

UNIFEM Responds to the Tsunami Tragedy *One Year Later: A Report Card*



The Indian Ocean tsunami that hit Eastern Africa and several countries of South and Southeast Asia on 26 December 2004 not only destroyed lives and property but decimated communities. Within two days of the tragedy, UNIFEM's partner organizations in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Somalia began sending information on women affected by the disaster.¹ Women who survived were left with nothing to support themselves and their remaining family members after their homes and livelihoods washed away. Where relief operations were taking place amidst continuing civil tensions, women reported incidents of discrimination, harassment and intimidation of women and girls in rescue and distribution areas and in temporary shelters.

UNIFEM's executive director, traveling in Southeast Asia at the time, went immediately to the hardest-hit province of Aceh, Indonesia, to assess the scale of the disaster and ensure that, from the outset, support was given to women, whom she saw at the heart of the relief and recovery effort.

She reported being instantly struck by the resilience and strength of the affected communities – “Even before the big relief agencies arrived survivors were already using their local networks and systems to assist each other amidst the wrecked buildings, bodies lying along the roads and repeated aftershocks. The strength of local agency was immediately obvious.”

Using Local Structures, Local Knowledge, Local Agency

For years at the forefront of survival strategies and networks that sustained their families and communities during conflict, women assumed critical roles in the tsunami emergency response effort, taking in relatives and children orphaned by the tsunami, offering care and support within camps and shelters for grieving survivors, and participating in the distribution of emergency aid and health care services and evacuation of the dead.

Drawing on these networks and strategies, UNIFEM and its local partners quickly compiled a databank of local organizations, identifying their key skills, assets and resource needs, in order to mobilize local knowledge, systems and solutions as the most effective response to the disaster. Rapid assessments were also conducted to develop a clearer picture of the specific effects of the tsunami on women in the hardest hit areas of Indonesia, Somalia and Sri Lanka, and to ascertain women's most pressing needs and concerns. The information gathered was provided to UNDP, OCHA and other international organizations so they could connect with local groups already working in the affected areas, and integrate women's concerns from the beginning into their operations. Information was also provided to village heads and religious leaders, so that gender concerns would be factored not only into international solutions but local ones as well.

To further mobilize and capitalize on local knowledge, the majority of staff in UNIFEM's programme offices in the affected countries were recruited nationally – this has helped significantly in terms of establishing institutional memory and tapping valuable networks to accelerate service delivery.

“When recovery and reconstruction programmes respond to the realities and needs of women and support their leadership and organizing, many local and effective solutions can be scaled up and women's voices and networks empowered to build the policies and institutions necessary for a more just and sustainable future.”

Noeleen Heyzer, UNIFEM executive director

¹ Although firm estimates were difficult to come by, field reports indicated that many more women than men had died or gone missing in Aceh and Sri Lanka. In Aceh female victims were believed to number between 55-70% of all casualties. A UNIFEM-supported survey conducted by the National Committee of Women in Sri Lanka of 53,613 households in 9 of 13 affected districts found 70% of females had died or gone missing.

Strategic Interventions

UNIFEM chose to focus its efforts in Sri Lanka, Somalia, and in the province of Aceh in Indonesia, because of its local networks, and because the devastation caused by the tsunami seriously intensified existing hardships in these areas arising from stark poverty and years of civil conflict.

Through numerous consultations with women survivors, NGOs, and local leaders, and through quantitative studies to measure the tsunami's psychological, physical and socio-economic impact on women, it was discovered that as the affected communities moved from the immediate emergency phase to the longer-term reconstruction period, women's participation was noticeably lacking in the planning and implementation of recovery and rebuilding processes. Sex-disaggregated data was extremely limited, so that gender concerns were either being buried or left out in the recovery efforts of international agencies and government task forces.

