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சனாமி - பெண்கள் நிவாரண சேவை ஒன்றியம்
Coalition for Assisting Tsunami Affected Women

Briefing Note 2

15th January 2005

Gender Specific Issues Relating to Post Tsunami Displacement

By December 31, 2004, barely a week after the tsunami struck the coastal areas of Sri Lanka, the first newspaper reports of sexual abuse of women while they were being 'rescued' from the tsunami appeared. They were quickly followed by other stories of sexual abuse of women and children taking place in the various welfare centers set up to house people who had been displaced because of the tsunami. The only two cases in which there were Police complaints and court proceedings were from Kalutara and Negombo. One report was of the rape of a young woman who had taken shelter with her boyfriend in a guesthouse in Kalutara on the night of December 26. The other was of the rape of two young women garment factory workers in Kochchikade while they were on the beach on December 31, having gone there to view the destruction caused by the waves. There was also a report of the gang rape of a young woman while being rescued from the waves. The Karapitiya Hospital officially acknowledged that they had treated two rape victims in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami but had no records as to their discharge or present whereabouts due to the chaotic situation that had prevailed at the Hospital in the first days after the tsunami. The Karapitiya Hospital also acknowledged that they had treated 2 children who were victims of sexual molestation.

Mothers and Daughters of Lanka, Action Network for Migrant Workers,
Women's Alliance for Peace, Women's Alliance for Peace and Democracy

174, අල්ලිස් මාවත, කාලුම් පිලිය, කොළඹ 8, ශ්‍රී ලංකාව ■ 174, அலலிஸ் ஏழுக்கை, காசல் வீதி, கோழம்பு 8, இலங்கை
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When a coalition of women's groups, comprising the networks Sri Lanka Women's NGO Forum, Mothers and Daughters of Lanka, Women's Alliance for Peace and Democracy, Action Network for Migrant Workers and the Women's Alliance for Peace, issued a statement calling for heightened sensitivity to the needs of tsunami-affected women for protection and security in the camps and elsewhere, there were many responses as to the 'actual' situation. A key challenge issued to us was that there were no official reports of such incidents.

As women activists who have been engaged in a range of interventions related to violence against women, we are well aware of the problems associated with reporting violence at the best of times. Long years of experience of working with conflict and internal displacement have also taught us that in circumstances where the law and order situation has broken down and where the normal safety networks provided by family and community have disappeared, women become most vulnerable to a range of violations of their rights, including sexual and physical violence and abuse.

This situation in which the lack of responsible and sensitive reporting of incidents of violence against women, and the many levels of silence and denial regarding the existence of violence against women in the post-tsunami context indicated to us that the safety and needs of women were in danger of becoming a low priority. Despite the proliferation of information of some kinds regarding the situation in the tsunami-affected areas, there was no scrutiny into the gendered nature of displacement or displacement-related protection issues. Measures taken by both state and non-state agencies to provide relief including health care to displaced persons were not taking into account the specific needs of women. There was also no focus on protection within and outside the camps that took the specific situation of women into account. The very 'neutrality' of the thinking on security in this situation actively hindered any interventions that sought to ensure women's safety.

At a discussion, convened by the Women and Media Collective in Colombo, the women's groups comprising the Coalition for Assisting Tsunami Affected Women

(CATAW), decided to send out fact-finding teams to different tsunami-affected areas. While we strongly felt that there was no need to authenticate reports of sexual violence against women we did want to get a better understanding of what protection mechanisms for women were in place on the ground and of what level of awareness there was within displaced communities and among officials from the state and non-state sector working with relief and rehabilitation issues. Among the areas visited were Galle, Tangalle, Hambantota, Matara, Kalmunai, Akkaraipattu, Batticaloa and Jaffna.

Findings:

From women residents in camps, we heard stories of concern regarding their safety and the safety of their children. Even if no actual incidents had occurred, there was a sense of insecurity and fear that prevailed in most camps. There were some stories of attempted molestation and coercion by adult males, including some who were in charge of the camp. In one camp, which was served by a temporary electricity connection, women complained that at night someone would trigger off a power failure and in the dark, men would enter the areas of the camp where the women were sleeping and grope their bodies. Tsunami survivors also had stories of being groped and touched while they were being rescued.

