

## **The Rationales for Incorporating Gender-aware Approaches in Addressing Tsunami Impacts in Aceh, Indonesia**

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### **Abstract**

*Tsunami yang memporakporandakan Aceh pada 26 Desember 2004 menyebabkan penduduk di wilayah itu menderita kerugian yang tak ternilai. Akan tetapi wanita dengan segala permasalahannya belum menjadi fokus dari proses pemulihan pasca tsunami. Beberapa studi hanya menekankan pentingnya perhatian lebih besar pada dimensi gender dari tsunami, khususnya pada kelompok perempuan. Akan tetapi sebagian besar argumen hanya mengedepankan bahwa perempuan merupakan korban paling menderita. Makalah ini membahas tentang pentingnya memasukkan pendekatan sadar gender dalam menangani dampak tsunami di Indonesia bukan saja karena masalah tersebut dihadapi oleh perempuan Aceh, tetapi juga karena potensi yang mereka miliki dalam menunjang proses pemulihan.*

Keywords : women, natural disaster, Aceh, gender approach

### **Introduction**

The tsunami that struck Aceh on 26 December 2004 has devastated the area. The government, International Governmental Organisations, Local and International Non-Governmental Organizations and even individuals, under the coordination of a national body, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency, have made many recovery efforts. Unfortunately, they have been criticized for being slow and yet to address some crucial issues, particularly those faced by women. Various studies have also been conducted to provide inputs and ideas. Some of them have included or focused on gender considerations. They show how the tsunami has discriminatorily affected women worse than men and envisage the immediate consequences, which most likely to worsen or even create new and bigger problems in the future. However, most of these studies, despite the various approaches they employed, have yet to emphasize the potentials of women to actively participate in the recovery process.

The conceptual framework underpinning the arguments put forward in this paper is of Moser (1991, p. 84) who states that,

Gender-aware approaches are concerned with the manner in which such relationships [the social relationship between men and women, in which women have been systematically subordinated] are socially constructed; men and women play different roles in the society, their gender differences being shaped by ideological, historical, religious, ethnic, economic and cultural determinants.

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The subordinated position of women has been one of the main concerns of studies that look into the gender aspects of development and conflict management. In most cases, it is identified that of the two genders, women are recurrently disadvantaged and marginalized. Their unique problems are often overlooked and their roles and participation in policymaking and implementation are frequently denied. Thus, although a genuine gender studies should cover both men and women, it has been asserted that more attention should be paid to women, mainly because of their subordinated position in the society. This is also the case when gender issues are discussed in relation to natural disasters. Similar conditions occur in nearly all natural disaster situations, including in Aceh. Most policies and efforts made in recovering the affected areas are still lacking gender considerations. For these reasons, this paper intends to elaborate a number of key rationales that justify the incorporation of gender-aware approaches in addressing the impacts of tsunami in Aceh, Indonesia.

While acknowledging that a balanced attention should be given to issues faced by men and women, this essay focus more on the problems specifically faced by Aceh women and their potentials in supporting the recovery process. This is done for two main reasons. Firstly it is obvious that the impacts of the tsunami are greater on women and the failure to address these problems most likely will lead to problems in households and the society as a whole. Secondly, women actually have the potentials to support the recovery process. Unfortunately, rather than explored and developed, these potentials have been overlooked. Hence, this paper aims to briefly discuss the problems faced by women and goes on to elaborate the potentials they have to participate in the recovery process. The briefness of this paper is due to limitation of resources particularly those that provide gender disaggregated data.

### **Problems for Women, Problems for All ?**

Previous studies have shown that more women died in the tsunami. Shortly after the tsunami, Oxfam International (March 2005, p. 4) conducted surveys in four villages in the Aceh Besar district and found out that of 676 survivors only 189 were female. It is assumed that more women died in the tsunami because at the time the tsunami struck, due to their role as the caregivers, most of them were doing activities around their homes which are located around the sea shores.

The absence of women in the picture leads to various interrelated problems. It inevitably changes the structure of families. Families left by the mothers have to be taken care by the fathers who might not be mentally ready and have the required skills to take over the roles (Smyth, 2005, p. 2). Society structure is also of concern. The absence of women might further weaken the society, which is already devastated by the tsunami. While in fact, in an emergency condition like this, the presence of women is greatly needed to keep the society together.

The reduced number of women has also become a source of problem for those who are still alive. After the tsunami, in most areas in Aceh women are outnumbered by men and this condition has brought up issues of women's insecurity. The most obvious threat to women's security is related to physical conditions. Some studies assert that women living in the refugee camps are vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse (Smyth, 2005, p. 2; Cohen, 2006, p. 5;

Oxfam, March 2005, p. 5). This argument is supported by reports of cases of rape in the camps and domestic abuse conducted by drunk and frustrated husbands. The studies also observe that for various reasons, many young women are forced to early marriages and frequent pregnancies, which in the long run might deteriorate their physical and mental health.

The next concern is related to women's economic insecurity, particularly faced by widows. Based on their research on other disaster conditions, Enarson and Morrow (cited by Acar and Ege, 2001, p. 3) have said "women's caregiver roles [have] expanded dramatically at all stages of disaster responses". This particular condition applies in Aceh where mothers in families left by their heads (men) are more likely to have increased workload. In addition to their original role as caregivers for the children and elderly, they have to do more productive works to earn income for the family. Unfortunately, in the cash for work scheme, women are often disadvantaged because different opportunities and compensation are given to men and women. It is also observed that most efforts made to recover work facilities are of those employed by men such as on boats, while working facilities for women have been relegated to second priority. Issues of women's rights on land and other assets ownership are also emerging (Oxfam International, March 2005, p. 5; Smyth, 2005, p. 3; Cohen, 2006, p. 5). Since traditionally assets were mostly held by men, widows have difficulties in claiming their rights.