Drawing from more than a decade of experience working in conflict-affected communities globally, UNIFEM identified three priority areas for its efforts in the tsunami-affected areas:

- **Leadership:** Supporting local women's leadership and the mobilization of women's networks to give them a voice in relief, recovery and reconstruction efforts; and providing financial assistance to women's organizations to respond to women's needs quickly.
- **Livelihoods:** Helping revive women's destroyed livelihoods, including restoring their productive assets, processes and supply chains, strengthening market links, and helping them to access reconstruction assistance.
- **Protection:** Working with other UN, government and civil society partners to assist women's groups in advocating for greater protection for women and girls from human rights violations in the relief, recovery and reconstruction period and beyond.



Coir production is one of Sri Lanka's largest cottage industries. Many coir producers in Sri Lanka (who are mostly women) found their livelihoods completely washed away.

UNIFEM joined the United Nations Flash Appeal, requesting approximately US\$3.5 million for its programme – contributions of about US\$2.7 million have been received to-date. As the recovery needs of survivors are considerably greater than can be addressed through this programme alone, most of the activities being implemented are intended as models for up-scaling, or as links into larger-scale interventions to be conducted together with other international and national partners.

Protection and Rights

UNIFEM's consultations and assessments presented important findings with regard to the impact of the tsunami on women, and drew attention to some weaknesses in recovery operations.

*Due to civil strife, tsunami-affected areas already had a **large number of female-headed households**. In Aceh, an estimated 60 per cent of the population was female, 23 per cent of which headed households. In the towns of Gara'ad and Kulud in Somalia, 45 per cent of women are heads of households. A UNIFEM survey in Sri Lanka estimated one in five post-tsunami households as headed by a female.*

- **Female-headed households:** The tsunami left many women heads of households, often widowed or divorced, without food, shelter or productive assets to support their families. Furthermore, many were taking in orphaned children or elderly relatives whose families did not survive. As relief distribution was targeted, in many areas, at male heads of households, many women found it difficult to access aid. Sri Lankan and Acehnese women described many instances where they received relief supplies in the form of goods, but were not able to access recovery grants which only went to men as heads of households. Without cash to start over, it would be difficult for them to re-build their livelihoods.

- **Legal rights:** Many women raised fears of losing inheritance, land or property rights given the loss of deeds and personal documents during the tsunami. This was complicated further by the fact that before the tsunami only a small number of land owners held properly registered titles in the first place. In Aceh and Somalia, homelessness among female survivors was particularly acute, as women traditionally have severe difficulties claiming ownership rights to land or property registered under their husbands or fathers' names. In the eastern part of Sri Lanka, women were especially concerned that customary laws that give women a one-third share in land and inheritance would be lost in the new legal processes being designed in the recovery period. Many women in Aceh were found not to know they had guardianship rights of their children or the right to savings in bank accounts of their deceased husbands - this was discovered only through meetings with religious leaders, as both issues are traditionally covered only in Shari'a courts.
- **Violence and intimidation:** Women reported that competition for relief food and other commodities often turned into physical confrontation. In Somalia and Aceh, women told of shying away from distribution areas to avoid potentially violent situations. Sexual harassment in temporary shelters and spikes in domestic violence cases in Sri Lanka, Aceh and Somalia were also reported.
- **Shelters and temporary settlements:** Shelters being constructed to house populations displaced by the tsunami did not adequately take gender and cultural concerns into account. Women in Aceh and Sri Lanka complained of discrimination, a lack of adequate sanitation, clean water, and health services, as well as poor lighting and insensitive latrine design which heightened insecurity and impinged on their dignity and cultural beliefs. Women were also not being included in shelter management decision-making processes to make their concerns known.

Based on such findings, UNIFEM supported its partners to establish governmental and nongovernmental mechanisms to track and address inequalities in service delivery, and to monitor violations of women's human rights throughout the recovery and reconstruction period.

