

The Women of Nagapattinam

Notes from a Bhoomika Volunteer March 4, 2005

The Tsunami that struck the Southeastern coast of India on December 26, 2004 had a devastating impact on families living in the narrow swatch of land along the Tamil Nadu Coast. Nowhere has the impact been felt more than in the fishing villages and adjacent agricultural communities, which normally prosper during this time of year. Whereas the waters are normally dotted with kattumarams, fiber glass boats, and trawlers, we now see only an oil tanker in the distance. Whereas men, women, and children would normally bathe in the ocean waters at night, they now steer clear of the waves even in the day time because they are afraid of another Tsunami. Although the fishermen have lost their boats, nets, and other livelihood equipment, the women of the fishing community have been the hardest hit:

* Most of the dead were women due to two factors. First, many men were out fishing when the Tsunami hit, and didn't feel more than a slight roll in the waters. The women, however, were waiting on the beaches for the day's catch to come in so that they could take it to the markets for sale, or were with their children at home -- which was in many instances not more than a few yards from the high tide line. Second, whereas the fisherman are adept swimmers, the women for the most part are not.

* Women who lost their husbands were also hard hit. Several women have been left with no possessions, no home, and more than one child to support.

* Young women who lost their mothers were also hard hit because they are now forced to assume the role of their "mother," caring for the men in the family. For example, one 17-year-old girl who has aspirations to continue her studies past the tenth standard now feels trapped in a situation where she has to care for her brother and her father instead of going to school.

* The loss of possessions has also impacted women of "marriage age," whose families now consider them "un-marriable" simply because they no longer have sufficient assets to provide as a dowry or to pay for a wedding ceremony. In these relatively traditional societies, young women have become resigned to this "reality," imposed upon them by their families and their peers, that they will remain single for a long time. Some NGOs are supporting group "Tsunami weddings" between such young women and men, providing both the funding for the wedding as well as, in some instances, the dowry payment.

* Emotionally, the women appear too busy (as opposed to the men) to fully deal with the emotional trauma caused by the loss of their loved ones, homes, and possessions. The women were expected to immediately begin living their normal lives on December 27 -- cooking,

cleaning, and providing for their families. The men, on the other hand, have for the past two months been doing anything but living their normal lives. Instead of fishing, they have been sitting listlessly on the beaches in packs, playing cards, "cabadi," or just wallowing amongst the ruins of their fishing boats and nets.

* On positive notes:

(1) Women are taking this "opportunity" to obtain training in alternative livelihoods so that they can become their families' primary breadwinner until their husbands resume fishing.

For example, one mother of an eight-month-old child is interviewing with us for a position as a receptionist and logistician in order to better provide for her husband and her baby.

At least one NGO, ROSE, is capitalizing on this unique opportunity to better the situation of women by training women in skills that will come in high demand, but are considered less conventional for a women, such as brick-making and skilled construction work. The hope is that these woman can eventually run their own organizations as tens of thousands of permanent houses are constructed along the coast.

(2) Women also appear to be more resilient. They have been more ready than the men to discuss their lost loved ones, which indicates that they have come to terms, at least in some respects, with their losses.

(3) The Tsunami has also bolstered the ranks of funding of NGOs focusing on the betterment of women. Women's self-help groups are flourishing with the increased demand for labour. NGOs such as SNEHA, which was on the verge of dissolving due to insufficient funds, are now flourishing and continuing their vital work on social development, education, and women's and children's issues.

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