
More than silence: the gender dimensions of tsunami fatalities and their consequences

Introduction

Women advocates often speak of the 'silencing' of women: from history, policy formulation and from participation in key aspects of relief and development. There is another, more dramatic form of silencing: the systematic neglect and discrimination against women and girls' rights that lead to their death. Sen (1990, 1992), refers to this as the phenomenon of the 'missing women' in other words the sex ratios that in many Asian countries reflect a 'female deficit'.

While social scientists have been analysing the causes and consequences of such a phenomenon, there is less interest in the extent to which 'natural' disasters contribute to this ultimate silencing of women. This contrasts with the consensus among practitioners for the need to integrate gender in disaster responses¹.

This presentation uses Oxfam's work (see Annex 1) and research to reflect on tsunami related sex differentials in mortality, and their implications for current and future responses.

1. The biases of natural disasters

High-quality information gathering is the nervous system of the humanitarian enterprise. Without it, any form of principled action - whether now or in the future - is paralysed (Diskett, 2003)

There is considerable research on what types of 'natural' disasters lead to what consequences. Earthquakes are likely to cause more injuries, floods (including those associated with tsunami) more deaths. The effects of natural disasters are heavier for those living in the poorest countries, and EM-DAT provides data showing that of those killed by natural events in 2002 just 6% lived in countries of high human development (International Federations of Red Cross and Red Crescent Society 2003). The same happens within countries where natural disasters, including floods, single out the poorest and most marginalized: 'the poor are disproportionately affected by severe impacts including loss of life' (Fox 2003).

Despite this wealth of information, we still know relatively little about how this bias plays out between the genders. What we know is random, anecdotal and due mostly to individuals and institutions with a concern for women and their rights. For example a report mentions that the 1991 Bangladesh killed over 140,000 people, 90% of which were women and children (Schmuck 2002). The gender effects of Mitch, on the other hand, varied according to countries, with more men killed in Salvador and Guatemala.

Unfortunately, at least in Aceh, most programmes are carried out in the absence of systematic official gender disaggregated statistics on mortality, missing people and IDPs. It is not possible to analyse the consequences of this situation for the appropriateness, adequacy, and efficiency of interventions. What is certain is that the absence of reliable statistics must have an effect on current relief, on disaster preparedness, and on longer terms social and gender relations, including women's ability to assert their rights.

¹ The abundant and valuable literature on the subject tends to focus on women's ability to withstand disasters, rather than gendered effects on mortality. See, for example, the Pan American Health Fact Sheet for a list of useful references on the subject.

It is worth noting that replies to enquiries on the reasons for the absence of gendered statistics mention fast burials. This raises the question of connectedness: in this case between activities on the ground and agreed policy positions, given that WHO discourages fast burials because they impeded the grieving indispensable to mental health, and because exposed bodies do not necessarily threaten public health (de Ville de Goyet 2004).

2. The tsunami and the missing women in Aceh

'...in some disasters ...more men die. However, the key point to recognize is the gendered nature of potential vulnerabilities' (Seligson and Shoaf 2003)

On the 15 of April the tsunami relief information centre site reported that in Aceh 126,602 people were killed and 93,638 are missing. There is no disaggregation by gender.

Oxfam is carrying out research and preliminary findings from a small sub-set of the research locations show that in four villages surveyed in Aceh Besar, of 676 survivors only 189 were women, thus a ratio of 3:1. In 4 villages in North Aceh of 366 people dead, 77% were women². At this stage it is only possible to speculate on the consequences of these imbalances.

2.1 Immediate consequences

The most immediate considerations must be for the provision of effective and adequate services, and their ability to safeguard the rights of women and girls.

- Women (in the countries affected) are struggling to 'participate' in relief. Their limited numbers must contribute to this, especially against the background of male dominance in positions of authority. This applies to all levels, from income³ and livelihood opportunities⁴, to larger reconstruction processes⁵.
- Men have lost wives, daughters and sisters. It is important that relief takes this into account for its effects on their mental health and their ability to deal with what where women's reproductive responsibilities. While the latter deserves note and creative solutions⁶, observations in Aceh and other countries indicate that often surviving women are taking over such tasks, with an increase in their work burden.
- Reported physical and sexual violence against women (in all countries affected) is likely to increase in settlements where men outnumber them, especially against the conflict background of Sri Lanka and Aceh. The requests for women-only shelters demonstrate their awareness of increased vulnerability.

2.2 Disaster preparedness

Beyond the gender bias of mortality, we need to understand its patterns (social, geographical etc.) and contributing variables. Only robust knowledge of the complexity of causes will allow for disaster preparedness of the necessary scale and sophistication

² For India scattered data confirm the situation of Aceh. In the most affected districts of Tamil Nadu women certainly died in larger numbers than men: in Nagapattinam 2,406 women, compared to 1,883 men; in Cuddalore 391 women versus 146 men. In Sri Lanka the patterns is repeated: though the data are even less systematic.

³ All evidence point to the fact that, for example, the proportion of women engaged in Cash for Work programmes are much less than that of men and that they are being paid less.