In the second week after the tsunami, Policemen had appeared in the camps in the south while members of the STF were visible in camps in the east, providing security to the inhabitants. However, it was clear that they had no specific training in the area of violence against women, and were primarily concerned with maintaining discipline within the camp. Among their key activities was keeping outsiders out of the camp at night and preventing men under the influence of drugs and liquor from entering the camp. Some of them were willing to accept complaints, while others maintained that this was not within their mandate. It was clear that they had not received any clear orders regarding possible interventions and responses to complaints of violence made by women and children.

In addition, women complained of the problems they faced due to the insensitivity of camp officials who were almost always men. In many of the camps visited by us, we found men in charge of maintaining lists, distributing rations and donations and meeting with visitors. In Tangalle, the Police had issued a notice calling on Camp Committees to be formed as a response to complaints they said they had received about incidents of indiscipline and violence against women in the camps in their area. However, they clearly stated that two men from among the community should be selected for this task.

Among the complaints made to us by women regarding the problems created by male-dominated camp administration was, for example, that the distribution of underwear, bras and panties, was carried out publicly with embarrassing comments about which sizes were appropriate for which women. In one camp, young women told us that the sanitary napkins were kept under the control of the male camp officials, some of them wearing the badges of a recognized political party, who handed out napkins two at a time, making the women go back to him again and again each time they needed a fresh napkin. These kinds of public humiliation amounting to sexual harassment drove women into withdrawal and silence, rather than articulating their needs. There were also camps being run by members of the clergy who were often also insensitive and unaware of the specific needs and problems faced by women. As a result we discovered sub quantities of sanitary napkins in camp stores which remained undistributed.

In exploring the provision of health care to women in the camps, it became clear that in general there was low awareness of the potential for women and children to be subjected to violence and abuse while in the camp. There was also not much awareness of the specific needs for reproductive and sexual health care in these situations. In Galle, it seemed that there was no focus on the need to provide contraceptives, and indeed a denial of sexual activity in the camps. This was in absolute contradiction to many of the stories we heard from women all over the tsunami-affected areas who told us about husbands and male partners who were insisting on having sex, even in circumstances where very little privacy was available. In Kalmunai, Family Health Workers told us that women were asking for contraceptives but that there no stocks available in their area.

Recommendations:

- Officials of both state and non-state agencies working with the displaced need to be made aware of the gender specific and special needs of women in the context of displacement.
- All service-delivery programmes designed for the internally displaced should also be sensitive to women's needs and concerns and adopt a rights-based approach. Women in displaced communities must be brought into a consultative process, be a part of decision making, implementation and monitoring of relief and service delivery as well as medium and long term reconstruction and development.
- It is absolutely necessary that women become a part of the structures of administration put in place to deal with the displacement and other problems faced by those who have been affected by the tsunami at every level, from the Camps right up to the Centre for National Operations.
- In particular, it is critical that women become an integral part of the Disaster Management Committees set up at the District and Divisional Secretariat level.
- We request that regionally based women's groups be invited to nominate experienced women representatives to these committees.
- Gender sensitive guidelines must be issued to camp officials and security forces personnel to ensure that women and girls are guaranteed safety and security from gender based violence in the both camps and in relocated communities.

- As schools re-open and those who had been housed in them are temporarily relocated, it is essential to ensure that communities and families can stay together, since the few support and kinship networks that remain to them are doubly precious.
- Special attention must be paid to land tenure, land rights and housing and shelter benefits, the creation of employment, re-establishment of livelihoods, training and livelihood support for women taking into consideration the specific needs of widows, women headed households, women with disability and aged women.
- Women's groups and community-based groups should be supported to work with displaced women and to build closer relationships that may pave the way for more open discussions regarding issues of violence as well as more constructive interactions with officials and decision-makers.