In partnership with other UN agencies and NGOs, guidelines were drafted for the protection of women's and children's rights, particularly targeting internally-displaced persons (IDPs), of which there are more than 1 million in Sri Lanka and Aceh alone (UNDP). A Gender Checklist was provided to the Tsunami Task Force² in Somalia to be used in all sector reports. Gender Rights Watch mechanisms have been set up in Aceh and Sri Lanka to monitor human rights violations and women's inclusion in recovery processes. These are complemented by a 'Women's Watch' run by local women's groups in Sri Lanka, and 'Women's Houses' in Aceh, which provide vital information to women on their legal rights, livelihood options and the recovery services available to them.³

The National Committee of Women (NCW) in Sri Lanka received support to lobby for and provide inputs to a bill on Domestic Violence (which has been passed), and bills on Women's Rights, and the Allocation of State Lands, which are pending. In Aceh, women's groups are working on drafting a new Qanun (local law) on women's rights and protection, and lobbying for inputs into a new bill on the governing administration of Aceh that is pending.

In Sri Lanka and Somalia, numerous workshops have been held to train peer counselors to deal with trauma – 71 women have received training in Sri Lanka, reaching about 10,000 people in turn, while in Somalia 28 women trainers have been able to directly reach about 500 women already.

Workshops are also being held to clarify rights and identify avenues for women to secure them, such as discussions on economic assets and inheritance rights under Shari'a law with religious leaders, village heads, local banks and the provincial authority in Aceh, and training for personnel at Women and Children Desks at police stations in 6 Sri Lankan districts to handle reports of violence against women.

*In Aceh, an important initiative is underway to re-establish **Balai Inong**, or 'women's houses', in the affected areas as a safe space for women to gather, work together, build livelihood skills, and get information on their rights. Traditionally, many villages in Aceh had a Balai Inong before these were destroyed by the tsunami. UNIFEM is working with NGOs and international organizations such as IOM and UN Habitat to include these structures in shelter planning programmes, and is supporting local groups to run them and conduct activities once they have been set up. The first Balai Inong, set up by NGO partner, Building Bridges to the Future, will open in December 2005 in Rumpet village.*

² The Task Force was set up by the Somali Aid Coordination Body (SABC) and OCHA to coordinate the inter-agency response.

³ The Gender Rights Watch in Sri Lanka was established within the Human Rights Commission, while in Aceh UNIFEM is collaborating with the Commissioner on Violence Against Women and the Aceh Bureau of Women Empowerment.

Rebuilding Livelihoods



Noeleen Heyzer with *bangkuang* weavers in Meulaboh, West Aceh.

“We don’t need any more free food. Give us the land and some tools – I want to grow some healthy food for my family.”

Woman from IDP shelter in Aceh

Small grants to local partners are helping fill gaps in service delivery by targeting the specific needs of women, particularly IDPs, widows and women heads of households. Aided by UNIFEM, local women’s groups are giving direct assistance to women to rebuild their small-scale businesses, while also providing skills training and market linkages to stimulate income generation and increase opportunities.

