

**සුනාමි - තාන්තා සහන සේවා සන්ධානය**  
**கனாமி - பெண்கள் நிவாரண சேவை ஒன்றியம்**  
**Coalition for Assisting Tsunami Affected Women**

---

**Briefing Note 3**

**13<sup>th</sup> May 2005**

**Integrating Gender Concerns in Post Tsunami Relief Operations**

It is now almost 5 months since the Tsunami of December 26<sup>th</sup> changed the contours of life in the coastal areas of Sri Lanka. The country is still grappling with the myriad of social and economic issues that have arisen in its aftermath.

Many of the thousands who survived have now been located in welfare camps set up as an immediate response or, in tents or in temporary shelters. In the immediate aftermath of the shelter schools, community buildings and places of religious worship were used as shelters for the displaced, much of the temporary shelters have now been provided by INGOs and NGOs. While there are situations where tents house 1-2 families, it has to be noted that the provision of temporary shelters has enabled many families some measure of privacy which was not available in communal welfare centres. However, many of the temporary shelters, the tents, tin huts or timber sheds are badly ventilated, too cramped, flood in rain storms and are unbearably hot in the excessive daytime heat. We have come across families who are suffering from various ailments due to the flimsy protection from the heat or heavy rains which result in water seeping into the tents and temporary shelters.

---

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

174, අල්විස් මාවත, කාන්ති ඒජිට්, කොළඹ 8, ශ්‍රී ලංකාව ■ 174, அல்விஸ் ஏஜிட்டுகள், அரசல் வீதி, கோழம்பு 8, இலங்கை  
■ 174, Alwis Avenue, Castle Street, Colombo 8, SRI-LANKA

Telephone : 94-11-2690192, 2690201, 5635900 Fax : 94-11-2690192 E-mail : womedia@stnet.lk

The Coalition for Assisting Tsunami Affected Women (CATAW) was set up primarily in recognition of the need to address the gender specific needs of women who lived in these areas. Our main concern was to help build the capacity of locally based women's organisations dealing with Tsunami recovery and rehabilitation efforts. We hoped to act as a lobby to ensure that women's concerns were met and that women were included in decision making positions and processes at the local, regional and national level. While a key concern of CATAW was to address the issue of the vulnerability of, and the need to ensure protection for, women and girls affected by the Tsunami and to lobby for a rights based approach to post Tsunami assistance, we have also been working to provide assistance to women to engage in/restart their livelihoods and to enable them to rebuild their lives.

### **Sexual Violence Against Women**

The initial fact finding endeavours undertaken by CATAW in several of the districts in the South and the North East, revealed an urgent need to ensure protection from sexual harassment for women living both within and outside the welfare centres in the areas affected by the Tsunami. A few of the reports we received were of rape and sexual abuse. CATAW was quick to alert the public and those in positions of authority of the need to ensure women adequate protection from this incidence of violence. Initially however, these concerns were dismissed by many person in authority as unsubstantiated and irrelevant given the scale of 'other' priorities following the Tsunami disaster. However, we were able to initiate a certain level of discussion and debate on the gendered nature of the impact of the Tsunami, and to bring about some positive responses from both the national and international agencies engaged in the relief efforts.

As the months go by, there are reports of an increasing incidence of domestic violence which women are being subjected to within welfare camps as well as in temporary shelters. Among the causes for such incidents appear to be men blaming women for the loss of children to the Tsunami; the lack of privacy for intimate sexual relations between spouses and, mental trauma resulting from the aftermath of the Tsunami; men using relief

monies for personal rather than household needs and the unemployment and insecurity experienced by men as familiar gender roles are undermined.

### **Girl Children Orphaned as a result of the Tsunami**

There are reports from almost all the districts but a significantly higher number from the east of girl children, many of whom are older teenagers, who have lost their parents or who are left with only the mother alive. While some of these children have been placed with relatives as a temporary measure, it is important to give due consideration to the rights and access of these children to land and property to ensure that their situation of vulnerability is not compounded in the future. It is also important to pay special attention to the educational needs and the future well being of these children.

