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Protection of women victims should receive priority

Two-thirds of the total fatalities in the tsunami disaster in Aceh were women and children as they were the ones left at home along the affected coastline. They were helpless when the giant waves ripped through the town. The executive director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (Unifem), Noleen Hayzer, talked to The Jakarta Post's Sari P. Setiogi on her concern for the women victims.

Question: What is Unifem's concern with regards the women victims in the tsunami disaster?

Answer: We are saddened by what happened here. However, we believe that women are the hub of the relief and reconstruction process. Two-thirds of the total people killed in the disaster in Aceh were women. They are renowned for their central role in society. Women there play multiple roles: heading households, sustaining subsistence economies, raising children and caring for the sick.

What can be suggested by Unifem regarding that?

First, the women need protection and security to protect them from multiple trauma. We received reports saying that there are some women in Sri Lanka and Aceh as well who have been molested and sexually harassed.

From the report that you have, how many of the women victims in Aceh have been sexually harassed?

I'm afraid we do not have the actual figure, but from the information coming in it was the volunteers, activists who came there to help. So I think it's extremely important to provide protection for the women volunteers, as well as to the community, so they are not being exposed to the second wave of danger or trauma.

Does this prevention effort include distribution of contraceptives to women?

We will concentrate on providing training and resource materials for the relief and reconstruction workers in existing UN guidelines related to protect women and girls from violence and other human rights abuses.

Do you think it will be feasible, considering that we are facing an emergency situation?

Well, it is very important to change the mindset of most workers and the military that they are now in an emergency situation and they are doing humanitarian work.

(over)

Are there any other suggestion that you can give?

The livelihoods of the women are important as well. The tsunami disaster had not only destroyed the infrastructure and the economy, but also the human spirit. Building the spirit of the victims should be done side by side with the rebuilding of infrastructure.

We should make sure that the women are engaged as part of the solution and not victimize them even more. Their leadership is important.

Unifem needs to make a rapid mapping of women's networks in the affected communities. They might need community support to take care of their children, for example.

Revitalization of the family is the most important thing for the rebuilding of the affected areas, I would say. Therefore, we should invest in women.