

# The tsunami's impact on women

## Introduction

There is no scarcity of reflections and commentary on the impact of the disaster that shook the coasts of several Asian countries on 26 December 2004. The media have, at least until recently, looked into almost every conceivable angle: the impact on tourism, the impact on the environment, revealed underwater villages, even the impact on animals. One area that has so far received less attention is the gender impact of the tsunami, and its impact on women in particular.

As a result, we are a long way from really understanding the social impacts of the disaster, let alone what concrete steps must be taken to ensure that both the immediate response and long-term policies are effective in bringing relief.

This briefing seeks to promote debate and awareness of the issues and to ensure that the recovery phase of the relief effort integrates the problems raised. It looks at the impact of the tsunami in Indonesia, India, and Sri Lanka, and in particular at how it has affected women. It concludes with some recommendations about how we can start addressing the problems raised.

## Getting the facts right

### Differences in context mean we cannot generalise

Oxfam's experience in disasters has shown that disasters, however 'natural', are profoundly discriminatory. Wherever they hit, pre-existing structures and social conditions determine that some members of the community will be less affected while others will pay a higher price. Among the differences that determine how people are affected by such disasters is that of gender.

So far we know that the tsunami killed more than 220,000 people in 12 countries spanning South-East Asia, South Asia, and East Africa while, according to the Red Cross, more than 1.6 million people have been displaced. And yet there is precious

little accurate, disaggregated data that shows how many of the dead were women, or how many women are still missing or displaced.

The information most urgently needed relates to mortality and displacement figures, disaggregated by sex. In Aceh province in Indonesia, and in India and Sri Lanka, there is abundant, if partial, evidence that many more women and children have died than men.

In Indonesia, in the four villages in the Aceh Besar district surveyed by Oxfam for this report, only 189 of 676 survivors were female. Male survivors outnumbered female survivors by a ratio of almost 3:1. In four villages in North Aceh district, out of 366 deaths, 284 were females: females accounted for 77 per cent (more than three-quarters) of deaths in these villages. In the worst affected village, Kuala Cangko, for every male who died, four females died — or in other words, 80 per cent of deaths were female. In the Borongon camp, just outside Banda Aceh, a room accommodates 21 widowers who have chosen to live together to cope with the responsibilities of caring for their surviving children.

In Cuddalore in India, almost three times as many women were killed as men, with 391 female deaths, compared with 146 men. In Pachaankuppam village, the only people to die were women. In Sri Lanka too, partial information such as camp surveys and press reports suggest a serious imbalance in the number of men and women who survived.

Some of the causes of these patterns are similar across the region: many women died because they stayed behind to look for their children and other relatives; men more often than women can swim; men more often than women can climb trees. But differences too are important: women in Aceh, for example, traditionally have a high level of participation in the labour force, but the wave struck on a Sunday morning when they were at home and the men were out on errands away from the seafront. Women in India play a major role in fishing and were waiting on the shore for the fishermen to bring in the catch, which they would then process and sell in the local market. In Sri Lanka in Batticaloa District, the tsunami hit at the hour women on the east coast usually took their baths in the sea.

Even more important for the purposes of relief and long-term reconstruction is the need to understand the consequences of such demographic changes. How safe are women in crowded camps and settlements, when they are so outnumbered by men in several of the countries in question? Will widows in India have access to land once owned by their husbands? Will younger women enter into marriages with much older men, as already seems to be happening in some locations? And will this carry risks in terms of compromising their education and reproductive health? In the fishing communities of South India, what rights will surviving women enjoy under new arrangements and programmes? In whose names will newly built houses be registered? Will men take on new domestic roles, or will women's workloads increase?

# Indonesia

## Overview

According to the Indonesia National Disaster Relief Co-ordinating Board, the number of people who died in Aceh province in the 26 December disaster totals 115,628, while more than 127,774 are still missing (as of mid-February 2005). The same official source fears that the count will continue to rise, as teams are still finding an average of 500 bodies a day. There are also nearly 400,000 men and women who have been displaced and have lost possessions and social connections, in addition to members of their families and communities.