### **Lack of District and National Level Gender Disaggregated Data**

Today while much of the political discussion is focused on a mechanism to ensure assistance to the North East; reconstruction efforts; the effective implementation of the coastal buffer zone and the relocation of the affected populations, there is little focus on the specific needs of women in the affected areas. Government level data collection on those affected do not, in the main, contain information on the different nature of the impact of the Tsunami on women and there is no gender disaggregated data to enable proper analysis or response. There is still no reliable data on the numbers of women dead or displaced or, on widows/female headed households as a result of the disaster. One of the reasons for this is the lack of gender sensitivity to ensure that such data is recorded. The other is the lack of national level mechanisms to gather comprehensive gender disaggregated data.

### **Land Rights and Relocation**

The rights of women to ownership of land and property is an area which is of particular importance in the formulation and implementation of policies regarding relocation of

affected communities. For example, in the East there is a traditional practice of bestowing land received by mothers as dowry or inheritance to daughters. However, in the post Tsunami relocation programmes, if the State is not sensitive to these practices but relies instead of alienating state land to the head of the household, deemed to be the male, this will impact negatively on the rights to land that girl children/women have traditionally enjoyed for centuries. In such a situation, it is important that the State intervenes to ensure that there is at least joint ownership between spouses in the event of distribution of property in the new locations.

Even in the South, where State land settlement policies have leaned towards giving ownership to males (primary and secondary) with spouses having only life interest in such property, it is important that the State brings about changes to current laws to ensure that joint ownership becomes policy which could then be the basis of allocation of land among the Tsunami affected population.

It is also disturbing to note that there is little consultation with the displaced population as to their views on the specific geographical areas which are being identified for relocation. This is particularly of concern in relation to female headed households as it is imperative that such women are given the opportunity to decide on safe places in which to settle which would provide security for her children and for her to live without fear. For example, it is important in such cases that there is easy access to schools and hospitals, to firewood, water and other facilities. It is also absolutely necessary decisions in relation to relocation takes into consideration women's need to access livelihoods and ensure their ability to do so.

### **Access to Livelihoods**

Much of the focus on State, national as well as international agencies has been on directing support for large scale projects such as provision of fishing boats, equipment and economic ventures. Such a programmes prioritising male focussed economic

activities overlook those small scale but essential activities which women have long been engaged in such as drying and/or processing fish, making and selling foodstuff, traditional bobbin lace making, coir production. Women in these areas have been very clear that even in cases where the spouse is alive, any assistance should be given to the woman since this would ensure better welfare of the family. This is even more urgent as there are many reports of men using State assistance to satisfy their own needs, such as on cigarettes and alcohol, at the expense of those of the family.

At the same time enabling women access to skills training remains a key issue. In this regard, it is important to stress that such skills should be those which women are able to utilise for viable economic ventures and not be confined to skills which are based on gendered notions of women's capacity. For example, women need to be able to acquire skills relating to carpentry, masonry and other technical related employment. Such skills will ensure that women can move out of traditionally low wage sectors or activities which have a limited market, into higher waged, hitherto male dominated, sectors. Skills to access the more lucrative jobs in the construction industry will be vital since much of the new employment available will be in this area.

#### **Measures to ensure Women's Representation at Decision Making Levels**

Currently, there are few women who have been appointed to decision making positions whether at the level of committees set up in welfare camps, in the district level mechanisms set up by AFREN (The Task Force to Rebuild the Nation) or by the relevant line Ministries dealing with Tsunami recovery at the district level or at the national level. This is contributing not only to the uneven utilisation of assistances as well as to the overlooking of gender specific needs and concerns of women. To ensure that all policies and programmes are formulated and implemented from an integrated gender sensitive perspective at the national level as well as the local level, it is critical that this issue is addressed without further delay.

The Mothers and Daughters of Lanka

Women's Alliance for Peace

Action Network for Migrant Workers (ACTFORM)

Women's Alliance for Peace and Democracy