

# Women in the December 26 Tsunami: How Have they Coped; How Can we Help?

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## Abstract

The tsunami that occurred on December 26, 2004 brought tremendous suffering and loss of life to several countries in the Indian Ocean. No less than 290 000 lives were lost in the countries affected, many of them from fishing communities. There were more women victims than men, and there were reports of women and children being disadvantaged and victimized. This paper describes how women were affected by the tsunami. It also highlights the importance of gender-sensitive emergency and reconstruction plans to ensure that the needs of women, men, girls and boys are given equal attention and treatment during a disaster.

## Introduction

On December 26, 2004 several countries in the Indian Ocean, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, Maldives, Somalia and Kenya in East Africa, were caught totally off guard when the tsunami brought with it untold suffering with a great loss of lives and massive coastal destruction. People who were hardest hit were those from poor fishing communities living along the coasts. The gigantic waves took away family members, in some cases whole families, smashed houses and boats, and destroyed livelihoods.

Altogether, the tsunami destroyed no less than 290 000 lives in the countries affected (Loney 2005). The impacts on loss of work productivity from those who were physically and mentally injured, and the long-term repercussions of losing a huge proportion of the workforce, including teachers, doctors, nurses, farmers and fishers, are less quantifiable but without doubt will translate to huge economic losses. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) estimated that the overall damage in Sri Lanka, the country that suffered the second highest losses in human lives after Aceh in Indonesia, was estimated at US\$ 1 billion, equivalent to 4.4% of its Gross Domestic Product

(World Bank 2005). According to ADB, an additional 2 million people could be forced into poverty by the catastrophe (The Star Online 2005).

Men, women, boys and girls suffered the impacts. In many disasters, women and children have been found to be particularly vulnerable as they belong to the weaker and subordinate groups. This paper describes how women were affected by the recent tsunami. It provides suggestions on how some of their needs could be met, and highlights the importance of the recognition of the needs of women in emergency and reconstruction plans.

## Women's vulnerability to disasters

The vulnerability of women to disasters depends a lot on their social, cultural and economic status. The December 26 tsunami affected mostly poor coastal fishers living in traditional, patriarchal societies in 12 developing countries. Women in these societies are usually economically weaker than the men. Such groups often suffer more from the direct consequences of the natural disaster because they are less well-informed, less well-prepared and less well-protected. They also suffer more from the indirect

impact in private and public life as the disaster is transferred and compounded via economic, social, political and family relationships (Acar and Ege 2001). In organizing emergency and reconstruction plans, it is therefore important to assess the conditions of women and children, and their status in the pre-disaster and post-disaster situations.

## How women were affected by the tsunami

It is important to understand fully how the tsunami affected men, women, girls and boys so that the rebuilding of sustainable economies in the tsunami affected countries can be carried out with greater success. Since men and women play different roles in the fishing economy and in the home, the disaster affected them differently. It is the traditional role of women to nurture and to provide care to the old, the young and the injured; the aftermath of the tsunami found some women who survived the tragedy to have increased workload since many people were injured and some were very ill. Many women in the fishing villages were also small-scale fish processors and fish and food vendors. The immediate plans of most governments in the affected areas were directed at rebuilding the fisheries, with financial aid first reaching

the men and with minimal help reaching the women to assist them to rebuild their livelihoods.

Women were also reported to be disadvantaged in receiving food and other essential supplies. David del Vecchio from the United Nations Population Fund noted that men and boys often take the lion's share of the food distributed due to their greater physical strength (Pikul 2005).

The descriptions given below on how women in different countries were affected by the tragedy are taken from accounts given by voluntary workers, aid agencies and journalists.

## Aceh

The greatest impact of the tsunami was felt in Aceh, where people live a traditional, Islamic life. A Unifem gender advisor for relief and recovery efforts, Debra Yatin, recounted that in Aceh, many of those killed by the huge waves were women and girls who did not know how to swim (Jimenez-David 2005). Yatin also noted that due to their nurturing instincts, many women were seen running back to the water to look for babies, the aged and the disabled members of the family. Many more women than men died, partly because the tsunami struck on a Sunday when the men were out in the shops or running errands while their wives were tending to their children in their homes located very near to the beach. Many men were out at sea where the waves were less ferocious (BBC 2005). In four villages in the North Aceh district, 82 men died as opposed to 284 women, and in Kuala Cangkoey 80% of those who died were women (BBC 2005). The scarcity of women has resulted in forced and rushed marriages (Casey 2005).

Many women in Aceh supported their families by growing paddy and cultivating vegetables, coconuts and other crops (Women's Edge Coalition 2005). The tsunami salinated a huge part of the coast and destroyed the livelihoods of the surviving women.

Yatin noted that the most heart-rending aspect of the tragedy was the judgments rendered on the dead who were mostly women. Some people blamed the tragedy on women who had sinned and brought forth the wrath of God.

## Sri Lanka

The Women and Media Collective group based in Colombo, Sri Lanka and INFORM, a Sri Lankan umbrella organization also based in Colombo, both received reports of physical abuse to women and girls in the course of unsupervised rescue operations and while resident in temporary shelters (Pikul 2005).

Many women lost their children. Preliminary data revealed by the United Nations indicated that nearly 1 000 children were orphaned by the tsunami and another 3 200 lost one parent (Mail and Guardian Online 2005). Desperate, heart-broken women were reported to be fighting over babies who lost their parents. The most famous case was Baby 81, with many women claiming him to be theirs.