Through their work with many of the worst affected communities in Aceh, Oxfam programme staff are becoming increasingly aware that a disproportionate percentage of the fatalities there were female. Newspapers reported the stories of survivors from Lampu'uk, a small coastal community about 15 km from Banda Aceh:

'When the survivors of Lampu'uk had picked themselves up out of the mud of the tsunami, several appalling facts became clear. The first was that their town no longer existed. The second was that four out of five of its former inhabitants were dead. But it took a while to realise the strangest thing of all: that among those who made it to higher ground, or who kept their heads above the surging waters, so few were women.'

'Out of a population of about 6,000, only 950 residents of Lampu'uk had been accounted for yesterday and fewer than 200 of those were female. In one of the town's constituent villages only four women were left alive, three of those because they were out of town when the wave struck.'

## Why the tsunami has hit women the hardest

Through talking with many of the survivors — both men and women — several reasons for the disproportionate death toll amongst women in Aceh are becoming apparent.

In rural coastal areas many men were out fishing at sea, and many survived, as the waves passed under their small boats. The waves hit the shore, flattening the coastal communities and killing many of the women and children, most of whom would traditionally be at home on a Sunday morning. In agricultural areas, men were often out in the fields, working, or doing errands away from the house, or were taking produce to markets. Again, women were at home with children, and when the wave struck, lost vital seconds in trying to gather children to them.

The sheer strength needed to stay alive in the torrent was often also decisive in who survived. Many women and young children, unable to struggle to stay on their feet, or afloat, in the wave, simply tired and drowned. Women clinging to one or several children would tire even more quickly.

In some communities, many men worked away from their homes, either in different towns or in Malaysia, as work was often hard to come by in Aceh. Many have now returned to find their families dead, or amongst the tens of thousands still listed as missing.

## The tsunami's impact on gender balance in Aceh

There has been no comprehensive survey conducted yet, but in many of the areas where Oxfam is working, more females were killed by the tsunami than males, and in many communities, the number of female deaths was significantly higher than that among males.

In the tables researched and compiled by Oxfam (below), figures are taken from two districts of Aceh province, Aceh Besar and North Aceh. The first shows survivors, and the second the numbers killed, broken down by sex. Both show significantly higher losses amongst the female population. Previous research has generally shown that, pre-tsunami, the female population in Aceh was slightly higher than the male population.

### Aceh Besar District

<i>Village</i>	<i>Population pre-tsunami</i>	<i>Survivors</i>	<i>Surviving females</i>	<i>Surviving males</i>
Gampong Baru	242	123	39	84
Meunasah Masjid	1,110	159	45	114
Lamsenia	220	124	26	98
Dayeuh Mapplam	4,500	270	79	191

### North Aceh District

<i>Village</i>	<i>Population pre-tsunami</i>	<i>Total dead</i>	<i>Fatalities: female</i>	<i>Fatalities: male</i>
Sawang	Not available	93	70	23
Kuala Keureutou	Not available	85	68	17
Kuala Cangkoy	Not available	146	117	29
Matang Baroh	Not available	42	29	13

In the four villages surveyed by Oxfam in the Aceh Besar district, of 676 survivors only 189 were female. Male survivors outnumbered women survivors by a ratio of almost 3:1. In the four villages in North Aceh district, out of 366 deaths, 284 were female: females accounted for 77 per cent (more than three-quarters) of deaths in these villages. In the worst affected village, Kuala Cangkoy, for every male who died, four females died — or in other words, 80 per cent of deaths were female.

## Problems now and problems for the future

The consequences of this apparent pattern are in some cases clear to see. Many men are experiencing serious difficulties, having been left to fend for themselves and taking on unfamiliar tasks as they look after their families. Many fear the possibility that they may lose self-esteem as a consequence of not being able to support their families in the aftermath of disaster. But in most cases, the most disadvantaged people will be women.

