptation and mitigation and the imperatives of financial and technological intervention is the need for social mobilization at various levels. Underlying this entire framework is the fundamental premise that any response to climate change—or to any other major issue confronting society at large—must spring from socio-structural realities on the ground. For any program to take off, it would need the buy-in of key stakeholders, whose basic needs, limitations and aspirations must have been taken into account in the first place.

When we speak of climate change adaptation, for instance, our strategic lens must first focus on specific areas of vulnerability. Normally, these are seen in terms of islands, coasts and low-lying areas, storm-prone regions, agricultural fields, endangered ecosystems and the like. In the context of the developing world, vulnerability is also correlated with economic status. Simply put, the rich have the resources to adapt to the consequences of a warming planet; the poor do not. By definition, poor communities live on the edge—be this in mountain slopes at risk of landslides, in marginal farm lands that can be parched by drought, in fishing villages that can be swept by storm or flood, or in crowded slums where food, water and basic services are in short supply. These segments of the population in dire need are the same people who must be equipped, above all, to deal with the impact of climate change.

In this part of the world, as the ADB so succinctly put it, poverty has a woman's face. It is estimated that two-thirds of the world's poor can be found in the Asia-Pacific region—and most of them are women. To aggravate matters, women in quite a number of societies in the region have no access to basic services like

health and education; they cannot own land and other assets, and they are shut out of decision-making.

The other side of that coin is that precisely because they have endured harsh living conditions from birth, these women have developed patience, fortitude and resilience. These are the very qualities that communities would need to have in the struggle to adapt to the effects of climate change. And, as the primary caregivers in practically every society, as custodians of food security and well-being in most homes, women are destined to play a key role in what is perhaps the defining battle of the 21st century.

In the words of Mr. Sálvano Briceño, director of the UN-ISDR: "Women in developing countries are already on the front line of adapting to climate change, with increasing floods and droughts impacting upon their livelihoods. As pivotal managers of natural and environmental resources and key frontline implementers of development, women have the experience and knowledge to build the resilience of their communities to the intensifying natural hazards to come."

Here in the Philippines, and, I am certain, in many other parts of the region, women are already taking lead positions in this battlefield at the service level. We see, for instance, barangay health workers by the thousands teaching village folk how to prevent their backyards from turning into breeding grounds for mosquitoes that can cause deadly outbreaks of dengue or malaria. In typhoon zones like the provinces of Albay and Naga, we see Red Cross nurses, social workers and volunteers mobilizing communities to vacate areas at risk in anticipation of typhoons. In the climate field school in Dumangas, Iloilo in the central Philippines, we see farmers and fisherfolk—male and female—training side by side in simple technologies to track weather patterns and to take appropriate measures against impending dry spells or excessive rainfall.

Recently, the Presidential Task Force on Climate Change conducted workshops involving educators and teachers from Miriam College and the Department of Education. They drew up modules tackling climate change issues that, we hope, would be part of the elementary and high school curriculum next school year. Just to stress the obvious, only a handful of male educators were there to help in the formulation of these modules.

This new school curriculum would carry with it multiplier-effects. For example, the children can now start telling their parents that trees slow down climate change and must not be felled, teach their siblings to turn off unnecessary lights and appliances, and learn how to segregate biodegradable from non-biodegradable waste. Hopefully, young students can learn how to chart their future early in life and to appreciate how their actions are linked to the fate of their Mother Earth. As they grow up, we can expect them to continue making little contributions to help mitigate the causes of climate change.

However, these gains at the service level should not make us complacent in confronting the gender issues that stand in the way of effective climate change adaptation at the grassroots. Teaching schoolchildren about climate change is relatively easy compared to the challenge of enhancing the sense of self-worth and well-being of largely unschooled women and empowering them to make decisions for themselves and for their families. But the challenge has to be met—if we are to respond to climate change in a sustainable way.

Mr. Briceño points out that "without the full participation and contribution of women in decision-making and leadership, real community resilience to climate change and disasters simply cannot be achieved."

Ms. Lorena Aguilar Revelo, noted Costa Rican author and senior gender adviser to the IUCN, echoes this principle: "Without the input of women, risk reduction and climate change adaptation strategies will not be designed for the entire community. Disaster risk reduction projects, policies and programmes will be meaningful and successful only if the interests of the whole community are taken into consideration."

This brings us back to the need for a holistic approach to meet the immense challenge before us. We are all stakeholders in the massive effort required to reverse the tide and to help vulnerable sectors adapt to its inevitable consequences.

Through social mobilization, the people participating in the fight against climate change can show solidarity, work shoulder-to-shoulder within a framework of partnerships, and share scientific knowledge on how to effectively respond to its impact. With a common sense of urgency and purpose, we can reinforce each other on a global scale and ultimately bring our civilization back on a sustainable track.

Moving forward, it is imperative that we bring all stakeholders into the picture. In this context, it is only fitting that we retrace our steps to make sure that the women in the most vulnerable communities are actively engaged in the battle to save our Mother Earth.

Congratulations once again on a successful Congress and more power to you all!

Thank you very much.