In Killinochi, women complained that there was no privacy in the latrines in the transition camps and they were not familiar with the use of sanitary napkins supplied by foreign aid agencies (Oxfam 2005).

## India

In Tamil Nadu, India although fishermen have been compensated for loss of boats and livelihood, no support or working capital has been announced for post-harvest activities that fisherwomen were normally involved in, for them to restart their business (Actionaid International, undated).

As part of their program to control population growth, the Indian government has had a sterilization program for women since the 1960s. In Tamil Nadu, more than 3 million women had undergone the procedure (Washington Times 2005). Some of the sterilized women who had lost all their children to the tsunami

suffered severe depression and some became mute. Women who had lost all their children were provided free sterilization reversal surgery by the State. Many of the women who lost only some of their children and who did not qualify for free surgery used all the compensation money they received to access such surgery.

An additional problem encountered in India involved women, men, boys and girls belonging to the lowest level of the caste system. The Dalits or Untouchables were denied food and other emergency aid supplies, and, according to Reuters, many higher caste Indians were too afraid of disease to join the Untouchables in the grim tasks of digging friends and neighbors out of the sand and debris (Reynolds 2005).

## Malaysia

Financial aid to restore livelihood in fishing communities affected by the tsunami was mainly directed to the main breadwinner of the affected families. Compensation was given for damaged or destroyed boats and damaged or destroyed fish cages, which were owned mainly by fishermen. In the first phase of the financial compensation, women affected by the tsunami who were earning a living through fish processing, fish vending and food hawking were not given financial aid.

## Gender-equitable actions

Although much more could be done to help women recover from their trauma and to prevent them from falling prey to discrimination and criminal exploitation, credit must be given to aid agencies, both local and foreign, as well as the various governments for instituting gender-sensitive emergency and reconstruction plans and actions under very challenging circumstances. Foreign aid agencies like Oxfam and Unifem included gender advisors in their relief team, the aid relief committee in Malaysia included representatives from the Ministry of Women, Family and Community

Development, a woman's group called Flower Aceh in Aceh and the National Women's Collective of Sri Lanka in Sri Lanka are helping the affected women.

Some gender-equitable actions on crisis response and reconstruction that are adapted from the International Labour Organisation (Enarson 2000) are highlighted below.

### **Vulnerability assessment**

Before a disaster strikes a vulnerability assessment using gender analysis is necessary to determine the special needs of men, women and children. Relief efforts to assist all groups of the community equally are possible only if the existing social structure of the community is well understood. Women-specific data and information are needed to anticipate and address the impacts of disasters on women. For example, the problem of women not able to compete equally with men in food distribution dropped from helicopters could easily be overcome by orderly queuing. Better security and greater enforcement will also be able to reduce incidences of physical abuse to women and children.

### **Gender-fair disaster interventions**

It is important to educate both women and men on the dangers wreaked by tsunamis and on how to recognize the signs of an impending tsunami. Reports from Aceh, Malaysia and Sri Lanka showed that on that fateful Sunday, men and women at the beach were not aware of the impending disaster when they saw the sea water retreating, exposing the seabed. Many rushed towards the seabed curious of the hitherto unknown phenomenon and were killed by the towering waves while they were scooping up fish from the emptied seabed.

Equitable relief services must anticipate and monitor gender bias in access to services by vulnerable groups, and women and children survivors also have gender-specific needs. Female relief workers

are important for female survivors, as many of the traumatized women may feel uncomfortable discussing their needs with men. Understanding the culture of the victims is of the utmost importance. For example, in some cultures women might not feel comfortable lining up to receive relief. In such a case, door-to-door relief may have to be implemented.

### **Equitable distribution of financial aid**

To support long-term economic recovery, women as well as men must have access to financial aid for job reconstruction. Wives and daughters in fishing communities usually have to help in the family business by complementing the work of their fishermen husbands or fathers, and their work is often unpaid. They help to unload fish, clean and mend nets, vend fish, process fish, and look after livestock, cultured fish and field crops. Some women may be self-employed or are wage earners in small-scale processing and handicraft businesses. In almost all instances, the unpaid work or the income from the women go a long way to help the family to stave off poverty. When women's livelihood is destroyed, compensating just the fishermen may throw many homes into deeper poverty.

### **Responsive action of employers**

Some employers were insensitive to the tsunami-affected workers and were reported to have instituted pay cuts for those employees who did not turn up for work. In a crisis situation, employers must be sensitive to the needs of their workers. Income support and special leave for overburdened caregivers who are usually women will help to enhance long-term recovery and increase morale.

### **Partnership with women's organizations**

Working together with women's associations, environmental and grassroots advocacy organizations, female-dominated non-governmental

organizations, and other community-based women's groups will help to provide disaster planners with better insights for social mitigation. Local women's community-based organizations are more likely than professional planners (that are not from the disaster site) or foreign relief workers to understand the needs and vulnerabilities of the local women.

### **Empowerment of women**

Empowering women will increase their resilience and reduce their vulnerability to disasters. Disaster practice, media campaign and pilot projects may help to reduce women's subordination as well as meet their practical needs in disasters. Helping women gain confidence and self-esteem will assist women to take control of their own lives and decrease their vulnerability in times of crises.

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