## Areas of concern

The gender imbalance is likely to have a wide impact. Concerns include:

- What will the gender imbalance mean for women's workloads? This will depend on whether men (for example, widowers or grown male orphans) take on household and childcare responsibilities, and thus transform dominant gender roles. If this does not happen, surviving women may see their workloads increase as they care for extended families.
- What will it mean for women's mobility? Women in Aceh, especially married ones, enjoy a degree of personal freedom that allows them to take part in work of different types, and to attend school, and religious and other events. For younger, unmarried women, such mobility is much more limited. Will the disproportionate number of men in communities increase the limitations imposed on the mobility and visibility of women, and thus their ability to benefit from access to services, information, and decision-making opportunities? In extreme cases, will a smaller number of women mean that they are more vulnerable to harassment and sexual abuse or domestic violence?
- What will it mean for marriage and the formation of families? The possibility exists that surviving women may be encouraged to marry earlier than in the past, with implications for their education, livelihoods, and reproductive health. Surviving women may also be encouraged to have more children, with shorter intervals between them, to replace those lost by the community. Again, this has consequences for their reproductive health and their ability to earn an independent income.
- What will it mean for the conditions and arrangements in settlements of different types?
- What will it mean for the surviving women's land rights and their access to other assets?

## A call to action

Relevant sources of information in Aceh, though consistent, remain scattered and largely anecdotal. In particular, there are no comprehensive statistics on the gender breakdown of those who have perished or who are missing. This is hampering the current relief efforts, as well as making it difficult to understand the long-term consequences of the situation. International donors, and NGOs, should make research and analysis a priority. Oxfam has started a research project on this issue.

Those working in the relief effort must also seek to integrate this problem into the centre of their work. In its programme in Aceh, Oxfam has started to address the issues raised by:

- ensuring full consultation and participation of women in all livelihoods and cash-for-work programmes;
- building women's shelters in areas where they feel secure;
- electing women's representatives in communities where Oxfam works;
- providing equal pay for women and men in cash-for-work programmes; and
- assessing the different needs of women and men in all of our programmes.

# India

## Overview

The tsunami caused extensive damage to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Andhra Pradesh, and the Union Territory of Pondicherry. The official death toll was put at 10,749, but another 5,640 people have been reported as missing and 'feared to be dead'.

## Why the tsunami has hit women the hardest

The evidence outlined below makes it clear that women appear to have been killed by the waves in greater numbers than men. Local survivors cite various reasons why this may be so. When the tsunami hit, many men were fishing at sea while the women were waiting near the shoreline for the boats to come in with the catch, which they would collect, clean, and then take to the market to sell. The tsunami travelled relatively calmly out at sea, passing under the boats, but swelled up as it reached the shore. Many women also lost their lives in their attempts to save their children and elderly relatives who were with them at the time.

## The tsunami's impact on the gender balance in India

Figures collated by Oxfam for this report show that the tsunami killed more women than men in the worst affected districts. In Nagapattinam, the worst affected district of Tamil Nadu in South India, government statistics state that 2,406 women died, compared with 1,883 men.

In Cuddalore, the second most affected district, almost three times as many women were killed than men, with 391 female casualties, compared with 146 men. In Devanampattinam village in Cuddalore, for example, 42 women died compared with 21 men. In Pachaankuppam village, the only people to die were women.

## Problems now and problems for the future

Experience of natural disasters in a wide range of contexts shows that events of this type can weaken the status of women and girls and their ability to negotiate both within and outside the family. The loss of assets, homes, and family members all contribute to increased gender inequality.

There is already some evidence of this emerging in the case of the tsunami. Oxfam has heard of an increase in the number of marriages of girls within their extended families in some of the affected villages in Cuddalore. There are cases where girls whose marriages had already been arranged before the tsunami, and who have lost both their parents, are now being married off by members of the extended family or the community to other young men. These marriages seem to be contracted in desperation and without involving the girls' consent.

‘One of my younger brothers has a mental handicap and is totally dependent on us now. If amma [mother] was around, there would have been no problem. Nor would I have had to stop my school to look after him. I am in class 10 and cannot afford to miss classes, but my family is more important.’

Widows and elderly women who have survived are also in a desperate position and need extra support. Many of the women who would previously have taken on roles caring for them have been killed. In Nagarcoil, in Kanniyakumari district in Tamil Nadu, for instance, many of the elderly women are now gathering and selling firewood to support themselves.

