



voices from the field

TSUNAMI SHARED LEARNING

issue 01 - october 2006 - violence against women

CONTENTS Violence is ever present in the lives of women/1 Editorial/3 **India** Reverse sterilisation in Tamil Nadu: empowering women or enforcing patriarchy?/4 **Sri Lanka** Taking the private to public air: street drama in Sri Lanka/6 **Thailand** Violence against the invisible: Burmese migrant workers/8 **The Maldives** Tackling the taboo in a Muslim island society/10 **Interview** Meet Farahama/12

Violence is ever present in the lives of women

From the killing of female foetus to the sexual abuse of girls and women, current analyses of gender relations seem to overlook structural power imbalances created in the name of culture and tradition

Violence is ever present in the lives of women. It grows with time and tortures and kills women. Violence Against Women (VAW) starts even before the birth of a girl. There is the discriminatory selection of the foetus before she enters this world, with the mere identification of her sex leading her parents to become killers. If the foetus escapes this stage, her childhood is marred by neglect and abuse: differential access to food, healthcare and education, plus incest and sexual violence at home and in the public sphere.

The survivors of such violence can end up in early marriages, pushed by parents eager to relieve themselves of their "burden". These heavenly marriages can turn out to be hell on earth as physical



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ActionAid and its partners work directly with six and a half million women and girls around the world. Our tsunami programme in five countries promotes women's rights as one of three strategic priorities.

and psychological abuse is introduced, marital rape becomes the love making, and coerced pregnancy and abortion a normal part of life. Once past her physical prime, the woman is then passed from her husband onto her children, only to experience further forms of deprivation of care.

Why such violence against women? Is the world so cruel? Why only women? Why not men? It is important to look at the causes of violence and dig out the hidden reasons. The usually cited factors are poor self-control of men, mental disorders of both sexes, alcohol and drug abuse, social pressures and poverty in the family. But these reasons do not expose the power relations that underpin violence against women.

WHAT IS CEDAW?

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was created in response to the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights lack of specific reference to women It was adopted at the U.N. Decade for Women Mid-Decade Conference in Copenhagen in 1979 and passed by the U.N. General Assembly in 1981 **Signatory states are legally bound to incorporate the principle of equality of men and women in their legal system i.e. abolish discriminatory laws and adopt new ones, establish tribunals and other public institutions to protect the rights of women** They

must ensure the full development and advancement of women in all spheres e.g. political, public, education, employment, health, economic, family relations **They must modify cultural and traditional practices that reinforce discrimination based on the idea of the inferiority/superiority of either sex** CEDAW is the only human rights treaty which affirms reproductive rights; parties also agree to take all necessary action against the trafficking and exploitation of women CEDAW governs all of ActionAid's work on women's rights, especially on Violence Against Women **India, the Maldives, Sri Lanka and Thailand are among the 184 signatory states; Somalia is yet to ratify, as is the United States**

every nine seconds a women is **battered** by her partner • every year 5,000 brides are **murdered** or commit suicide due to dowry-related problems • one in three women around the world are beaten, **forced into sex** or otherwise abused during their lifetime • women are most **at risk** at home and from men who are family members

AFTER THE WAVES WOMEN MORE AFFECTED

- **Up to 4x more women than men killed** in some villages in Indonesia and 3x in India, largely because women were more likely to be at home and less likely to be able to swim or climb trees
- **Increased verbal harassment and physical and sexual violence** in crowded camps and temporary shelters due to a lack of privacy and a higher ratio of men to women
- **Increased domestic violence** due to new strains on the family unit and the tendency of many men to abuse alcohol for solace

continued from page 1

The power imbalances between men and women in the family, community and society at large are overlooked when talking about VAW. The structural violence that the state and other patriarchal actors have sanctioned is not challenged due to fear that the peace of the existing institutions will be disturbed. Too much questioning of the family, religion, state, law and education can interrupt the power structure that people have carefully constructed over decades. We are not to question why, but to tolerate systematic suppression in the name of culture and tradition.

