

BY CHRISTINE VAN DUSEN

women last

For women who live through disasters around the world, every storm hits twice.

SUMATRA DHAMADEVA'S small tent was always spotless. Maybe the cleanliness was her way to stay civilized amid all the destruction of the tsunami — a way to hold on to her identity as a once-successful businesswoman, homeowner and wife.

The massive waves had surged onto the shores of Sri Lanka, pummeling fishing villages, overtaking trains and cars, and killing thousands. Those who survived fled the water with only the clothes on their bodies and the children in their arms. Dhamadeva ended up in a squalid refugee camp, seeking privacy with her 11-year-old daughter in a very tiny but immaculate tent made of sticks and a tarp.

Weeks later, she and other women

survivors in the camp were still wearing the same underwear. They had no sanitary napkins. They struggled to get a place among men in food lines. They worried about being assaulted on the way to and from makeshift, unisex latrines and in unguarded showers.

Sera Bonds, founder of the women's health advocacy group Circle of Health International, saw it all and was saddened and discouraged. After so many years and so many disasters in the world, relief agencies were doing a better job of getting food, water and shelter to the general population of survivors. But the specific and important needs of women were not being addressed. "It was so frustrating," Bonds says. "Women should be a bigger priority."

Women are disproportionately affected both during and after disasters. In the 2004 tsunami, to name just one, the death toll among women was reportedly three to four times greater than among men. Those caring for small children or the elderly simply couldn't escape in time. But women also make up a large portion of any surviving population. "So in a disaster situation, women have two waves that hit them: the disaster itself and the lack of support or assistance," says Ritu Sharma Fox, co-founder and president of the anti-poverty nonprofit Women Thrive Worldwide.

Still, there are signs that a shift toward more equitable treatment of women survivors is beginning to take place. More organizations are springing up to address

SUDANESE WOMEN WAIT IN A CARE FOOD DISTRIBUTION LINE AT THE BREDJING CAMP IN EASTERN CHAD.



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the needs of women, or are focusing on women as an important subset of survivor populations. This change, advocates say, stems from one catalyst in particular: Women are ascending the ranks of disaster-assistance organizations.

“When women are in charge, there is attention paid to promoting the health and safety of women,” Bonds says. “In meetings where men are in charge, that is not so much of a priority.” But, she adds, “We have a very long way to go.”

Hearing Women's Voices

Never was the inequity in disaster relief more obvious to Marge Tsitouris, senior advisor to humanitarian organization CARE, than during her time in Rwanda. Tsitouris provided assistance to women in refugee camps who were forced to live in tents made of sticks and mud and plastic sheeting. One woman in her early 20s with three young children told Tsitouris about surviving the genocide. Her husband and extended family were gone. As a woman alone in the camp, she was continually bullied and jostled out of the way in food lines. There was no system set up to ensure that women just like her would receive enough food to feed their families.

That was 1994, when humanitarian efforts in Rwanda were led primarily by men. Only by the time aid workers were getting ready to leave Rwanda did these leaders finally recognize the necessity of structuring food delivery and other services to benefit women. Now, due to the insistence of women leaders in the humanitarian community, most camps distribute food equitably, by gender, according to a special calendar.

Male decision-makers may overlook other important issues for women. When a 7.9-magnitude earthquake struck India

in 2001, for example, relief agencies didn't dispatch any female doctors to the scene. Many of the affected areas were conservative – places where women would not see male doctors. When the next earthquake hit the region, CARE made sure female doctors were there right away. “We need to understand context,” Tsitouris says, “and what it means to be dealing with ethnicity, women, men, society and how to make this work.”

Rebuilding Women's Lives

Susan Romanski will never forget the first time she went to Darfur. As a member of the emergency response team for Mercy Corps, a disaster-assistance organization, she has dropped into many a disaster scenario. But the women in Darfur are forever etched into her mind.

“They told me stories of being raped, beaten, and how some of their husbands were killed,” Romanski says. “Even when it's not easy to talk about things, I believe we are able to look at women, straight in the eyes, and see a lot more than men could ever see. Because women are more inclined to trust us, especially in places where horrible things are happening to women.”

When women are in charge at disaster scenes, a trickle-down effect can occur, Romanski explains. Women in the survivor population may feel more empowered to lead and act because they see other women doing the same. “It's always positive to have women in leadership positions to demonstrate that women are natural leaders, that it can be done,” she says.

And the focus on women should not end when the storm has passed and the rebuilding has begun, Sharma Fox adds. Female survivors must also be considered during reconstruction. Often, though,

want to **HELP?**

When disaster strikes, several organizations mobilize to help women in need. Your charitable giving can make a difference.

CARE:

Fights global poverty with a special focus on working with poor women.

(care.org)

MERCY CORPS:

Offers aid amid disasters, conflicts, chronic poverty and instability.

(mercycorps.org)

CIRCLE OF HEALTH INTERNATIONAL:

Improves women's healthcare in crisis settings through small grants, volunteer programs and advocacy.

(cohintl.org)

WOMEN THRIVE WORLDWIDE:

Pushes for U.S. assistance and economic policies that benefit women in poverty worldwide.

(womenthrive.org)

that's not the case. The majority of jobs available after a disaster, for example, are heavy construction – building roads and bridges – and don't often go to women, she says.

What helps, when reconstruction begins, is to earmark disaster funds for small-business loans so that women can create their own economic opportunities. That's what worked for Dhamadeva after surviving the tsunami in Sri Lanka. Aid workers helped her get funds to buy a brick-making machine so she could supply local builders. And she hired other widows to help her.

This sort of economic support is a good start, activists say. “I think the humanitarian community is a lot wiser than it was before,” Tsitouris says. “But we always have to be vigilant.” ■