The structure of families has also undergone a change. In some homes, traditional gender roles are being challenged, as men deal with the crisis by taking on the responsibilities of single parenting and learning to perform new roles.

However, Valli, from Pudukuppam village in Cuddalore now looks after the two young daughters of her brother, Palaniappan. Palaniappan, 26, committed suicide after he found he could not cope with the children and a life without a job, after his wife was washed away by the tsunami.

‘Palani was extremely distressed after the loss of his wife and would often sit alone wondering what he would do without a job and with two small girls to feed and marry off. But we never thought he would go to such extremes,’ says Valli.

## A call to action

Progress has already been made in some areas. For example, the initiative by the governments of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, in the initial period after the tsunami, to station women fire officers and police officers and women doctors in the camps and affected villages was a very positive move. This helped to deter violence against women and provided women survivors with a safer environment.

The Kerala government has also agreed to register permanent houses owned by married couples in the names of both the spouses, so that one cannot sell the house without the consent of the other. The district collector of Kanniyakumari has agreed to do the same for temporary houses.

In other areas, a lot of progress is still needed. Livelihoods represent one such area. The present focus on making boats available to fishermen means that women’s livelihoods are not being given the attention they need. Women, for instance, need bicycles with boxes to store fish, as the retail sale of fish is often traditionally a woman’s job. Women also repair nets, process and dry fish, and undertake other petty vending jobs such as selling *idlis* (pounded rice pancakes) and running small shops. Many are involved in other non-fishing jobs, such as making coir and collecting sea shells. Women’s livelihood needs are of special concern, as their income particularly benefits children.

Gender equality in livelihoods is another major concern. This includes equal cash for equal work and ownership of assets such as houses and boats, as well as life insurance and insurance of income-generating assets.

Government agencies and aid agencies need to include women’s voices in decision making, through consultation. In the current situation, protection is needed for women, and their dignity, in the temporary shelters and in camps. Privacy issues need

to be addressed, as well as the placement of water sources, toilets, and kitchens at convenient locations. In camps, private space needs to be designated for women for medical examination.

Taslim, of Agaram village in Cuddalore, points to the benefits of having bathing cubicles near to her home:

‘Earlier I had to walk about 100 yards away and felt very shy because I had to pass all the houses on the way. Now, away from prying eyes, I feel safe and more comfortable. No-one watches me come and go now.’

Oxfam’s programme strategy aims at assessing the needs of women and men in all of its work. This began with the relief phase, when the public health package we distributed included toiletries, underclothes, and outer garments for women. Emergency water and sanitation interventions were also carried out in consultation with women, which resulted in women getting toilets in areas where they felt safe.

Oxfam’s livelihoods work also seeks to ensure that the different roles of men and women are addressed equally. In Cuddalore, for example, Oxfam has ensured equal wages for equal work and has worked with the district administration to ensure that this is implemented. There was initially some resistance to the idea among the men, who were used to receiving higher wages, even for the same work. However, Oxfam staff and Oxfam’s partners talked to the community and all eventually agreed that this was the right thing to do.

# Sri Lanka

## Overview

When the tsunami hit Sri Lanka, it left over 30,000 people dead and made hundreds of thousands homeless. It affected swathes of the island's southern and eastern coasts, with the worst affected districts being Jaffna, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Ampara, Hambantota, Matara, Mullativu, and Galle.

## Why the tsunami has hit women the hardest

As in Indonesia and India, women appear to have been killed in greater numbers than men. The impact of the tsunami on women was disproportionate for several reasons. Some of these were the same as in other countries, others specific to Sri Lanka. One of the factors that increased women's vulnerability here was their traditional role of caring for their husbands, children, and elderly relatives, which kept them largely in and around their homes. As the tsunami hit quite early on a Sunday morning, many women would have been engaged in preparing breakfast for their families.