All women, whether rich or poor, educated or uneducated, high caste or low caste, are subject to this structural violence. It is inevitable that at some stage in their life, they will experience male dominance, suppression and oppression via culture and tradition. Some women overcome it, after long and painful struggles. Survivors of violence need constant confirmation of the decisions they have taken to fight against these power imbalances and conservative thinking that are embedded in the society.

In disaster situations women face increased violence. Reports from tsunami-hit countries by women's groups and NGOs have highlighted the different forms of VAW, alongside anecdotal evidence about physical violence in camps and temporary shelters by family members and outsiders.

Women had to absorb the shock of the disaster and bear the family grief with little support from the men, who were turning to alcohol and other abuses for comfort. Women were further excluded from relief assistance programmes, livelihood promotion activities, consultations on reconstruction/planning, and specifically from decision-making bodies such as planning committees. Nobody consulted them about their needs, especially concerning protection and security.

Such structural barriers and exclusion furthered VAW and forced women to get organised in a few countries. They formed task forces, coalitions and organised forums to discuss their issues. They forced governments and donor communities to listen to their grievances. They demanded attention and claimed

spaces. But these isolated initiatives have not improved their status and VAW continues to grow not only in tsunami-affected communities, but also in other parts of these countries.

During one of my field visits after the tsunami, I came across a woman who told me "the camp was secure for my husband to beat me up. I could not retaliate for the fear that others would hear us. Sometimes I wonder why it is only the women who are concerned about such social stigma. Doesn't he feel ashamed for beating up a defenseless woman?"

At times I too wonder why, and it disheartens me. But as a field worker I should not get disheartened. If we feel helpless then who will assist these women – our grandmothers, mothers, sisters, and daughters? Let's instead get energised by the small victories we see and vitalise and strengthen the campaigns against VAW.

- Sriyani Perera, ActionAid International
Asia Women's Rights Coordinator
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ACTIONAID'S VAW POLICY FRAMEWORK POST-TSUNAMI

Assessment of the VAW policy environment and actors, including an analysis of the extent to which CEDAW is addressed by existing laws **Local and national alliance building** for advocacy through participatory action research, citizen's report and national fora **Communications strategy** and material aimed at community level awareness raising on rights and entitlement of women to security, protection, compensation, and service provision in the post-tsunami context **Capacity development** of ActionAid staff and alliance members on VAW/WR/legal framework **Community-level awareness raising, analysis, organising and action planning**; this will simultaneously generate information for **policy intervention*** Analysis of findings by alliance members, leading to the production of a **country-level citizens' report** and policy and practices influencing work* **International alliance building** for post-disaster VAW policy advocacy, increased dialogue and alliance action planning, synthesized policy guideline, and International Women's Day events

* components of this work will draw on communications and media strategies



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“Working with men is more challenging than working with women. When I joined the struggle to close the liquor bar, everyone laughed at me. Even now people laugh at me. But I believe that most problems arise because of alcohol. Drinking is no excuse to vent out frustrations. Finally in the struggle to close the bar there were only 15 men [showing support] and all the others were women. I feel bad that lots of women were beaten up by their husbands for joining the campaign.”

**- PRAKASH BANIK
VOLUNTEER, SAATHI
ANDAMAN ISLANDS**



Have your say!
Email us in 75 words or less
preetid@actionaidindia.org

Dear Friends,

It's been almost two years since ActionAid International started working alongside the poorest and most excluded communities affected by the Indian Ocean tsunami. In India, Thailand and Somalia, our existing country structures swiftly turned efforts to rebuilding people's lives. In Sri Lanka and the Maldives, we had to start from scratch, forming new partnerships and alliances.

Already we've reached 400,000 tsunami-affected people. This includes fisherfolk, farmers, coir weavers, widows, dalits, stateless people, women affected by violence, and children in both rural and urban areas. We've developed and carried through unique initiatives and programmes that have at their core the human rights based approach and the voices of those in greatest need. And we've rejected quick and immediate fixes in favour of long-term and sustainable solutions.

