

# Caught in the Storm: The Impact of Natural Disasters on Women

BY LIN CHEW AND KAVITA N. RAMDAS



Indonesia. © Paolo Pellegrin/Magnum Photos

**“When the wave came, I grabbed both my children in my arms and tried to run, but the wave caught me, and I was forced to choose between my six-year-old and my baby or else we would have all perished.**

**I can still see the look in his eyes when I let go of him.”**

*—Sri Lankan mother*

## The Global Fund for Women

provides longterm support to local groups in regions affected by natural disasters with

grants that help communities rebuild, prevent sexual violence, and ensure that women and children are accorded their full human rights. While the Global Fund does not conduct direct relief efforts, we inform grantees in disaster regions that they may use any moneys from open grants to address such crises.

The Global Fund for Women is the largest foundation in the world that focuses exclusively on advancing women's rights internationally. Grants made by the Global Fund expand the choices available to women and girls, securing their efforts to strengthen economic independence, increase access to education and prevent violence. Since 1987, the Global Fund has awarded over \$44 million to seed, strengthen and link nearly 3,000 groups in 162 countries.

More information is available in six languages at [www.globalfundforwomen.org](http://www.globalfundforwomen.org)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**LIN CHEW**, a former Board member of the Global Fund for Women, is the current Activist in Residence. In the Spring of 2005, Lin traveled



to Sri Lanka and Aceh, Indonesia, the regions of Asia most severely affected by the tsunami. She met with women's organizations that had distributed immediate relief supplies and gathered information on women's conditions in the aftermath of the disaster. Lin provided critical guidance to the Global Fund as grants were made to women's organizations struggling to help women rebuild their lives and livelihoods. Lin Chew is a co-founder of the Foundation Against Trafficking in Women, the Netherlands, and of the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, based in Bangkok, Thailand.

**KAVITA N. RAMDAS**, an expert in international women's rights, has served as President and CEO of the Global Fund for Women since



1996. She has won numerous awards for her vision and advancement of an inclusive philanthropy in which donors and grantees are treated as equal partners. Through her leadership, annual grantmaking has risen over 500%, and Global Fund assets have increased from \$6 million to more than \$20 million. As President, she has overseen the establishment of the largest endowment ever dedicated exclusively to women's rights internationally.

## DEDICATION

We dedicate this report to the courageous women in Southeast Asia, Guatemala, Pakistan and the US, who, despite their own painful losses, reached out to help others in their communities. We especially wish to acknowledge the 60 brave representatives of the Coalition for Assisting Tsunami Affected Women, whose work informed this report.

# Caught in the Storm:

## The Impact of Natural Disasters on Women



Indonesia. © Lin Chew

Through the last year, a series of natural disasters have left the world reeling. Tsunamis in Asia and Africa killed over 200,000 and left millions orphaned, homeless, grief-stricken and traumatized.<sup>1</sup> In the United States, Hurricane Katrina displaced over one million people and more than 1,200 died. In Guatemala, Hurricane Stan left at least 652 dead and 398 missing, wiped out crops and roads, and entombed whole villages in mud.<sup>2</sup> The massive earthquake that struck Kashmir killed at least 73,000, severely wounded as many, and left up to 3.3 million homeless, many to face the brutal Himalayan winter with no shelter at all.<sup>3</sup> **These disasters occurred in vastly different places and among different populations, yet they share a common factor: during and afterwards, women and children suffered most.** That women are disproportionately affected by disasters is indisputable<sup>4</sup>—yet it continues to be ignored: by governments, and by many non-governmental agencies involved in relief and reconstruction efforts.

**The Global Fund for Women has provided grants and worked in partnership with women struggling to rebuild their lives and communities after a number of natural disasters,** including the 2004 tsunamis, the 2005 Kashmir earthquake and Hurricanes Stan and Mitch (which struck Central America in 1998). The Global Fund for Women is the largest foundation in the world focusing exclusively on international women's rights—and our experience grows out of work with 31 women's organizations in nine countries enduring natural disasters. If not for local women's groups, the aftermath of these disasters as they impact women would have remained hidden and unaddressed. We have learned from them how traditional relief efforts fail women, the suffering that results, and how this failure could have been avoided. They have made us painfully aware that although humanity will continue to face natural disasters, we can act to avoid the often politically motivated humanitarian crises as well. Through this report, we share what we have learned from direct grantmaking to women's rights groups during and after emergency situations.