Another major factor is that the skills that helped people survive the tsunami, especially swimming and tree climbing, are taught to children in Sri Lanka to perform tasks that are done nearly exclusively by men. Shanthi Sivasanan, an Oxfam Programme Assistant working on gender protection issues, explains:

'Many men climbed trees to escape the water — it was something they had done many times before to pick fruit and while playing — yet women had never done this before and so didn't do it.'

As was the case in all the countries affected by the tsunami, those who were physically strongest survived. Pathimalar, a woman from Vattavan on Sri Lanka's east coast, told Oxfam of her experience in trying to save herself and her children from drowning:

'I grabbed my youngest child and gave her to a man who was stronger than me... I took my other child and found a tree to hold onto. I couldn't hold on, the water was too high and strong. We were taken by the sea but were lucky to escape. Two of my relatives died but the tree saved me and my child.'

Specific regional factors also influenced the number of women killed. In the fishing village of Dutchbar in Batticaloa District, for instance, an area where Oxfam staff believe over 90 per cent of the total population was killed, women died in far greater numbers than men, because when the tsunami hit it was the hour that women on the east coast usually took their baths in the sea.

## The tsunami's impact on the gender balance in Sri Lanka

The difficulty of fully assessing the actual number of women and men killed by the tsunami in Sri Lanka is compounded by the lack of gender differentiation in available statistics. The matter is further complicated by the lack of reliable census information for many of the Tamil regions of the island.

However, qualitative examples currently available clearly demonstrate the massive and disproportionate toll, cutting across ethnic lines, that the tsunami took on the women of Sri Lanka.

While hard data are still being compiled, the grim accounts of local officials and aid workers help to tell the story. According to a press report citing village elder Kanapathipilli Soundararajan of Batticaloa District, women made up the majority of the 1,300 bodies recovered in that area. The account of Daisy Lowe, of the Sri Lankan Association of South Wales, tells a similar story. She conducted a count at a camp in Batticaloa and found 1,589 surviving men and boys present, but only around 1,000 women and girls.

## Problems now and problems for the future

Some of the gender-specific problems created by the tsunami in Sri Lanka are short-term. These relate to the difficulties women encounter when living in a camp environment or in trying to receive equal access to emergency assistance, such as ration cards, which are registered in the husband's name. Another important concern is ensuring that women are paid equally and adequately in cash-for-work programmes, especially in the rehabilitation of agriculture and in the construction of temporary housing.

However, most of the problems that have emerged in the three months since the tsunami will be present for both the short and the long term, and will only get worse if they are not fully addressed. Many of them are exacerbated by the low status of women in Sri Lanka relative to men before the tsunami, which limits the degree to which they are being consulted and included in local governance and reconstruction matters now.

There are fears that domestic violence, a significant problem before the tsunami, may be exacerbated by the new strains on the family unit, such as the loss of men's livelihoods and the mental health implications of the disaster. The mental health needs of women, especially those who have lost children or who are widowed or pregnant, will be present in both the short- and long-term stages of the response.

One clear example of a short-term issue encountered by women is threats to security in displaced people's camps and temporary shelter areas. Incidents of sexual assault have reportedly already taken place in poorly lit toilets. Basics such as appropriate lighting, security, and screens to ensure privacy need to be provided by local authorities and NGOs to protect women and girls.

Women also need other basic facilities that are not always provided — for example, designated washing areas for sanitary cloths used during menstruation. Cultural taboos exist against washing these cloths in public and women need to be comfortable while caring for their basic needs in the camp environment.

A woman living in a camp for displaced people told Oxfam about her experiences using the toilet facilities there:

'In the night we get scared because there are no lights. It's frightening for us, we know there are snakes and you can't see who is around the toilets and washing areas.'

Domestic abuse is a real threat, and it has grown with the added stress on families since the tsunami. Alcohol abuse, a pre-existing problem, is a key factor that increases the risk of women being abused by spouses or other male family members.

P. Velunagagam, a field officer with Sarvodaya, an Oxfam partner in Sri Lanka, experienced first-hand an incident of domestic abuse stemming from the post-tsunami environment:

‘Last week there was a problem between a man and his wife. The government is giving people payments after they lost their relatives and houses in the tsunami. The husband went to claim the payment and spent it on Arrack [a local liquor made from palm sap] to get drunk. The wife asked where the money had gone so he hit her... We couldn’t take her to a doctor because she refused to see one or to speak of it.’

