

PAYING ATTENTION TO GENDER ISSUES IN THE FACE OF TSUNAMI

The recent tsunami disaster has resulted in many deaths, displacement of thousands and destruction of livelihoods, infrastructure and property. Given the scale and complexity of the situation there is a rush to attend to immediate needs to restore normalcy, to initiate rehabilitation and reconstruction.

Numerous agencies; government, UN, international and local NGOs, and individuals are attending to the immediate relief measures, and so soon a massive reconstruction and rehabilitation process will begin. Some will have previous experience and be knowledgeable and skilled in disaster situations. There are also many organizations/groups and volunteers new to crisis situations who are trying to help.

Despite good intentions, there is always the risk that important issues get bypassed. Experience shows that gender, in particular addressing women's issues in disaster situations, is a key area where there will be gaps unless given specific attention.

Although women and men have made common concerns, disasters do affect women and men differently: because of the different roles they occupy in community; the different responsibilities given to them in life; and because of the differences in their capacities, needs, and vulnerabilities.

Ignorance of gender differences leads to insensitive and ineffective operations that largely bypass women's needs and their potential to assist in disaster relief and reconstruction activities.

This note highlights important messages about addressing women's concerns and gender issues in relief and reconstruction.

Making initial disaster responses gender sensitive.

Relief distribution

Disaster relief that is gender sensitive requires:

- ◆ Close interaction with the affected communities during the relief planning process.
Gender-disaggregated assessments for relief distribution.
- ◆ Employment of female relief workers
- ◆ E.G. distributing provisions through women.
- ◆ Relief workers who are aware and sensitive to gender issues and humanitarian ethics.
- ◆ Recognition of skills and capacities of women from affected communities and their involvement in relief planning, distribution of assistance and in other emergency management activities.

- ◆ Relief that reaches sub-categories such as widows old women, female-headed households, single women, disabled etc.
- ◆ Attention to the cultural concerns of different communities and elimination of culture/religion/gender based discrimination in registration, compensation and relief distribution.
- ◆ Adherence to the minimum standards set for relief distribution (e.g. the SPHERE standards).

Basic practical needs

Women have specific needs; and measures should be taken to:

- ◆ Ensure privacy for women in common areas of camps.
- ◆ E.g. provide women's "corners," separate toilet and bathing areas.
- ◆ Provision for menstruation, and clothing and undergarments.
- ◆ Attend to needs of pregnant and nursing mothers.
- ◆ E.g. provide infant milk powder, feeding bottles, infant clothing, nappies and mosquito nets.

Security and safety

It is a fact that in displaced situations, in temporary shelter and in camps, women and children are often subject to sexual harassment, abuse and violence. Specific measures need to be taken to secure women and children's safety:

- ◆ Take practical measures to protect them from abuse;
- ◆ E.g. secure sleeping arrangements, adequate lighting and safe location of toilets.
- ◆ Take steps to ensure that the community is responsible for the safety of children
- ◆ Where possible, assist and accompany women/children going in search of loved ones.

Health concerns

Women keep families healthy after disasters. As caregivers to the young, old, sick, disabled, and injured, women tend to put their own needs last. Relief and reconstruction efforts need to pay attention to women's health and ensure specific health concerns and needs are being addressed:

- ◆ Measures are needed to tackle the increased risk and incidence of sexual and/or domestic violence associated with major disasters.
- ◆ E.g. medical assistance should be available to women and child victims of physical or sexual abuse. Some women may need the morning after pill.
- ◆ Reproductive and family planning health services should be included in general health work.

- ◆ E.g. provision made for antenatal and postnatal care; pregnant and lactating women who may need nutritional supplements.
- ◆ The different physical and mental health needs of women and men need to be recognized and addressed.
- ◆ E.g. people with disabilities, elderly people and family care givers.

Trauma counseling

Members of relief teams need to be aware and sensitive to the issues of trauma:

- ◆ Gender differences in psychological impacts of disasters should recognize that women's anxiety also stems from fear and risk to their family/children.
- ◆ Training for mental health providers should address problems of highly vulnerable groups such as women headed households, grandmothers caring for orphans, battered women, women with disabling injuries, newly widowed women and men, women at risk of suicide.

Gender sensitive planning for rehabilitation/reconstruction.

In many communities, women take an active part in community disaster initiatives. Yet in larger, more formal planning, women are scarcely represented and markedly absent from decision-making. Not being sensitive to gender issues in development planning and disaster mitigation means that interventions are often only targeted at men. Sensitivity to gender is vital in order to empower a community to successfully move on and move up from the abyss of disaster.

Rehabilitation/reconstruction should promote post-disaster development that reduces risk of communities to disaster and empowers local communities. This means tackling the reasons why certain sections of society and community are more vulnerable to disasters. Rebuilding should happen in ways that address the root causes of vulnerability, including gender inequalities.