This experience has generated immense knowledge of development issues and the disaster reconstruction process across five diverse countries and 63 local partners. But are we properly sharing these valuable learnings to gain maximum benefit for ourselves both as individuals and a collective organisation? Or is this knowledge being confined to our own field offices and tea rooms?

Voices from the Field is an attempt by the Tsunami Management Team to encourage us to better support each other by openly sharing our successes, failures, hopes and recommendations for those in similar situations. Produced for and by field workers, it aims to strengthen our response using first-hand knowledge from people working on the ground directly with affected communities. Our goal is to inspire, influence, improve, educate and learn, especially when the way forward is less than clear. This inaugural issue was led by the India tsunami team.

Only by joining hands in this spirit of shared learning can we truly become "one programme" and fulfil our commitment to fight for the rights and rebuild the lives of poor and excluded tsunami-affected people.

In solidarity,

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REVERSE STERILISATION IN TAMIL NADU EMPOWERING WOMEN OR ENFORCING PATRIARCHY?

The tsunami killed 2,300 children in Tamil Nadu, spurring the government into offering free reverse sterilisation operations to women who had decided they didn't want any more children due to poverty

“I am 36 years old and I did not want to undergo reverse sterilisation. At this age it is risky to bear children,” said Allirani from a temporary tsunami shelter in Nagapattinam district of Tamil Nadu in India. Allirani lost both her children, a five-year-old daughter and three-year-old son, who were sleeping when the huge waves engulfed them.



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“Their memories haunt me and I still feel at a loss thinking about my children. It is very painful, but what hurt me more is the lack of emotional support from my family members,” she said.

Living in the temporary shelters of Nambiar Nagar village, life became hell for Allirani when the Tamil Nadu government announced they would offer women free reverse sterilization operations or 25,000 rupees (approx. USD 525) to those who wanted to get it done in a private hospital.

Allirani refused and was subjected to physical torture by her mother-in-law and sister-in-law. Her husband was a silent spectator to the entire event. He also wanted Allirani to get the operation done. But Allirani wanted to adopt a tsunami orphan and did not have the courage to tell the family.

One of the ritualistic beatings by her sister-in-law was so harsh that Allirani ran out of the house screaming, much to the shock of the other residents of the temporary shelters. This was when she made up her mind to fight the physical and emotional trauma and start enquiring about adoption. But with no one to support her, she finally gave up and submitted to the

demands of her husband's family.

Allirani had the operation in a private clinic and then faced another problem – getting the promised 25,000 rupees from the government. Allirani was all alone as she ran from one office to another trying to claim her money. Every unsuccessful day resulted in more shouting from the family.

During this time Maligha, a psychosocial counsellor with ActionAid India's partner Construction Workers Building Center (CWBC), approached Allirani. CWBC works in 65 villages in Nagapattinam and decided to tackle the issue of reverse sterilisation after realising that many post-operative women, in addition to not receiving their money, would still not be able to conceive and require counselling. CWBC field officers and psychosocial counsellors developed an action plan through consultations with programme staff from ActionAid India.

Maligha and field workers obtained copies of the government's orders regarding reverse sterilisation and made sure their facts were clear about the 25,000 rupees payment; they contacted a lawyers

association to explore methods of legal recourse; they collected all of Allirani's hospital bills and prescriptions; they submitted a written complaint to the district collector's office; and they followed up on the case regularly. In partnership with like-minded organisations working on the issue and with local journalists, they also took the story to the media.

CWBC worked on about 25 cases in Allirani's village. They didn't have

a set target, but instead helped women upon hearing of their need. While there were no efforts to link affected women via forums, group counselling sessions offered opportunities for the women to come together for strength and solidarity. After five months of hard work, Allirani finally received her money.

Seven months after the operation, Allirani had not yet conceived. She still wanted to adopt, so Maligha helped to convince her husband to agree by explaining the dangers of pregnancy for older women and by emphasising Allirani's decision. Maligha also informed them about the process, warning that it could be long and tedious, and offered her ongoing support.

