

Asia

Women victims

Concluding comments from Oxfam Briefing Note 13 (March 2005) on The Tsunami's Impact on Women

As this briefing has demonstrated, the evidence available to date shows that the tsunami has had a greater impact on women than on men. In each of the three locations considered, the information (though partial) consistently demonstrates that many more women than men appear to have been killed in the disaster. The briefing also shows that in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and India, problems are already becoming apparent as a result of this disproportionate impact. Action needs to be taken now if we are to avoid short-term impacts turning into long-term problems.

Generalizations about why women died are not always helpful in understanding complex and diverse processes. On the contrary, they may create an image of women as “vulnerable victims”. This contributes to their widespread exclusion from decisionmaking: in Aceh, for example, the structures debating the “master plan” for the reconstruction of the province are almost exclusively male, and women’s organizations are struggling to take part in consultation systems. Yet it is clear that the different death rates among women and men have implications for individuals and their communities, and for the relief and reconstruction response. These differences need to be more clearly understood.

Consulting affected women and men at all levels is the way to ensure that what is provided is indeed what people need: whether it is formula for babies in camps in Sri Lanka, among whom mortality levels are a concern; or the underwear and sanitary protection many women ask for; or the physical design of kitchens in the resettlements in Aceh, where the wind blows out cooking fires as soon as they are lit; or the location of bathing cubicles for women nearer their homes, so that they have some privacy.

Beyond the loss of life, Oxfam’s beneficiaries state that their lack of income is their biggest concern. As local fishing is a seasonal occupation, women’s livelihood activities play a critical role in maintaining the household economy. Insufficient consideration is being given to revitalizing work normally done by women, including agriculture (certain crops, in

particular) and other trading and livestock-rearing activities. Loss of income and inability to access cash will not only deepen the poverty of communities, and especially women within those communities, but could also create dangers of immediate (sexual) exploitation, and forms of dependency from which women will find it hard to recover.

In particular, conflict in Aceh and in the northeast of Sri Lanka has left a legacy of human rights abuses and a history of sexual and other violence against women. Reports have been received from affected areas of verbal and physical harassment and inappropriate behaviour by men in camps and settlements (while bathing, for example), and of great fears in the packed resettlement sites. In Aceh, for instance, national and international agencies are expressing concern at the physical conditions (overcrowding, lack of privacy, distance from places of origin) and their possible consequences for the safety and decorum of women who are sharing small rooms with up to four other people.

Responses: small and big things that make a difference

Actions can and must be urgently taken to ensure that the needs of women and men are adequately addressed, and that the disproportionate impact on women is factored in. This is key to the recovery of communities. Responses should include the following considerations:

- All those involved in humanitarian assistance and policymaking must collect and use sex-disaggregated information.
- The protection of women from sexual violence and exploitation must be a priority, even when information is slow to emerge (particularly in certain settings such as conflict and the consequent presence of military personnel; when young women are alone; times when alcohol consumption among men is on the increase, etc.).
- The manner of delivering aid must use and abide by the highest standards for protection and accountability. This includes systems for the protection of women and for reporting and dealing with any incidents of abuse or misconduct.
- It must be ensured that earning opportunities are accessible to both men and women, whether in immediate cash-for-work programmes or in



more sustainable livelihood programmes. This is essential to revitalize local economies by unleashing the potential of all. It also avoids creating or strengthening forms of (sexual) exploitation and dependencies. Even within the boundaries of what is allowed by local culture, it is possible and necessary to go beyond the “cooking and sewing” projects to which women are often relegated, so that new opportunities for established and non-traditional occupations are open to them.

- Genuine participation, at all levels, implies not only talking to women and men when assessing needs, delivering aid or evaluating the effectiveness of interventions in camps, villages and cities that are on the road to recovery. It also implies developing creative strategies to overcome the limitations of the near uniform domination of men in leadership structures in the countries affected.
- Participation also implies a change of mindset: from perceiving women as “vulnerable victims” to respecting their rights as citizens with specific perspectives and capacities. Agencies such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, international NGOs, donors and governments have an obligation to lead the way.
- Serious consideration must be given to the demographic changes (as well as cultural values) in the countries affected, so that the rights of women as well as men, in property, education, family formation and reproductive health, are protected and promoted in all policies and interventions.

- Provision of relief aid and long-term policies must be based on awareness of current and emergent patterns of family and household formation, rather than on an abstract notion of the “nuclear family”. The composition of households is never generic and the tsunami has further complicated the picture. A one-size-fits-all policy will not work.
- If conditions of gender inequality determine who feels the impact of disasters, and how, then providing the finances that have for so long been promised to meet the gender-specific Millennium Development Goals has to be one of the best forms of disaster-preparedness for the future.

http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what_we_do/issues/conflict_disasters/downloads/bn_tsunami_women.pdf

