

CASE STUDY #3 – GENDER AND DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT

Sinking of the Princess Ashika ferry



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The MV Princess Ashika was a 37-year-old old ferry purchased in July 2009 from Fiji by the Tongan government, as the only ferry to be used for domestic travel to the outer islands (Ha'apai, Vava'u and Niua groups).

On August 5, 2009, the Princess Ashika sank just before midnight in open sea in the Ha'apai Group of Tonga, with a total of 128 people on board. Official figures released by "Operation Ashika" confirmed that 54 men were rescued, and 74 persons were lost at sea. These include two bodies recovered and 72 missing (68 passengers and 4 crew), including five foreign nationals. Two of the missing passengers remain unidentified.

All of the survivors were men, and all the women on the boat drowned (32 women in total). The dead include 15 children (10 boys and 5 girls). The average age of these children was 7 years old.

As is the usual practice found in the gendered division of labour and space on such boats, the women and children were sleeping close together on mattresses below deck, while the crew members (all of whom were men) and some male passengers were on the upper deck. This meant that it was easier for the men to jump off when the ship was sinking, and thereby save their lives. Survivors report that the boat sank quickly, within 5 minutes.

In the wake of this disaster – the worst in Tongan history -- an official inquiry was opened to determine who was ultimately responsible for this tragedy and all the deaths. More than 100 people have been interviewed so far in relation to the Royal Commission's inquiry, including experts from overseas. About 10 government ministries and relevant stakeholders in the kingdom are said to have had some involvement or connection with the case and will be involved in the hearing. As more facts and testimonies were reported, it became increasingly that safety checks and processes had failed at numerous points in the chain of events.

The New Zealander who was managing director of Shipping Corporation of Polynesia bought the 37-year-old ferry on behalf of the Tongan government, but said he never looked into the state of the vessel's hull. The former Director of the Marine Division in Tonga's Transport Ministry admitted a series of failures, including not recommending that Marine Division surveyors travel to Fiji to inspect the vessel and not sighting a current survey certificate for the Princess Ashika.

The former Deputy Secretary at Tonga's Ministry of Ports and Authority testified that when inspecting the ferry on August 4-5 he noted holes and areas of severe corrosion on the walls and decks of the ferry. During his statement at the inquiry, he presented 37 photographic slides, including those showing holes in the cargo deck through which the ocean below was visible, blocked scuppers (drain holes on the deck), worn out ropes and safety rails, and a broken and heavily rusted gate where "wandering passengers could have easily fallen overboard". There were also photos of heavily corroded areas freshly painted over.

On Thursday, a second witness – a welder with 20 years of work experience with the Shipping Corporation of Polynesia Ltd, the company owning the Princess Ashika – also testified to the vessel's unseaworthy state. He described performing welding work on the ferry from July 2 right up until the day it left for its fatal voyage to Ha'apai. The day before the voyage, he worked on the Ashika until 10pm. He told the hearing that the ferry's first voyage came back with a hole, and that anyone could see it was heavily corroded – "even by standing from the wharf". He also affirmed that he and his brother were assigned to close up a gaping hole on one side of the vessel, and that crew members had to cover corroded areas of the upper deck with metal sheets.

The first survivor of the Princess Ashika sinking to give testimony spoke of water forging through the cargo hull, causing vehicles to move below deck. He told the hearing the ferry then rocked intensively from side to side before sinking. The 25 year-old witness from Tongatapu said he noticed work had been done to chip away corrosion on the Princess Ashika, there was rust and corrosion at the front, and the port side was swelling with rust which was painted over. He said seawater was coming in, hitting the cargo below deck. He agreed the intense rocking of the vessel was not just caused by waves, but because the vessel was taking in water. The witness said he was not aware of any loudspeaker warning to passengers, nor was any safety information given regarding lifejackets or life rafts.

It appears that all of the decision-makers involved in the chain of events leading to the acquisition and doomed sailing of the Princess Ashika ferry were men.

In many Pacific island countries, transportation is quite limited and distances to be traveled across the ocean are vast. Conditions on small airplanes and ferries, as well as other vessels, are often not safe enough, can be aggravated by stormy weather or rough seas, and frequently inadequate for passenger transport and basic comfort. In addition, these boats may carry excess cargo or more passengers than allowed, and may not have enough lifejackets for all passengers. However, many islanders have no choice but to take their chances traveling on such vessels -- for employment, to go to school, visit relatives or to purchase basic supplies.

Those living on outer islands are the most vulnerable to transport disasters such as this one, as they are dependent on such precarious forms of travel.

Based on excerpts from various news reports and websites

Questions for discussion:

1. If a ferry sinking 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 all passengers will be less vulnerable in the next disaster?
3. What measures should be taken by governments to prevent loss of human lives in transport-related disasters?
4. If you were a member of the Inquiry panel, what questions would you ask?