⁴ Where assumptions may be made about the gender division of labour, especially in fishing communities.

⁵ In Aceh it was clear that the 'master plan' for reconstruction had almost completely ignore women both in contents and in forms of consultation with relevant individuals and institutions

⁶ Two trends are beginning to emerge and deserve close scrutiny: in Aceh children are being sent to religious orphanages at least temporarily when they still have families; men are gathering together in camps etc., explicitly as men, while women are more generally being 'reabsorbed' by families.

(beyond 'teaching women to swim'). That floods are responsible for 34% of all disasters in the world (Hoyois, Guha-Sapir 2004) makes this a crucial matter.

2.3 Longer term consequences

Family formation, livelihood and cultural practices are profoundly entwined, and the disappearance of large numbers of women is bound to affect them all. Despite some demographers' argument that scarcity of women improves their bargaining power, initial research findings indicate that the consequences may threaten women's long term welfare and rights.

Despite the limited demographic and anthropological information on Aceh⁷, we can speculate that the endogamous marriage patterns typical of the province may lead to women marrying younger⁸. Associated with the tendency among disaster affected populations to 'rebuild' themselves by high fertility, this raises alarm for the reproductive health of women in a country with high levels of maternal mortality⁹. It is worth mentioning that early marriages and frequent pregnancies have a deleterious effect on girls' education, hence on women's rights and gender relations. If we include in the equation the practice of *merantau* (male circular migration) (Jayawardena 1977), the possible disruption to livelihood strategies will also become apparent.

One of the most difficult issues in post-disasters is access to land. Aceh follows a variety of ownership regimes, thus all must be assessed if the property rights of the descendants of diseased women are not to be neglected. Gender based violence has long- term aspects, as women in communities where they are a minority will be more vulnerable, especially if pattern of family formation and marital residence (uxorilocal in Aceh, Jayarwarnena 1977) change.

3. Conclusions and Recommendations

"Men are more likely to be aggressive in getting aid while women are left behind," Dakkak said. "We need to give more help to the women. The Acehnese can't afford to lose any more women now." (Djuhari 2004)

Accurate information on gendered mortality patterns and a better understanding of their immediate and long-term consequences, is essential to appropriateness, adequacy, efficiency and connectedness of aid, relief, disaster prevention and preparedness. They will be instrumental to ensure that the latter fulfil their potential to promote the rights of girls and women, rather than exacerbating threats.

Finally, this represents an opportunity to help address the female deficit in Asia and to inject wisdom, and a firm focus on poverty and women's rights, into the dangerous debates on the supposed threat to security represented by the 'surplus male' in Asia (Hudson and den Boer 2004).

Future responses will be greatly strengthened by the following:

- Always disaggregating disaster statistics by gender
- Long term comparative research on demographic trends, gender aspects of livelihood, property rights, violence etc.

⁷ Due at least in part to lack of access related to the conflict.

⁸ In field visits the most common response by men in terms of urgent needs was; a wife.

⁹ Maternal mortalities rates in Indonesia are reported to be 390/100,000 live birth, with approximately 18,000 women dying of related causes.

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- Women's participation in relief must mean including women in consultations, challenging the dominance of men in leadership positions in communities and national and international agencies, a mind shift from perceiving them as 'vulnerable victims' to one recognising their skills and rights

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Appendix 1 - Summary of Oxfam Response to the tsunami of 2004

Various members of the Oxfam International affiliation, including Oxfam Great Britain, Oxfam Novib (Netherlands) and Oxfam CAA (Australia) participate in the tsunami response.

By the middle of April Oxfam had spent over 9 million pounds, with by far the larger proportion going to Indonesia. The work focuses on rehabilitation and distribution of water and sanitation, distributions of non-food items (including 'dignity kits' for women), and community based shelter and livelihood programmes (including cash for work),

Oxfam GB alone has assisted 363,629, as follows

Sri Lanka :	169,000
Indonesia (includes Nias):	162,960
South India:	150,000
Nicobar Islands:	49,500

More in detail:

Indonesia

Oxfam is working in 6 locations (more than 110 villages) in Aceh, with 457 staff. It has distributed nearly 9,700,000 litres of water to date, and constructed 213 latrines. Over 24,000 people are benefiting from the Cash-for-Work programmes. More than 760,000 USD has been granted to 40 Acehnese NGOs and women's organisations. In Nias Oxfam has cleaned 136 wells in 5 returnee villages.

Sri Lanka

Oxfam is currently working in 6 locations, with 270 staff. So far we have cleaned 378 wells (Batticaloa), provided 220,000 daily litres of water to people living in Ampara and constructed 240 latrines in all camps. In Trincomalee boat repairs are ongoing and to date 60 fibre-glass boats have been repaired.

India and Andaman Islands

Oxfam has been meeting the needs of communities in temporary shelters by distributing basic items such as soap and hosepipes. Communities have also been mobilized to maintain basic hygienic conditions. Oxfam is looking at replacing boats and nets in affected villages in the Cuddalore area. In the South Andaman, twenty-five toilets and two shelter structures have been completed and in Bambooflat debris cleaning is in progress.