“I have no preference for a male child and thanks to Maligha's support my husband has let me decide. I am just waiting for our permanent house to be constructed and hoping that the formalities of adoption will be completed by then so I can bring the child home. I am happy, but I wish that Maligha would have come earlier and then I would not have had to go through the operation,” said Allirani as she wiped away her tears.

PARTNER

Construction Workers Building Center

RIGHT HOLDERS

25 women who participated in a government-led post-tsunami reverse sterilisation programme

LOCATION

Nambiar Nagar village, Tamil Nadu state in India

ISSUE

Government failed to deliver promised financial compensation

ACTION PLAN

Identify and approach women in need; obtain copies of supporting documents like hospital bills and doctors' certificates; submit written complaints at district level; join hands with like-minded organisations working on the same issue; encourage local journalists to give media coverage; hold group psychosocial sessions for affected women throughout and beyond the process

**SOCIAL ACTIVISTS
WORRY THAT THIS
HIGH-PROFILE REVERSE
STERILISATION
PROGRAMME IS FEEDING
INTO BROAD CULTURAL
BIASES THAT ONLY
VALIDATE WOMEN IF THEY
BEAR CHILDREN**

Statistics collated by the Department of Women and Children indicate that domestic violence in India is spiralling. Seven million complaints are expected to be registered in 2006-2007, a whopping 40 percent increase since the previous year.



© CWBC

Psychosocial counsellor **Maligha** from ActionAid India's local partner organisation Construction Workers Building Center says:

“I wish we all could have responded earlier to issues like this. By the time I could get involved in Allirani's story it was already too late. Fresh out of the training I was prepared with methods of dealing with the problem.

Allirani was running around to get the money promised by the government only three days after her reverse sterilisation operation. The first thing I did was suggest she take a rest and and get my team of field officers to sort out the issue. I met her and her family members daily and started talking about various issues but never brought up the incident of the operation. I knew that Allirani had to take care of her health and the crammed temporary shelters she was living in were extremely unhygienic.

With Allirani's support we started talking to others in the village and told them about the importance of keeping the shelter clean. We were able to organise a handful of people to start cleaning the surroundings.

Slowly we started getting closer to the community and I was getting to know Allirani better.

It was a challenge to convince Allirani's husband about adoption, especially as he was sure that since the operation was complete, Allirani's fertility was back. It was quite a process and I used various methods to put Allirani's point across. Finally Allirani's husband agreed, though the rest of the family are yet to accept the decision.

As for other women in the community, some were happy and some skeptical but now I get a lot of enquiries about the adoption process from other people in the nearby hamlets.

I wish I had met Allirani earlier.”

A study of 8,000 abortions performed after amniocentesis tests to determine the sex of the foetus in Maharashtra state of India showed that just one was male (Narasimhan 1994). In 1990 the country's ratio of women to men was 945:1000, now it has dropped to an alarming 933.

taking the private to public

What happens behind closed doors no longer has to stay hidden, thanks to confront and question their own roles as perpetrators, fearful

Colorful costumes, painted faces, sing-a-longs, sets resembling village houses and an animated troupe of actors spreading important social messages. “It is a very good initiative because people can learn many things. Even children watching these dramas can see what is happening around them, understand some of these problems and, to a certain extent, prevent these behaviours in the future,” said K.W. Marinona, 52, of Welliwatte village in Southern Hambantota district, Sri Lanka.

Street Drama is a fun, easy-to-understand and hugely expressive vehicle to communicate with local communities. “During our first Street Drama in November 2005 conducted as part of our campaign on Violence Against Women (VAW), we realised that

people really enjoyed the plays, paid lots of attention and participated in the shows,” enthused Kisholi Perera, Team Leader of ActionAid’s Women’s Rights Unit, who collaborated with Dharana Cultural Collective. “It was a great learning experience for us.”