- **Aceh** - To leverage the UN’s cash-for-work programmes clearing debris and rubble to make way for reconstruction, UNIFEM provided immediate assistance to women craft makers, such as *bangkuang* weavers, to restart their economic activity and stimulate the local economy – *bangkuang* hats found a ready domestic market among workers in the cash-for-work programmes as protection against the sun. To-date, through vocational and business skills training and revolving credit facilities, nearly 450 women in IDP shelters in Aceh have resumed businesses such as pottery production, fish processing, garment trading and selling of traditional cakes. A mobile training unit is also teaching computer literacy and administrative skills to young people in remote locations to help them enter the job market. A UNIFEM microcredit fund – the UNIFEM Livelihood Facility Fund - will soon be launched allowing 10 local financial institutions to provide funds to small businesses run by women.
- **Sri Lanka** - UNIFEM’s partners have made start-up funds, tool kits and better machines available to women working in the coir, tailoring, baking and brick-making industries, and conducted training for young women to become health volunteers, pre-school teachers and psycho-social counselors. Over 1000 beneficiaries have been reached to date. Siyath Foundation, UNIFEM’s local partner in its home-based workers global programme, is taking the rebuilding of livelihoods a step further by seeking to mechanize the process of coir production, one of Sri Lanka’s largest cottage industries typically filled by women. Coir production is backbreaking work and poses significant health risks for workers who have to stand in mucky water for long hours to harvest the coconut fiber. New machines have been purchased that are now owned and maintained by cooperatives of women, allowing them to earn their income more efficiently in better working conditions. Women craft-makers from 3 networks were supported recently to sell their products at the India International Trade Fair in New Delhi – this gave them market exposure and new sales contacts with South Asian, European and African buyers.
- **Somalia** – In the tsunami-affected fishing communities from Gara’ad to Hafun along the Northeast Coast, most women were involved in small-scale businesses related to fishing activities, including selling foodstuffs to fishermen, processing fish and mending nets. Because the tsunami hit during the high fishing season, it impacted severely on these communities, wiping out their stock and leaving them with nothing to survive the low season⁴. UNIFEM’s programmes focused on helping women (especially heads of households) to restart their small-scale businesses, while also providing immediate food/cash assistance to sustain them when market activity was very limited. 153 women heads of households have so far received seed capital – each has an average family size of 6-7 members, and 70% are illiterate. Training in literacy and numeracy is also being provided therefore, especially after it was discovered that many women traders were often cheated by buyers because they could not count.

⁴ Pre-tsunami, 75% of income sources came from fishing-related activities. All households purchased 90-95% of their food needs using income from fishing, during the high season which runs from October to February. (UNDP)

Creating Policy Space – Bringing Women’s Perspectives to Decision Makers

To amplify women’s voices to influence recovery policies and agendas, UNIFEM is building the capacity and leadership of women’s organizations to advocate for the promotion of women’s rights in all reconstruction processes.

Gender advisors are in place in Aceh and Sri Lanka, advocating with government, UN Country Teams, and NGOs on women’s most pressing needs and ensuring that their perspectives are part of mainstream efforts. UNIFEM is also working closely with local coordination agencies and task forces, such as the Aceh Bureau for Reconstruction and Rehabilitation (BRR), the Somali Aid Coordination Body Tsunami Task Force (SACB), and the Government Task Force on Tsunami Relief (TAFREN) in Sri Lanka to highlight women’s leadership roles. Support is going to building the capacity of national women’s machineries to form gender units or women’s desks within government recovery processes to monitor the inclusion of women’s perspectives in all decision-making.⁵ Local women’s groups are receiving support to build skills, organize, and conduct advocacy activities to make themselves heard at local and national policy-making levels. They are also being supported to mobilize women to participate in grassroots activities through forums and mobile discussions.

To ensure that efforts at the policy level are derived from and remain connected to what women are really prioritizing on the ground, major women’s consultations were organized in May and June 2005 in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and in Aceh, gathering hundreds of women to discuss their concerns and articulate their role in the recovery and rebuilding phase. Both meetings were the first time women from different affected districts and villages came together. Besides more immediate concerns about livelihoods, inheritance and property rights, and the creation of adequate settlements and housing, the issue put forward as most critical in the post-emergency phase, was the need for more opportunities for women to interact with local and national authorities, and participate in decision-making to engage with the reconstruction process.

Recommendations from the meetings were brought to the highest policy levels – during a visit in May, UNIFEM’s executive director and South Asia regional programme director raised the issues with the Sri Lankan Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and UN Country Team ahead of a donor Development Forum, when it was discovered that women’s perspectives were being marginalized in its planning process; in Aceh, after recommendations from the women’s consultation were brought to the BRR, its chief promised to recognize and consult with the Aceh Women’s Council (a body creating at the meeting to represent Acehnese women), and appointed UNIFEM as its gender advisor.