<sup>1</sup> "At a Glance: Countries Hit," BBC News, Wednesday, June 22, 2005; Barry Bearak, "Apocalypse on the Horizon," *New York Times Magazine*, November 27, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Report "Solidaridad con Nuestro Pueblo," Union Nacional de Mujeres Guatemaltecas, October 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Watson, "Only With a Tent Can We Survive Winter," *Los Angeles Times*, October 25, 2005. See also "Pakistan's Official Quake Toll at 73,000," *Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> The World Health Organization acknowledges that women and children are disproportionately affected by natural disasters. See "Gender and Women's Health: Gender and Disaster," WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia, January 19, 2005.

# Women and Disaster: The Facts

**During and after natural disasters, women face disturbing and negative trends in a variety of ways:**

## Women are far more likely to die than men.

Children are also at greater risk. Strikingly, we don't even know how many women died in the Asian tsunamis, because statistics weren't separated by gender. But estimates made based on the sex of survivors (for instance, by Oxfam International) suggest that around three times as many women as men perished.<sup>5</sup> According to early reports from Pakistan, more women than men were killed in the October 2005 earthquake, and as many as half the dead may be children.<sup>6</sup>

## Women are at increased risk of violence.

In the chaos and social breakdown that accompany natural disaster, women become uniquely vulnerable to sexual abuse, including rape and gang rape.<sup>7</sup> Domestic violence also increases, with local authorities often failing to intervene in what may be perceived as a "personal matter." Statistics on gender-based violence are always difficult to collect because many incidents are never reported, and that reality is magnified during disasters. Incidents of rape in the days after Hurricane Katrina had not been confirmed or counted, in part because local rape crisis centers had been closed by the storm.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Merni Carter, Executive Director of the Louisiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence, reported that after Katrina – which shuttered four New Orleans-area shelters and two nonresidential programs – "we have received

reports that women are being battered by their partners in the emergency shelters." A new database for sexual assaults during natural disasters, which went on-line in November 2005, now counts 38 cases of rape in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. This resource will support future documentation of rape, but will not likely recover the majority of stories of survivors of violence from recent disasters.<sup>9</sup>

It should be noted that problems of violence can be even worse in regions with prior histories of armed civil and/or social conflict. In cases where soldiers and displaced women are from different political or ethnic groups, those who should be protectors may instead become predators, increasing women's vulnerability. In the tsunami-devastated region of Banda Aceh, Indonesia, for example, security forces had a history of rape and other crimes of sexual violence against women thought to be relatives of members of the Movement for the Independence of Aceh.<sup>10</sup>

## Women do not receive necessary health care.

Disaster relief efforts often fail to include attention to specifically female health needs. Pregnant women lack obstetrical care, and may miscarry or deliver under extremely unsanitary conditions.<sup>11</sup> Displaced women frequently lack access to contraception and even undergarments and sanitary supplies, which in some cases have been doled out by men.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Reported by the BBC News World Edition, March 26, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> A number of factors produce this higher mortality rate. Women are more likely than men to be found at home – during the Pakistan quake, home was a deadly place to be, as were coastal dwellings during the tsunamis. Gender conventions also play a role. During the tsunamis, women drowned because they became entangled in cumbersome clothing, had not been taught to swim or had not had practice climbing trees, which was a crucial way to survive the onrush of water. A report by the Women's Crisis Centre in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, which surveyed 14 displaced persons camps showed that women died because they were trying to save children and the elderly – a number of women's corpses were found with babies in their arms.

<sup>7</sup> "...available evidence suggests that the stress and disruption of natural disasters may lead to a rise in gender-based violence, particularly sexual violence."

<sup>8</sup> "Gender and Disaster: Gender-based Violence in Disaster," WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia.

<sup>9</sup> "What does Hurricane relief have to do with rape?" the Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault. [www.lafasa.org/Events/Fundraising/LouisianaRapeRelief.cfm] and Nancy Cook Lauer, "Rape-Reporting Procedure Missing after Hurricane," Women's E-News, 9-13-05.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Judy Benitez, M.Ed., Executive Director, Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault, December 8, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> "Indonesia – sexual violence by the security forces." Amnesty International, December 8, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> According to the Women, Children and Infant Tsunami Victim Relief Act of 2005, brought before the US Senate in March 2005, the Indonesian Midwife's Association estimated that 30% of its 5,500 members had died, and maternity hospitals, women's health clinics and other facilities for reproductive health services were destroyed.

