

Asia/ India

Women's demands

Women who participated in public hearings organized in Tamil Nadu, India, highlighted many problems they faced in the aftermath of the tsunami

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Women suffer most during disasters. It was no different in the case of the Indian Ocean tsunami. The responses of different agencies as well as that of government shows that even in the 21st century, men continue to be seen as the breadwinners of the family—the loss of their assets and means of earning are considered more grave than the loss of women's livelihoods. This happens even if it is proved, time and again, that women contribute equally or even more to the income and wellbeing of a family.

Consider a fishing household. The women, apart from doing household chores, contribute actively towards the family income through processing and selling fish. The tsunami destroyed women's livelihoods as well, but efforts to restore their livelihoods are relatively limited.



To listen to the grievances of the tsunami-affected, public hearings were conducted in different parts of Tamil Nadu. They were organized by the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCCL) in collaboration with other organizations and unions. In total, nine public hearings were held—eight district-level and one State-level. More than 7,000 men and women attended these hearings.

While a large number of issues and problems were highlighted at the hearings, the women who participated stressed problems specific to them, namely:

- Women whose livelihoods have been affected have not been compensated so far, though their numbers are large. Women are involved in fish marketing and processing, and in other petty businesses near the coast. When the tsunami struck, they lost all their assets (ranging from the fish they bought just before the tsunami and the vessels used to carry fish to the market, to the implements in processing units).
- Women are unable to pay back the loans they had taken prior to the tsunami, for the purchase of fish. It is the usual practice to pay back these loans after the fish catches have been sold. The tsunami, however, took away all the fish, plunging women into losses and leaving them credit-unworthy in the local market.
- There is a clear male bias in relief and rehabilitation. Bureaucrats consider women unworthy to discuss rehabilitation and reconstruction processes. When women go with petitions, they are shown the door and asked to send their husbands instead for discussions.
- The money given for relief by the government has, in many cases, been spent by the men on liquor, so that the household did not benefit in any substantive way. The government had not shut down liquor shops on the days the compensation was distributed.
- The compensation for the loss of craft and gear is based on the list available with fishermen's societies. This list represents only men and not women (both widows and women abandoned by their husbands) who also owned boats.
- Provision of relief (like food and other necessary items) to families did not take into consideration single women in the community. One woman said that widows who are still living with their husbands' families are really suffering. Relief materials are given to one household, irrespective of the number and type of dependents. In such cases, widows in joint families suffer because the family could exclude them.
- In many areas, wells and water sources have been contaminated by the tsunami. Women, as the ones responsible for fetching water, now have to cover greater distances to get water. It was reported that in some areas, they now have to

travel more than 5 km for clean drinking water or else buy water from those who capitalize on the opportunity by selling water at unaffordable prices (Rs.5 or US\$0.1 per pot of water, approximately 5 litres).

- Several women have lost their children to the tsunami. A good number of them had earlier undergone sterilization. There are women who are interested to consider options like fallopian tube re-canalisation to have more children. The government has declared a grant of Rs.25,000 (US\$571) for re-canalisation operations for deserving couples. There are also reported incidents of sex determination tests and a strong preference for the boy child.
- Temporary shelters lack proper sanitation, indicating the gender-insensitive nature of government and private rehabilitation efforts.
- Though sanitary napkins are necessary for the hygiene of women, they have still not been made available in adequate quantities.

The women at the hearings demanded that all the above problems should be addressed. In addition, they made the following demands:

- Women's co-operatives should be initiated.
- Special schemes for widows for income generation should be started, along with other special schemes for widows, destitutes, single women, etc. Widows' pensions should be disbursed with minimum bureaucratic hassles.
- Women who have lost their implements/assets to the tsunami should be compensated adequately.
- Money for house construction should be given directly to the affected people through women's self-help groups to ensure that it benefits the family.

Education

- With the decrease in the earnings of tsunami-hit families, the education of children has stopped for want of money to pay fees. Although tsunami-affected children are exempted from paying fees in government schools, children of private schools are facing great difficulty.

Drinking water

- The tsunami contaminated drinking water sources in the villages. In some villages, people have to purchase water or walk 5 km to get water for their daily needs.

- Some villages have overhead tanks filled with water from neighbouring villages. There are now protests against other villagers taking water from these tanks, as there is a huge scarcity of potable water.

Relocation and temporary sheds

- There were complaints that the temporary sheds were unsuitable for families, often lacking privacy. Temporary shelters were being made from tar sheets, extremely hot and unsuitable for the summer months.
- Relocation of fishing communities should be done only after putting in place all the facilities needed for the affected population to lead a healthy and happy life, taking into consideration factors like a playground for children. (Right now, the beach is their playground.)
- If fishermen are to be relocated 500 m beyond the shoreline, then the vacated beach area should be reserved for fishing communities. No other construction—whether hotels or other private industries—should be allowed in this area. Plantations of casuarina and coconut palms can be allowed in the 500-m zone.
- Relocation should take into consideration the fact that fishermen need a clear view of the sea to launch successful fishing operations.
- Even though the government is pressing for relocation beyond 500 m of the shoreline, the temporary shelters are being built very close to the sea, so much so that seawater inundates the area during high tide. This is a strongly felt problem.

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