So it followed naturally that in May 2006 while planning activities the Women’s Rights Unit in partnership with the Communications and Capacity Building Units came up with the idea of using Street Drama to raise awareness and break misconceptions about HIV/AIDS and disability along with VAW.

Dharana quickly jumped on board. “Street Drama is an art where we can make a greater influence on people’s thinking,” explained an eager Anton Mihidukula, who founded Dharana in 1982 to raise



JACOBO QUINTANILLA/ACTIONAID (ALL)

awareness about workers’ rights after the UNP government increased neo-liberal economic policies and opened production factories and Free Trade Zones. Since then the Sinhala-speaking group has delivered a wide range of social messages to people across the island, as well in India and Nepal.

The next step involved drafting key messages and educational materials, fixing deadlines and discussing budgets. Once the proposal was finalised, the team then had to write scripts, design brochures and booklets and coordinate with their field office in the South. The entire planning process lasted three months, with festivities being launched on August 13 in Hambantota and appearing in national news items for the first two days. The campaign reached a total of 42 villages and public places over two

weeks and stuck to its budget of 764,500 rupees (USD 7,645) for 42 shows and communications materials.

“It was very fun, people enjoyed it a lot, and vibrant discussions came up after the performances. We were very surprised as we weren’t expecting so much participation,” confessed Indika Dayarathna, ActionAid field officer from the South, whose favourite play was the one on domestic violence. “We had to ask local officers for permits to perform in some public places such as bus stands. Sometimes we had problems, but we managed. Next time we should work on all these legal issues with the government more in advance.”

Another difficult task was the coordination and design of communications materials (booklets, stickers and brochures) in three

at a glance: 42 villages and public places reached **more than 4,000 audience** (6 ActionAid staff, 10 partner staff, 2 resource people) needed to get things on the road

street drama in sri lanka

to a Street Drama initiative that is forcing tsunami-affected communities victims and compliant bystanders in violence against women



Tips for next time

“We would include women resource people such as women lawyers to make it a friendlier service, especially for violence affected women. We would also have better coordination with the government authorities to get permissions to use public places.”

- Indika Dayarathna, Programme Officer for ActionAid Sri Lanka's South Programme Support Unit

“The street drama was best received in communities. In public places people weren't really interested in the performances, but they still managed to absorb some of the key messages we wanted to deliver.”

- Anton Mihidukula of Dharana Cultural Collective

laughed because the characters were fun, but the message was very clear. I think we enjoyed and also we understood,” said Supun Madushanka, a 16-year-old student from Mirijjawila Madya village.

People who came to see the Street Drama were amused and concerned at the same time. They saw the public demonstration of something very private: domestic violence. “They wondered if this issue should be discussed out there,” said Kisholi. “But it was inevitable that they confronted it and that they were forced to relate it to their experiences at home. Women found it challenging but comforting at the same time to talk about the violence they face. And the perpetrators found themselves being ripped out of their guise.

languages (Tamil, Sinhalese, English). However, one of the biggest challenges was adapting key messages into scripts.

“We knew what we wanted to say about VAW, HIV/AIDS and disability, but turning rights concepts and technical wording into easy-to-understand, meaningful and accurate messages was hard,” said Kisholi. “We had two rehearsals with the drama group where everyone was invited to give comments and suggestions. Afterwards we reworked the parts which were unclear or inaccurate. It was essential to take everybody on board.”

The final outcome was four plays that encouraged lively audience participation. The team also conceived of a mobile caravan filled with educational materials, staffed by one male lawyer, one social worker and two ActionAid programme

officers from the South. After the performances this resource team posed questions to the audience and facilitated discussions on things such as domestic violence and access to legal services.

“Many people experience these problems, but they are afraid to talk openly,” explained lawyer Dinesh Abeyesundara. “They never look for any kind of support as they feel ashamed and fear being rejected by their communities. Our initiative tried to help them challenge this situation and change some of these attitudes.”