To address the paucity of sex-disaggregated data, UNIFEM is further developing the databanks created in the emergency period by continuing to collect detailed information on all local organisations working on gender issues, including informal and traditional groups. In both Aceh and Sri Lanka, surveys have been carried out in IDP shelters to obtain more first-hand data on women’s situation – these will be made available in early 2006.⁶ In Somalia, UNIFEM is giving support to the women’s ministry to collect gender-sensitive data.



Obtaining information on women in Somalia is especially tricky – the highly traditional communities often post male ‘gatekeepers’ to monitor women’s activities and meetings so that it is difficult for women to speak out. The post-tsunami UN interagency task force assessment contained no sex-disaggregated data for example, mainly because most of the field teams conducting interviews were male, and hence not allowed to speak to female-only groups without the presence of male gatekeepers, who prevented women from voicing their concerns. UNIFEM, through its field missions and local female partners, was able to obtain critical, accurate information from women directly (left), and feed this into reports and assessments to plug gaps and correct misconceptions.

⁵ National women’s machineries include the Bureau of Women Empowerment in Aceh, the Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and Social Welfare, and the National Committee of Women in Sri Lanka, and the Ministry of Women and Family Affairs of Puntland, Somalia. A gender unit has already been set up in Aceh, while in Somalia, UNIFEM partner NGO WAWA (We are Women Activists) is lobbying for the creation of one within the SABC. In Sri Lanka, advocacy efforts are underway to urge the creation of an NGO Task Force to focus on women’s issues.

⁶ In Aceh, 6497 women IDPs living in tents, temporary shelters and host communities were surveyed in 17 out of 21 districts. In Sri Lanka 53,361 households in 9 of 13 affected districts were surveyed.

Ena and Her Kiosk

Ena, her brother, her husband and child, are among the very lucky few who survived the tsunami in December 2004. Her village of Ulee Lheu was one of the most decimated in Banda Aceh. Left with nothing, her family went to the Lhong Raya Barracks, a temporary shelter for survivors, where they currently live.



As soon as she could, Ena joined a cooperative called *Kelompok Swadaya Masyarakat* (Self empowered community group) managed by the Matahari Foundation, a local NGO working with

UNIFEM. In a few months she received seed capital of Rp. 500, 000 (about US\$50) to start a kiosk selling cookies, soft drinks, cigarettes and other small goods, which she set up right in front of her 4x6 square meter living quarters in the barracks.

“I started the kiosk hoping that I could make more income to support the family. My husband is just a *Becak* (a motorized-rickshaw) driver. I realized that his earnings will not be enough, so I decided to open a kiosk.”

She said that she had initially received training by Matahari to learn to make *abon*, a shredded fish product, but had not really liked it. “I prefer to focus on my kiosk. So I applied for an additional loan of Rp. 2, 500, 000 from the cooperative to fill up more goods in my kiosk.”

Evi, a program coordinator from Matahari described how hard-working Ena was - she applied for the micro loan in June 2005, and according to Evi, never missed a daily payment of Rp. 20,000, so that the loan was already repaid in full by October. “I was really happy to get the loan from Matahari,” Ena says, “Before, there were a lot of things unavailable. When customers came to buy and asked for certain things, I usually did not have it. But, now as many things are already available in my kiosk, people in the barracks do not have to go far to buy things,” she explained, smiling.

Ena’s income is steadily increasing. “Before, I could only make about Rp. 50, 000 a day or at most Rp. 150, 000. But now, praise to God, it has doubled.” She has just gotten approval for her second loan for double the amount of the first one. Evi said that the approval for the second term completely depended on the borrower’s performance and discipline in paying off the first loan. “Ena proved that with her determination and discipline she deserves the next loan. She’s going to use the money to expand her kiosk even more, with much more goods. We wish you lots of luck Ena!”

UNIFEM is the women's fund at the United Nations, providing financial support and technical assistance to innovative programs promoting women's human rights, their economic and political empowerment, and gender equality in over 100 countries. For more information, visit www.unifem.org
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