<sup>12</sup> A 2005 press release issued by the Coalition of Tsunami Affected Women, a collective of women's rights groups that conducted a series of fact-finding missions in devastated areas, noted that "the distribution of underwear, bras and panties was carried out publicly, with embarrassing comments about which sizes were appropriate for which women." In addition, distribution of sanitary products were under the control of male camp officials, who handed them out one at a time, so women had to go back and ask again and again. There were no contraceptives available, even though husbands and male partners insisted on sex.

## Women may be denied adequate relief aid or compensation for their losses.

At times, essentials like blankets, mattresses, and even food and water, have been distributed based on the needs of single adults, forcing mothers to share meager rations in order to feed their children. In other cases, women have been too intimidated to collect aid when the distribution of supplies is controlled by men. Government compensation for loss often completely excludes women in societies where only males are recognized as heads of household. The Sri Lankan government offered 5,000 rupees (about \$49) to families affected by the tsunami, but in Batticaloa, the regional capital of the eastern coastal area, authorities recognized only male-headed households, so women whose husbands had died couldn't claim the money.<sup>13</sup> In Thailand, the government paid twice as much to families for the funeral expenses of men than for those of women.<sup>14</sup>

## Women experience ongoing economic vulnerability.

While women are expected to continue performing traditional duties like childcare and nursing the wounded, those who have lost partners or parents must also take on the burden of providing financial support. Women are especially likely to work in agricultural industry or the informal economy, both of which tend to be heavily impacted by natural disasters. Due to this fact and their lower educational and literacy levels, they are overrepresented among those who end up unemployed. Due to their caretaking responsibilities, they are not free to relocate in search of work.<sup>15</sup> As a result, they are vulnerable to impoverishment, forced marriage, labor exploitation and trafficking.



Pakistan. © Rural Women Welfare Organization

Economic status at the time of disaster sharply influences the pace of recovery. Poor families led by women have virtually no resources to draw on to rebuild their lives. At the time Katrina struck, 41% of all female-headed households were living in poverty. The majority of these were African-American, Southeast Asian or of the Houma nation.<sup>16</sup>

## Women are excluded from a say in rebuilding and reconstruction efforts.

Women are often the first to mobilize local relief efforts. After Hurricane Mitch, in 1998, Guatemalan and Honduran women readily took on traditionally masculine tasks like building homes and shelters, hauling water and digging wells.<sup>17</sup> Six months after Banda Aceh, Indonesia was devastated by the tsunami, more than 70% of the local civil organizations working in the area were women's groups or groups mostly staffed by women.<sup>18</sup> However, women are rarely included in policy- and decision-making and frequently go unrecognized for their critical roles. This lack of participation reverberates at the most basic levels. In post-tsunami Sri Lanka, for example, women had no say in temporary housing design. As a result, dwellings actually were constructed without any kitchen facilities. The lack of safe cooking areas led to smoke and fire hazards.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Sarala Emmanuel, Suriya Women's Development Centre, Sri Lanka: "Sri Lankan Women's Small but Significant Gains in the Post Tsunami Reconstruction Process." Published by Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, [www.apwld.org](http://www.apwld.org)

<sup>14</sup> Statement issued by Asian Women's Consultation on Post Tsunami Challenges, July 27, 2005, a 3-day gathering in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, attended by over 60 women from five countries, including survivors and activists involved in relief and reconstruction. Released by Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development.

<sup>15</sup> "Gender and Natural Disasters," fact sheet, Women Health & Development Program, Pan American Health Organization, [www.paho.org/genderandhealth/](http://www.paho.org/genderandhealth/).

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Mia White, program officer for democracy and power, Ms. Foundation for Women, December 7, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Maria Suarez and Katerina Anfossi, Radio Internacional Feminista [Guatemala]. "Hoja de datos y enfoques de la Campana. 'Entre mujeres, con las comunidades afectadas.'" Via e-mail, October 27, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> "Aceh: Tsunami's Women Survivors Demand Greater Role in Recovery and Reconstruction Efforts." Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development. [www.apwld.org](http://www.apwld.org).

<sup>19</sup> "Human Rights in the Post-Tsunami Context," INFORM Human Rights Documentation Centre, Sri Lanka, July/August 2005.

# Women and Disaster: Recommendations

Based on what we have learned from local women's groups as they respond to disaster, the Global Fund for Women strongly recommends that before, during and after crises, relief groups and governmental and non-governmental agencies should:

## Include women in pre- and post-disaster planning.

To ensure the success of relief and/or disaster preparation efforts, national and international agencies must consult with the affected communities, particularly with women. Plans made by relief agencies must include the input of local women leaders and organizations. Emergency plans must include strategies for dealing with children: in the chaotic response to Hurricane Katrina, some 2,430 children (if not more) were separated from their families.

