

## In disaster zone, women are key

By Swanee Hunt and Don Steinberg

**CAMBRIDGE, MASS., AND WASHINGTON** - Alarmed at the near total absence of women's voices in the post-tsunami recovery and reconstruction now taking place in Sri Lanka, a group of women's associations has quickly formed there. Led by Visaka Dharmadasa, founder of the Association of War Affected Women, they have established the Tsunami Women's Fund and demanded a seat at the table at meetings on policy for rebuilding their country.

Ms. Dharmadasa knows the meaning of loss. Her voice softens as she describes her son, who is among the thousands of missing in the deadly civil war that wracked her country even before nature's latest onslaught. Over the years she has developed her organizing skills to pull together mothers on both sides of the conflict to demand an end to the fighting. Now she's using those skills to help tsunami victims.

The governments of Sri Lanka and other affected countries, as well as international donors, would be wise to heed her call. As the world rushes to respond to the disaster in South Asia and East Africa, we must consider both the differential impact of the tsunami on women - many now suddenly heads of households - and the key role that women can play in the distribution of assistance and the reconstruction effort. Ironically, the international community is never so flush with resources as during an emergency of this magnitude.

The \$4 billion pledged by foreign donors and international agencies provides a unique opportunity to empower women as planners, implementers, and beneficiaries. After all, they have their fingers on the pulse of the community as well as the best access to devastated families.

In one giant wave, an estimated 5 million people in South Asia and East Africa were added to the ranks of the world's 25 million internally displaced persons. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, surveying the devastated region by helicopter, asked poignantly, "Where are the people?" He says it may take a decade before lives return to normal.

Women and children have suffered grievously from the tsunami, and unless we're careful, they may have the most to endure in the aftermath. Relief supplies have often been provided by men to men. In an e-mail immediately after the disaster, a South Asian judge told us, "As usual, the women and the children have suffered most. Even the little relief aid that is sent is grabbed by the stronger men."

In cases of displacement around the world, women have more difficulties than men regaining identification papers needed to receive food, health, education, and other social services. By law or by social custom in many developing countries, women are discriminated against when it comes to owning and managing property. That complicates their access to reconstruction assistance. Displaced women are also particularly vulnerable to sexual violence and human trafficking. In addition, domestic violence often increases when men's traditional breadwinning roles are shattered by natural disasters. On top of all these obstacles, when emergency care is the priority, reproductive health is relegated to second place, which can lead to skyrocketing infant and maternal mortality rates.

But women are much more than victims - they're key to recovery and reconstruction. Comprehensive aid programs need to involve women in planning, because women's organizations throughout South Asia have unique capabilities to provide skills training related to health, education, and income generation, and for trauma counseling. Women are often better able to work across ethnic, religious, and political lines - especially important in areas such as Aceh in Indonesia, and northern Sri Lanka, already torn by secessionist struggles. And women are more likely than men to use resources for social investment. Their empowerment in times of crisis increases their status as leaders, so that they can create stable communities.

The World Food Program, a large provider of tsunami relief, recognizes women's unique role in crisis efforts. To ensure that aid strengthens families, the WFP has a longstanding goal of distributing 80 percent of relief to women and 50 percent of educational resources to girls. Similarly, the international community has broadly endorsed the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, which commit host governments and international donors to emphasize the needs of women, including reproductive healthcare, counseling for victims of sexual abuse, and girls' education.

In April 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell wrote to all State Department officials: "Women's issues are human rights issues, health and education issues, and development issues. They are ingredients of good government and sound economic practice.... Women must play prominent roles in relief, reconstruction, and development efforts if these undertakings are to succeed."

Translating those good words into substantive action on the ground is not just a question of equity and justice. It's a vital component of a successful global response to the tsunami tragedy.

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