One especially powerful role play showed a drunk father beating the mother for cooking a “tasteless” dinner, with their child watching and crying and begging the father to stop. “I think it was black and white for parents and children about how sad and negative it is to beat a mum. We

Kisholi recommends that the next step of the campaign should be to deepen our own analysis of the issue and to facilitate for communities' self-reflection through collective organisation.

“Are they the suppressed woman who grins and bears the violence without retaliation? Are they the neighbour who watches it happen all the time, folding their arms in fear? Are they the police officer who always blames the woman for making the issue public and bringing shame on the family unit,” she asks.

It is time for women to shed their fear and help each other to respond, react and, above all, be proactive. ActionAid Sri Lanka will work towards this, and already has plans to take the Street Drama campaign to the East of Sri Lanka once the security situation permits.

members over two weeks 2,000 brochures and booklets distributed 18 hard workers 764,500 rupees (USD 7,645) total cost, including communications material

Violence against the ‘invisible’

Burmese women migrant workers are among the most marginalised and abused group in Thailand. After the tsunami washed away their precious paperwork and work permits, these women become doubly vulnerable to violence and even more invisible to NGOs and government officials

When the giant waves of December 26, 2004, hit the Andaman coast of southern Thailand, migrant workers from Myanmar, especially those illegally employed in the fishery and service sectors, were massively though silently affected. Having fled their homes across the border and exchanged political instability, poverty and military dictatorship for minimal wages, poor working conditions, abuse and discrimination, they found themselves once again fighting for their life while struggling with the fear of being deported.

“While I hid in the forest, people came and distributed food and water. I was afraid of the people who were coming because I was worried they were the police,” remembered Ma Daw Lay, a 44-year-old Burmese worker who laboured in a shrimp factory. “After the tsunami I worked on construction sites in different locations in the Takuapa district. I was manipulated by Thai sub-contractors many times. Sometimes they informed the Thai police to arrest the Burmese workers who did not have identification.”

With a large number of migrant women illegally employed as waitresses, massage girls and sex workers in tourist restaurants and hotels, as well as informally on the beaches, their struggle to rebuild their lives faces many obstacles. The tsunami claimed the lives of 5,395 people in Thailand. For many Burmese migrant workers who survived, it also claimed their jobs. For the lucky ones who possessed valid identification and employment documents, the tsunami

swept away these precious papers too.

“Being illegal significantly increases vulnerability to physical and sexual abuse and exploitation by employers,” explained Adisorn Kerdmongkol, Programme

Overlooked by government records, Burmese migrant women are subject to rape, assault in the workplace, domestic violence, sub-standard pay, long hours, uncompensated overtime, no life insurance, and an inability to protest because they are illegal. According to Adisorn, 75 percent have no education at all, including no education about healthcare let alone access to healthcare: “So those working in sex tourism also tend to have untreated sexually transmitted diseases,” she said.

Thailand’s employment registration fee of 4,500 baht (about USD 110), plus another 3,500 baht for renewal every year, is unrealistic. The women can instead easily secure work in the informal sector due to the high demand in areas such as Phang Nga province, where tourism development is gaining rapid momentum. The construction of luxurious beachfront hotels is similarly providing jobs for their male counterparts as unskilled labourers.

According to the Grassroots Human Rights Education and Development Committee (GHREDC), currently more than 120,000 migrant workers from Myanmar are employed in the six tsunami-affected provinces of Thailand.

“We must not forget that this vulnerable group is easily overlooked. Because they lack legal documents, they don’t make it onto government registers and they don’t have opportunities to voice their concerns. They don’t realise that they have rights just like you and me,” cautioned Chuengsuk Arsaithamkul,



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“More than 120,000 migrant workers from Myanmar are employed in the six tsunami-affected provinces of Thailand.”

Coordinator of Thai Action Committee for Democracy in Burma, a partner organisation of ActionAid Thailand. “These women suffer in silence because they are too scared to seek help. Most are threatened with arrest or deportation if they attempt to report their attackers.”

continued from page 8

who has just joined ActionAid Thailand as Women's Rights Coordinator and is keen to get this work going.

