

CASE STUDY #1 – GENDER AND DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT

Indian Ocean tsunami on Boxing Day 2004

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The day after Christmas in 2004, a massive tsunami struck the coastlines of twelve countries, in Asia and Africa, around the Indian Ocean. This tsunami was triggered by an earthquake measuring 8.9 on the Richter scale and had developed near the west coast of Sumatra in Indonesia. The total death toll was over 300,000. Altogether, more than 1.6 million people were displaced. In India, tidal waves as high as ten meters drenched the coastline up to three kilometers inland.

India was the third country most severely impacted, after Indonesia and Sri Lanka. The official death toll of India was reported at 10,749 and another 6000 people were reported missing and feared to be dead. Approximately 154,000 homes were destroyed and 600,000 people were displaced and moved to emergency shelters. The overall financial loss for India has been estimated at about \$ 2 billion U.S. dollars. The fishermen communities that lived in the coastline suffered the most damage and destruction. Approximately 80 percent of the dead on the mainland were from fishing communities. They lost their homes and their source of livelihood.

While these statistics emerged, there was another startling statistic that began to surface and expose the gender inequalities during natural disasters. Official government data shows that three times more women than men were killed by this tsunami.

Research began to reveal the specific reasons which led to the very high incidence of women's deaths in this tragedy. In Indonesia, many of the men were fighting in a separatist movement based up in the hillsides, therefore were at some distance from the coast when the tsunami hit. In the meantime, in all of the countries affected most women were in their houses or nearby, often taking care of children and sick or elderly relatives. Women were reluctant to flee in the face of the tsunami and abandon those under their care. Another factor was that many women and girls did not know how to swim, as this is not considered an important skill for women to learn in these Asian countries; so many women and girls drowned. Traditional clothing for women, such as sarees and other garments, restricted their movements, making it hard for them to run uphill and inland.

In the aftermath following the tsunami, the widespread death and destruction and social upheaval also caused changes in gender roles and relations, including increased levels of domestic violence against women. It was reported that men were drinking alcohol more frequently, as a way of coping with the stress of the disaster.

Though the tsunami affected many men and women, the severity of its impact varied according to each person's pre-disaster social, economic and political power or vulnerability. Social norms differentially

influenced the capacity of men, women, boys and girls to survive the disaster, and they affected the conditions that survivors faced in its aftermath.

Based on excerpts from studies by Oxfam-America and Prof. Revathi I. Hines

Questions for discussion:

1. If a major disaster such as this occurred in Fiji, would women also be more likely to die than men? If so, why?
2. What can be learned from this experience, so that women will be less vulnerable in the next disaster?
3. How can the capacities of women in the Indian Ocean region be strengthened, so that they can better protect their own lives and the lives of others during the next tsunami?
4. How can men help to reduce the vulnerability of their wives, daughters and female neighbours?