Women's local knowledge and expertise are essential assets for communities and households struggling to rebuild. To capture these capacities, disaster responders must work closely with women. In planning and implementation of rehabilitation/reconstruction, practical steps should be taken to:

- ◆ Ensure the needs, skills and capacities of affected communities are incorporated in planning and implementing rehabilitation work.
- ◆ E.g. include women in housing design as well as construction; recognize and incorporate women's traditional knowledge and experience in managing natural resources.
- ◆ Establish on-going consultation with women in affected areas, women's bureaux, and women's advocacy groups.
- ◆ Evaluate and take measures to ensure women can participate in reconstruction and benefit from economic recovery packages.
- ◆ E.g. Ensure that women have the mobility to participate in reconstruction and rehabilitation activities. Ensure meetings and

- events are held at times and places where women can participate; Ensure family caregivers have access to support
- ◆ Strengthen informal social networks and link them to disaster-responding agencies and offices.
- ◆ Fund women's groups to monitor disaster recovery projects.
- ◆ Identify and respond to women's needs for legal services in the areas of housing, employment, and family relations
- ◆ E.g. Deed newly constructed houses in both the names of husband and wife, and land rights for women.
- ◆ Give priority to social services, children's support systems and women's centers.
- ◆ Target highly vulnerable women such as single mothers, widows, below-poverty, unemployed women and socially marginalized women in reconstruction of damaged and new houses.
- ◆ Monitor relief and rehabilitation for possible gender bias and inequalities that may develop over time.
- ◆ E.g. avoid unintentional overburdening of women with multiple responsibilities at home, work, and in the community.
- ◆ Monitor as far as possible the degree to which relief and recovery assets are equitably distributed.

Rebuilding livelihoods

Reconstruction must fully engage women and ensure that women benefit from economic recovery and income support programmes. Women's limited income generation and employment opportunities should be expanded in the process of developing local economies. In re-building livelihoods, practical steps should be taken to:

- ◆ Ensure rehabilitation and reconstruction target economically active women of all ages and social groups.
- ◆ Incorporate gender analysis into all empirical assessments.
- ◆ E.g. collect or generate gender-specific data; conduct a thorough analysis of damaged economic sectors (e.g. fishery, tourism, agriculture) that identifies roles of women and identify areas for their participation.
- ◆ Support income-generation projects that build non-traditional skills among women.
- ◆ E.g. provide women with fair access to construction-related and other non-traditional employment; include employment-relevant job training; seek out women with technical qualifications for training on specific projects such as overseeing housing construction.
- ◆ Incorporate women's income generating options in livelihood rebuilding plans.
- ◆ E.g. make provision for self-employed/home-based women workers in plans.
- ◆ Ensure access to grants and loans to re-build lost livelihoods to replace damaged or destroyed tools, workspace, equipment, supplies, credit, capital, markets and other economic resources.
- ◆ Include measures to support women's multiple responsibilities as economic providers and family workers.
- ◆ E.g. work with employers to develop or strengthen 'family friendly' policies for those needing time to apply for assistance, cope with trauma and help injured family members provide

- assistance to family care givers to support them economically and ensure continued care to the injured, children and disabled.
- ◆ Develop and commit to gender accountability and monitoring measures.
 - ◆ E.g. monitor the percentage of women and men in construction, trade, other employment; the numbers of disabled women trained; the proportion of economic recovery grants and loan

funds received by women; the working conditions in private and public relief working projects etc.; monitor and assess long term impacts on women and girls o disrupted markets, forced sale of assets, involuntary migration, increasing proportion of female-headed households etc. ■

Courtesy MS. Column in the *Leader*

GOD BEHIND TSUNAMI?

In the article ‘Is Tsunami an act of God?’ in the *Island* of February 07, Mr. R.M.B.Senanayake says there was a divine hand behind this Tsunami destruction. He says, “God has intervened with the forces of nature to punish mankind.”

He cites as examples ‘the flood during the time of Noah and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah for sexual immorality.’ He further says, ‘God has a purpose in sending calamities.’ He goes on to say that God divided the Red Sea to allow Jews to cross over and escape and when the Egyptians pursued them he killed the Egyptians! The purpose of this article appears to justify the terrible destruction of life and property and to instill fear of God in all of us.

But such attempts to make non believers fall in line through fear are counterproductive as having seen their near and dear ones destroyed by the killer waves which Mr. Senanayake claims had been sent by God, people tend not to fear but hate whoever created the disaster.

Mr. Senanayake could be asked by those who survived the deaths of their family members why ever God chose to destroy innocent children as well as those who are not sinners by any stretch of the imagination.

The rich and the poor alike mourned the death and destruction caused by the Tsunami and did whatever they could to help the living.

The kind-hearted people from all over the world are pouring in money and goods to help the destitute. Governments and experts are trying to install early warning systems to warn people of future tsunamis and save lives.

Since according to RMB, God is behind all these calamities and he alone determines when and where tsunamis should occur, the early warning systems will be of no use.

RMB has made the remark: “All suffering is due to sin say Christians, while the Buddhists refer to ‘karma’ and the ‘Kamma vipaka’ of those who died.”

All I will do is to quote the Buddha. The Buddha said, “Don’t waste your time thinking about *kamma vipaka* as you will end up a mad man.” Besides, the Buddha said that the Dhamma is for the wise to be realized by themselves. Not by prayer.

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