"All interventions addressing the issue of Violence Against Women must provide safe spaces and support women to emerge and demand their rights, while pushing for just punishment of their perpetrators. At the same time, the Thai government cannot violate these women's rights by using the excuse that they are illegal migrants."

(GHREDC also notes that not only migrant workerwomen, but mentoo, are experiencing violence committed by both the Thai and Burmese: employers, government officials, and even communities.)

"These women suffer in silence because they are too scared to seek help. Most are threatened with arrest or deportation if they attempt to report their attackers."



Following ActionAid Thailand's appointment of **Chuengsuk Arsaithamkul** as Women's Rights Coordinator, their plans to work with poor and excluded women are in full swing!

- **Workshops for staff** and partners to understand the legal framework for Violence Against Women
- **People's Report** on VAW in tsunami-affected communities in Pang-Nga and Phuket provinces
- Women-centric **sustainable agriculture initiatives** in farming and fishing, including access to and control over land
- **Reproductive health programmes** for healthy sex, safe abortion and education rights for pregnant students
- Collaboration with other NGOs working on women's law to positively **influence draft bills** on issues such as domestic violence



The local fishing industry employs many illegal Burmese workers



Human rights training sessions for workers in Ban Neing village help to raise awareness



Fearing deportation, women from Par Week construction site go into hiding

"The psychological work we have implemented with traumatised children does not help only them, but also the volunteers themselves. Because the more we know about their difficult life, the more we can find ways to handle our own issues."

- SUPREEYA LAPYINGYONG, VOLUNTEER, KHUKKAK CENTER FOUNDATION FOR CHILDREN, THAILAND

Have your say!
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Tackling the taboo in a Muslim island society

Speaking out against Violence Against Women in many countries often means speaking out against traditional beliefs and the comfort of age-old customs

For most Maldivians, Violence Against Women (VAW) is a taboo topic. It challenges traditional beliefs that a woman's role is to be obedient and submissive to her husband/father. And it threatens the deep-rooted and institutionalised gender discrimination that thrives as a result.

With national law based on Islamic Shariat law and forbidding women to become head of state, women are at a disadvantage, with religion often being seen as advocating patriarchy although the situation is less severe than in other Muslim countries.

"It is the age-old cultural norms which are soaked in our religious beliefs that prevent recognition of emotional, psychological and physical violence against women as a problem of magnitude. People don't want to move away from the comfort of customs, including women who have an identity as a good/obedient/ideal woman," said Fathimath Afiya, Executive Director of Care Society, ActionAid's sole partner in the Maldives.

"Currently we have a serious lack of policies and laws relating to women, while the few we have are desperately inadequate. This leaves our national position on women's rights rather ambiguous." This is despite that an Office for Women's Affairs was established in 1981 or that the Maldives ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1993.

Women who lost their husbands to the Indian Ocean tsunami found themselves alone and without any support. Firstly, Maldivian women are severely geographically isolated, with communities scattered across 200 inhabited islands (of 1,192 total islands), some with

populations as small as 500 to 1,000 people. Secondly, many were plunged into deep depression and despair, with an increased dependency on others for basic needs like food and shelter matched by an increased vulnerability to violence.

To help these women get back on their feet, Care Society started a psychosocial programme on 15 islands, reaching almost 5,300 women. At the same time they conducted a general health questionnaire (designed by the World Health Organisation and modified by Care Society) and found that there was an upsurge in domestic violence and social issues due to difficult living conditions and families taking out their frustrations on the women members. "The women faced many forms of violence post-tsunami as the status of the family declined economically and emotionally," said Shareefa, a community worker from Gaafu Alifu Island.

Care Society in partnership with Oxfam also ran a Cash for Work programme on eight islands for the first four months of the relief phase. Participants, including 758 women, cleaned up debris and made bricks. "But the project managers were all men," regretted Fathimath, acknowledging that brick making and physical labour is traditionally viewed as men's work. "The men tended to concentrate on completing the projects and paid little attention to the involvement of women although instructions had been given to include at least 30% of women in the project." It was later discovered that the women were being paid less for the same work.



