

## WOMEN FROM TSUNAMI-HIT DISTRICTS IN FIVE COUNTRIES MEET TO ADDRESS GENDER CONCERNS IN RECONSTRUCTION



Thirty six year old Jesinda Jeganathan squats with her face resting on her palm outside her 10 by 10 tin beach shack in the Zahira College tsunami relief camp in Batticaloa. Her thoughts are not on the tsunami which flattened her house, destroyed her livelihood and killed her relatives, but on the future that awaits her.

"Right now, we don't see much of a future. We are unable to say what the future in the next five months would be like," says Ms. Jeganathan.

About 1300 people died and another 630 are missing from Ms. Jeganathan's village, Navalady – which recorded the highest number of deaths from a single village in Batticaloa. The tiny fishing village on the sandy patch between the lagoon and the sea, has almost disappeared after the tsunami. While the surviving men have either gone back to fishing or are working to clear debris for cash, the women who head households, the widowed and young girls remain at home without a livelihood or a say on their needs.

Ms. Jeganathan, for instance, says her family received no livelihood assistance while her husband, who is a fisherman, is currently working on a short term contract overseas. "Since my husband is not here to ask for fishing equipment, we didn't get any," she says. "We were never given a chance to participate in the camp committees or to give our opinion on the needs of women in the camps."

However, with the help of several local community based organizations, funded by UNDP, Ms. Jeganathan and hundreds like her are coming out of their tin shacks to let their concerns be known to camp committees, to win equal employment opportunities, to voice their needs and to help plan and implement rebuilding activities. "Earlier we never got a chance to talk. Now we get a chance to say what we want," Ms. Jeganathan says. Suriya Women's Development Centre, an organization that receiving funding from UNDP, is helping tsunami affected women and young girls to stop violence against women in camps and to provide livelihood assistance.

At a South Asian conference on gender concerns in post-tsunami reconstruction that was held in July, organized by Suriya and funded by UNDP, more than a hundred women from Banda Aceh, India, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Bangladesh discussed common issues that women were facing, and worked to plan common strategies and share resources on better participation of women in rebuilding.

One of the important issues that has surfaced repeatedly is the increase in violence against women within families and communities, Suriya officials report. She says that by analyzing social realities using a gender based and rights based perspective, the impacts of disasters on women's lives can be brought into clear focus. More than 130 representatives from 5 tsunami affected countries attended the conference, which, unlike many regional conferences that are held in the capital, was held in one of Sri Lanka's worst affected tsunami districts of Batticaloa, yards away from the tsunami debris and relief camps. The meeting was conducted in a native language with simultaneous translations.

The conference focused on violence against women in camps, lack of decision making powers, representation of women in rebuilding activities, land rights issues and livelihood development issues. "One of the biggest issues is the lack of participation and consultation in decision making, says Sunila Abeysekara of INFORM, a women's rights based organization. "Usually participation is done when programme is about to be implemented, when it is too late." The participants said that one of the main problems faced by women in relief camps is sexual harassment and abuse.

Ruth Manorama from India said that some young girls in tsunami affected districts have been forced to remarry because they lack a livelihood and there is little support to displaced girls. "Some adult young girls who have been orphaned are being forced into marriage while some women have committed suicide because they were forced to remarry," says Ms. Manorama. In addition to sexual harassment, Shaliny Jaufer from Maldives said that the rebuilding efforts in the affected islands of the archipelago have ignored the land rights of women and have neglected the commercially unregistered but self-employed women who have now lost their livelihood after the tsunami.

She said that livelihood development for women affected by the tsunami has become a major need in Maldives, especially since most women contribute to household income and are involved in home based industries. The two day conference discussed disaster recovery and the challenges for women, and women's activism and mobilization in the post tsunami disaster context. The participants made a number of recommendations to overcome their constraints and to better women's participation in recovery efforts.

The recommendations made at the conference will be presented to the government and non-governmental authorities who are responsible for equitable delivery of assistance in post-tsunami recovery. "Now we do a lot of negotiating and play an active role in the community," Ms. Jeganathan says, adding that empowerment of women through local organizations have not only given them a voice but also the courage and confidence to face the challenges ahead.

**For more information:**

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