Livelihoods are both a short- and a long-term issue. Getting women back to work is an important process in improving their mental health and in enabling them to move forward with their lives, through their own choices and with their own resources. To do this, attention has to be paid to industries such as lace making, coconut husk weaving (used in making brooms, twine, mats, and other products), and to the whole range of industries related to fishing.

## A call to action

Assessing the needs of women and men when planning the tsunami response programmes of government, NGOs, and other agencies is essential to the overall success of the reconstruction effort. Women in Sri Lanka must have their rights respected and their voices heard in order to get the assistance they need to recover from the effects of the tsunami.

- Tsunami-affected women in Sri Lanka face heightened risks and new vulnerabilities to their physical security. The threats of rape, sexual assault, and gender-specific health problems have increased for women living in displaced people’s camps and in temporary housing.
- The economic security of women has been acutely and uniquely affected by the tsunami. The damage done to female-dominated businesses, such as small-scale cottage industries and fish processing, needs to be addressed with the same attention that is being given to male-dominated areas. Women who are the heads of their household, especially single women providing for elderly parents or the recently widowed, must have their livelihoods quickly re-established.
- Women have had difficulty in accessing benefits, especially cash payments and rations, because families are registered for government and insurance purposes in the man’s name. Widowed women sometimes do not receive their payments because the benefits are registered in their husband’s name. Women must have equal access to benefits and insurance payments to support themselves and their families.
- Women’s specific mental health needs must be prioritised and adequately met. If unaddressed, these will have major implications for the central cultural role that women play in caring for all members of the family. Pregnant women, especially widowed women who will have their babies without their husbands, are experiencing additional stress on their mental health, on top of the normal strains associated with pregnancy.

Oxfam’s response to the tsunami in Sri Lanka is built on a foundation of nearly three decades of work with communities and local partners across the country. Oxfam also works with 25 Sri Lankan civil society groups on ‘We Can’ (Campaign to End Violence

Against Women). Oxfam is making the needs of women affected by the tsunami a top priority in all of its emergency response and long-term reconstruction programmes.

Currently, Oxfam in Sri Lanka has taken the following steps to help tsunami-affected women and their families:

- ensuring women receive equal pay, and say, in cash-for-work initiatives to construct temporary housing and to clear plots of land so that crops can be replanted;
- targeting livelihoods affected by the tsunami on which women — many of whom are their family's only breadwinners — rely for income, such as the lace-making and coconut husk industries;
- establishing the Genderwatch group of local authorities and NGOs, to ensure that aid is properly reaching women in need;
- advocating for equal representation and distribution of power for women on the local councils that influence aid programmes and the disbursement of benefits;
- constructing separate and culturally appropriate latrines and washing areas that keep women safe and healthy in camps for displaced people and on temporary housing sites;
- supporting the work of local partners who are conducting training for security forces and camp managers at camps for displaced people, to ensure that women are protected and that incidents of harassment, abuse, and assault are quickly reported and dealt with;
- providing immediate assistance and support to newly widowed women, who are facing the difficult challenge of suddenly becoming the head of their household;
- initiating Kadal Varaintha Oviyam (which means 'drawing by the sea') counselling programmes for women and children. These aim to reduce fear of the ocean and help to heal the mental and emotional trauma caused by the tsunami; and
- making sure that all programmes in Sri Lanka prioritise and consider different issues facing women and men, at every stage of development and implementation.

## Conclusion

As this briefing has demonstrated, the evidence available to date shows that the tsunami has had a greater impact on women than on men. In each of the three locations considered, the information (though partial) consistently demonstrates that many more women than men appear to have been killed in the disaster. The briefing also shows that in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and India problems are already becoming apparent as a result of this disproportionate impact. Action needs to be taken now if we are to avoid short-term impacts turning into long-term problems.

