

TSUNAMI RELIEF EFFORT SEEKS TO REACH WOMEN IN SRI LANKA AS VIOLENCE GROWS

AdvocacyNet

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Batticaloa, Sri Lanka, and Washington, DC: A year after the Tsunami wiped out their livelihood, eleven young women in the coastal village of Poonichimunai are wondering how to turn their new-found sewing skills into a paying job.

The women have been trained as seamstresses by the Home for Human Rights (HHR), a partner of the Advocacy Project (AP). They would like to form a cooperative and sell their products, but they will need investors and buyers. Some are even unsure whether their husbands will allow them to work.

These are typical of the difficult choices that face Tamil women as they attempt to rebuild their lives in the wake of the Tsunami. They also illustrate the challenge that faces HHR as it tries to turn short-term emergency aid into long-term development.

The challenge has been further complicated by an escalation of Sri Lanka's long-running civil war, culminating in a recent grenade attack on the Batticaloa compound of the foreign mission that monitors the ceasefire. Tensions between Hindu and Muslim Tamils have also prevented HHR teams from visiting villages.

HHR's program, which is funded by the Dutch Refugee Foundation, targets Tsunami-affected groups that were overlooked in the aid effort because of their caste, gender or low standing. HHR is currently supporting 585 Tamil families in six villages.

The beneficiaries have all petitioned HHR for assistance, and HHR is working with their committees – the sort of local capacity-building that donors praise but rarely support. A new report from the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition finds that donors have “undervalued and underestimated” the contribution of local actors in responding to the Tsunami.

The past year has driven home the special problems facing women during reconstruction. The women of Poonichimunai used to make and sell baskets, but the Tsunami wiped out the forest where they collected wood. Sewing appeared an attractive alternative because it allowed the women to work together and learn a skill. HHR has provided sewing machines, cloth and training for 72 students in three of its six target villages.

But Poonichimunai also shows that it will be difficult to turn training into an income. Four women have agreed to form a sewing cooperative to sell their finished products, but this will call for new marketing skills. The Dutch Refugee Foundation is helping HHR to find a partner in micro-credit. AP will look for buyers in the United States.

The last year has also shown that widows need special support in the wake of a disaster and war. 249 women in the village of Nasivanteevu have lost husbands from the war or the Tsunami, but the community is under too much stress to help them on its own.

HHR's solution has been to revive a women's society that was suspended in 1997. HHR is contributing nine rupees for every two rupees paid by each member, on the understanding that the society will develop small projects (such as poultry) for widows.

In the village of Periyaneelavanai, HHR is helping 42 women who were severely traumatized by the Tsunami. One woman, Viji Thangumani, lost three daughters to the Tsunami, but has been abandoned by her husband (who turned to drink) and shunned by the community. In seeking to help her and the others, HHR has approached the local Batticaloa hospital and psychiatrists from the Sri Lankan diaspora in London.

This suggests that donors will have to make a long-term commitment if they are to make a real difference to the lives of these women, and other vulnerable groups. This may seem at odds with the fact that emergency aid is by definition short-term.

But the real lesson may be that emergency aid can have a sustainable impact if it can build Sri Lankan civil society, encourage groups like HHR to keep the world informed, and help them find new partners who can bring new skills and resources to the task.

- Read the 2005 blogs from AP intern [Sarosh Syed](#).
- Read the profiles of the [six communities](#) by AP's director, Iain Guest.