Moreover there are also issues related to women's rights to land ownership and other assets (Smyth, 2005, p. 3; Oxfam, March 2005, p. 5). Since assets were mostly held by men, widows have difficulties in claiming their rights (Cohen, 2006, p. 5). In addition, there are also problems that can be viewed as spillovers of economic security problems. It is indicated that the amounts of prostitution and trafficking of young women have increased since the tsunami (Muslim, 2005).

The above conditions are worsened by the fact that it is usually difficult for women to get access to services and assistance. It is the contention of Smyth (2005, p. 2) that this is due to the low representation and participation of women in the decision-making and implementation process of recovery efforts. In a patriarchal community like Aceh, women are rarely involved in decision-making process, thus their specific needs are often overlooked and their problems are not addressed. In fact it has been argued that in a natural disaster condition there is a strong possibility that patriarchal community reinforces the subordinate status of women.

The brief explanation above has shown that Aceh women have to face problems which are significantly different from those faced by men, mainly because of their embedded positions and roles in the community. A decision or policy making process which incorporates gender-aware approaches may ensure that these problems will be properly addressed because they will be classified, analysed and addressed based on gender considerations.

### **Potentials of Aceh Women in Supporting the Recovery Process**

Moser (1991, p. 86) observes that in low-income households (which exist in most developing countries), women's work includes reproductive, productive and community managing. In a natural disaster situation, women's roles in each type of work become more crucial because it might determine the survival and recovery of the families and even the society as a whole.

However, when arguing for the need to pay greater attention to women affected by natural disasters, most research in this area would focus more on women's problems and vulnerabilities. Only a few have built their arguments based on the potentials of women to support the recovery process.

Among them are Enarson and Morrow (cited by Acar and Ege, 2001, p. 3) who highlight the significance of women's formal and informal networks in the recovery of household and community. It is also the claim of Enarson (2000) that in a natural disaster condition, women should not be seen as "helpless victims". She argues that women, with the reproductive, productive and community disaster works that they usually perform in a crisis situation, are actually "resourceful social actors". Compared to men, women's engagement with the community as a whole is more frequent and intense. Consequently, they might have better knowledge of their community's characters, values, needs, problems and even of the environment surrounding them. This particular knowledge could be used as valuable inputs in deciding the appropriate responses to disaster impacts. An appropriate and successful recovery process in Aceh requires comprehensive information of the actual needs and problems faced by the community. With their community managing role, Aceh women are more likely to be better sources of this particular information as compared to international governmental and non-governmental organizations which have only come to the area and involved in the community after the disaster occurred. Unfortunately, as contended by Denton (2002), although women might have better environmental knowledge, they are rarely considered as primary sources of input and are often left out in decision-making process in most natural disaster situations.

Another potential of Aceh women is shown in the economic sector where, with the support from international organizations like UNIFEM, Aceh women have started to recover their small scale industries by doing activities like sewing, cake making, fish processing and the production of ceramics and potteries, and have managed to earn significant incomes to support their family (UNIFEM, July 2005). These types of economic activities are quite vital because as acknowledged by Oxfam International (December 2005), since men's productive works like fishing and agriculture are seasonal and requires significant time and efforts to recover, women's income generating activities have become significant to temporarily support the household.

Acar and Ege (2001, p. 4) assert that women's active participations are highly needed in disaster situations to "pinpoint women's specific needs in disaster contexts and to respond to these needs". It has been claimed in several preliminary studies and briefly explained in the previous part of this essay that women's representations in the recovery process are quite low. Fortunately, one year after the tsunami, there have been efforts to address this issue. There are NGOs – local and international - which focus their activities on empowering Aceh women. In addition, there are now instruments that can be used by Aceh women to channel their voices and participate in the policy making. One of the significant developments is the reestablishment of Balai Inong (women's centres), which traditionally have been the places for Aceh women to gather and express themselves. After the Kongres Perempuan Aceh II (2<sup>nd</sup> Aceh Women Congress), the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency, UNIFEM and an INGO called "Building Bridges to the Future" have assisted Aceh women in building modern

Balai Inong in almost all tsunami-affected areas (BRR, 2005). These women's centres could be used by Aceh women to share their experiences, discuss the problems they are facing, help each other in coping with the tsunami impacts, and empower themselves so that their voices can be heard and taken into account.

The brief explanation above has shown some of the potentials of Aceh women which need to be explored further. If developed properly, these potentials will enable Aceh women to actively participate in assisting the recovery of the community as a whole. The first significant steps will be to understand the different roles between men and women and focus on promoting greater involvement of women in the recovery efforts based on their embedded roles in the community.

## Conclusion

Rather than a neutral random event, the tsunami has obviously been discriminatory and women are the ones who experience greater impacts. Nevertheless, it ought to be realized that women should not always be viewed as the vulnerable and weak ones or even victims. They, in fact, have the potentials, which are valuable to support the recovery process. This paper has elaborated some main problems faced by Aceh women and their potentials to participate in the recovery process. These problems and potentials could be considered as justifications for incorporating gender approaches in addressing tsunami impacts in Indonesia so that women's specific problems and needs would be addressed and their potentials in supporting the recovery process would be explored appropriately. Consequently, if those involved in the recovery process fail to put these problems and potentials into consideration, they will miss the opportunity of gaining valuable inputs from the women and benefiting from their active participation in the recovery process. It is also believed that active participations of Aceh women will most likely improve the pace and result of the recovery process itself.

As this paper has shown, there is urgency to put more emphasis on incorporating gender approaches in addressing tsunami impacts in Indonesia so that women's specific problems and needs would be addressed and their potentials in supporting the recovery process would be explored appropriately.

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