Generalisations about why women died are not always helpful in understanding complex and diverse processes. On the contrary, they may create an image of women as 'vulnerable victims'. This contributes to their widespread exclusion from decision making: in Aceh, for example, the structures debating the 'master plan' for the reconstruction of the province are almost exclusively male, and women's organisations are struggling to take part in consultation systems. Yet it is clear that the different death rates among women and men have implications for individuals and their communities, and for the relief and reconstruction response. These differences need to be more clearly understood.

Consulting affected women and men at all levels is the way to ensure that what is provided is indeed what people need: whether it is formula for babies in camps in Sri Lanka, among whom mortality levels are a concern; or the underwear and sanitary protection many women ask for; or the physical design of kitchens in the resettlements in Aceh, where the wind blows out cooking fires as soon as they are lit; or the location of bathing cubicles for women nearer their homes, so that they have some privacy.

Beyond the loss of life, Oxfam's beneficiaries state that their lack of income is their biggest concern. As local fishing is a seasonal occupation, women's livelihood activities play a critical role in maintaining the household economy. Insufficient consideration is being given to revitalising work normally done by women, including agriculture (certain crops in particular) and other trading and livestock-rearing activities. Loss of income and inability to access cash will not only deepen the poverty of communities, and especially women within those communities, but could also create dangers of immediate (sexual) exploitation, and forms of dependency from which women will find it hard to recover.

In particular, conflict in Aceh and in the north-east of Sri Lanka has left a legacy of human rights abuses and a history of sexual and other violence against women. Reports have been received from affected areas of verbal and physical harassment and inappropriate behaviour by men in camps and settlements (while bathing, for example), and of great fears in the packed resettlement sites. In Aceh, for instance, national and international agencies are expressing concern at the physical conditions (overcrowding, lack of privacy, distance from places of origin) and their possible consequences for the safety and decorum of women who are sharing small rooms with up to four other people.

## Responses: small and big things that make a difference

Actions can and must be urgently taken to ensure that the needs of women and men are adequately addressed, and that the disproportionate impact on women is factored in. This is key to the recovery of communities. Responses should include the following considerations.

- All those involved in humanitarian assistance and policy making must collect and use sex-disaggregated information.
- The protection of women from sexual violence and exploitation must be a priority, even when information is slow to emerge (particularly in certain settings such as conflict and the consequent presence of military personnel; when young women are alone; times when alcohol consumption among men is on the increase, etc.).
- The manner of delivering aid must use and abide by the highest standards for protection and accountability. This includes systems for the protection of women and for reporting and dealing with any incidents of abuse or misconduct.
- It must be ensured that earning opportunities are accessible to both men and women, whether in immediate cash-for-work programmes or in more sustainable livelihood programmes. This is essential to revitalise local economies by unleashing the potential of all. It also avoids creating or strengthening forms of (sexual) exploitation and dependencies. Even within the boundaries of what is allowed by local culture, it is possible and necessary to go beyond the 'cooking and sewing' projects to which women are often relegated, so that new opportunities for established and non-traditional occupations are open to them.
- Genuine participation, at all levels, implies not only talking to women and men when assessing needs, delivering aid, or evaluating the effectiveness of interventions in camps, villages, and cities that are on the road to recovery. It also implies developing creative strategies to overcome the limitations of the near-uniform domination of men in leadership structures in the countries affected.
- Participation also implies a change of mindset: from perceiving women as 'vulnerable victims' to respecting their rights as citizens with specific perspectives and capacities. Agencies such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, international NGOs, donors, and governments have an obligation to lead the way.
- Serious consideration must be given to the demographic changes (as well as cultural values) in the countries affected, so that the rights of women as well as men, in property, education, family formation, and reproductive health, are protected and promoted in all policies and interventions.
- Provision of relief aid and long-term policies must be based on awareness of current and emergent patterns of family and household formation, rather than on an abstract notion of the 'nuclear family'. The composition of households is never generic and the tsunami has further complicated the picture. A one-size-fits-all policy will not work.
- If conditions of gender inequality determine who feels the impact of disasters, and how, then providing the finances that have for so long been promised to meet the gender-specific Millennium Development Goals has to be one of the best forms of disaster-preparedness for the future.