## Keep women safe.

Relief agencies must ensure women's physical safety post-crisis, working to prevent violence, including rape, by creating safe spaces and facilities for women and means for legal redress.

## Protect girls' education.

Schools must be relocated and rebuilt quickly, and women trained to be teachers, to enable girls, who are already disproportionately deprived of education, not to fall behind. Similarly, temporary housing must offer access to education. Some post-tsunami shelters constructed in Sri Lanka were sited so far from schools, with no transport provided, that children were unable to attend.

## Target women's health needs.

Agencies must make special efforts to address the specific health needs of women in disaster situations. This includes providing suitable bathrooms, undergarments, sanitary supplies and prenatal and maternity care. Psychological counseling for post-traumatic stress must be available to women and girls as they cope with the loss of children and family members, and the ongoing challenges created by the disaster. Women and girls must be provided with culturally appropriate clothing, such as head scarves.

## Help women become self-sufficient.

Relief efforts must include longterm income-generating projects and/or jobs for women whose livelihoods and/or key providers have been lost, so they may provide for themselves and their families.



Guatemala. © FIRE (Feminist International Radio Endeavor)

## Ensure equal aid distribution.

Women and children account for more than 75 percent of displaced persons following natural disasters. In addition to providing safe temporary housing, permanent housing and land rights must be secured for displaced women.

## Bring women into all decision-making processes.

Both long- and short-term reconstruction plans and efforts must include women's input, and their leadership, with its unique perspective, should be encouraged. These efforts can both protect and advance the rights of women. Indeed, those months when villages, cities, nations and regions work to rebound from disaster hold the unique promise of longer term social and structural change that will improve women's lives well into the future.

# A Summary of Grantmaking by the Global Fund for Women Following Natural Disasters

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## Asian Tsunamis

Immediately after the earthquake and tsunami that swept across the Indian Ocean in December 2004, the Global Fund for Women reached out to all of our grantees in the affected regions from Asia to Africa. Since January 2005, the Global Fund has awarded \$104,000 in tsunami relief to 15 women's organizations in India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka and Thailand. In the days and weeks following the tsunami, many of these groups provided basic and desperately needed relief to their communities in the form of food, water, medical supplies, and shelter. They are now working to ensure that women are included in longterm reconstruction processes and that the human rights of women are not ignored.

## Hurricane Katrina

While the Global Fund normally does not fund in the United States, we could not ignore the destruction and subsequent human rights abuses wrought by Hurricane Katrina in the American South. Following the hurricane, the Global Fund awarded \$10,000 to the Katrina Women's Response Fund of the Ms. Foundation for Women. This fund is providing immediate support to women of color and low-income women in the Gulf Coast region, and ensuring their leadership and priorities are central in both short and longterm recovery and rebuilding efforts.

## Kashmir Earthquake

As winter approaches, more than 3 million people remain homeless in the mountains of Pakistan and India. The Global Fund has awarded a \$30,350 emergency grant to the Rural Women Welfare Organization (RWWO), a rural women's group organizing to end violence against women in Pakistan. RWWO is rebuilding women's health clinics and girls' schools in the towns razed by the earthquake.

Additional Kashmir earthquake grants are pending at the time of this writing.

## Hurricane Stan

Groups throughout Central America are mobilizing to provide support to low-income and indigenous communities who have lost their homes and livelihoods to Hurricane Stan. The Global Fund has awarded \$15,000 to the New Horizons Home Association in Guatemala to provide food, shelter and health services to over 125 families. The Association is also working with local women to seed economic empowerment projects to provide for communities in the long term.

In partnership with the Global Fund for Women, the Feminist International Radio Endeavor (FIRE) of Costa Rica, which produces daily radio shows in Spanish and English, has launched the "Woman to Woman, with Affected Communities" campaign. Through this campaign, a Latin American coalition led by FIRE is building the capacity of women's organizations to take leadership and be recognized for their role in preparing for disasters and cleaning up in their wake.

Additional Hurricane Stan relief grants are pending at the time of this writing.

## Hurricane Mitch

In one of the worst natural disasters in the history of Central America, in 1998, Hurricane Mitch left thousands dead, and hundreds of thousands without homes or any means of income. In the wake of Mitch's devastation, the Global Fund for Women awarded \$98,500 to 13 women's organizations in Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala who mobilized quickly to provide shelter to families, prevent hunger crises, and address psychological trauma. Women's groups also provided community health trainings to create mental health support networks, and organized reconstruction efforts that promoted the leadership of women.

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