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40% of women in the Maldives endure some form of violence, according to a recent study by the Ministry of Gender and Family. And yet the general public fails to recognise VAW as a predominant social issue.

Women in the Maldives have minimal knowledge or awareness of their rights including ones which talk about VAW, even though the crime has long existed. A United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Gender Ministry study (2004) showed the prevalence of VAW at work, home, in public and in the community, while ActionAid's report "Tsunami Response: A Human Rights Assessment" (2005) revealed similar abuses. According to Care Society, one of the most common forms of VAW in the Maldives is emotional and psychological abuse.

"Any attempt to stir the mechanisms reinforcing patriarchy and VAW is seen as acting against the culture. Reporting or going to the police or taking a case to public office is viewed as unacceptable to most families," said Fathimath, pointing out that there is much work on women's rights to be done across the islands. "Our challenges lie in changing the general outlook of women towards

themselves and protection of their rights, as well as changing the general outlook of the community.”

Already, Care Society with the support of the Gender Ministry has agreed to take the lead in forming a national civil society network to promote work on women’s rights and advocate for changes to VAW policy. They will also take the lead in creating local-level network and a database documenting reported cases of VAW and child abuse.

The networks will link to community-based organisations and include women, youth, representatives of vulnerable groups, civil servants and government officials. Activities will empower women to stand up and raise their voices against VAW

and increase their informed participation in all areas of society.

“We must start working at the grassroots level, which means reaching women in island communities and attempting to increase their awareness on what exactly are their rights and how to ensure that these rights are practiced,” explained an enthused Fathimath. “Currently women tolerate violence due to a lack of awareness about their rights and because there is no official mechanism to combat VAW and assist abused women.”

To do this Care Society will recruit a women’s rights coordinator, assistant and programme officers for 15 islands. They will also train 18 people from 18 islands in psychosocial care and

disaster management with the support of ActionAid Sri Lanka. Also, once the Gender Ministry decentralises services and establishes a social center and social service worker on each island, Care Society will link community-based organisations to these centers and encourage the absorption of their well-trained staff into the government system to strengthen local capacities.

There is willingness from the women, communities and others to take the VAW issue to the national agenda. And though in their initial stages, Care Society has committed to engage in direct interventions on women’s rights and Violence Against Women on a long-term basis.

Zaahidha Shukury is a community worker on Raa Atoll Ungoofaaru, one of 15 islands supported by Care Society. She first met Aifa* at Kandholhudhoo camp for tsunami-affected people (a community she visited weekly) when Aifa decided to come forward and report that her own husband had been raping her.

“I went to Aifa’s household on the pretext of my regular visits and developed an informal relationship with the family. On one particular visit I asked Aifa to go out of the house so I could speak to her husband alone. I opened up the conversation with him by talking about family relationships, intimacy between a husband and wife and how important it is to respect women.

“Aifa’s husband suspected that she had told me something. I probed him by asking if he had done anything in this regard, or anything else he felt bad about. Although he denied it, the following week he approached me with a confession and asked for my help. For the next few months I regularly visited the couple to support them and talk about different issues. Now their problem of marital rape is resolved.”

* Name changed to protect privacy

“After the tsunami, I had the good fortune to meet several lovely people from the islands. What struck me most was that I thought I knew my country well, but how wrong one can be! Geographically the layout of our 200 inhabited islands is so different and the culture and history varies from each and every one. So, never make assumptions of a place, situation, location, culture and the PEOPLE unless you are witness to it. Let us meet the people we are helping!”

**- FATHMATHA AFIYA
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CARE SOCIETY
THE MALDIVES**



Have your say!
Email us in 75 words or less
preetid@actionaidindia.org



meet S. FARAHAMA*

* Name changed to protect privacy

S. Farahama is a programme officer for ActionAid Sri Lanka's partner organisation Foundation of Rural Economic Development (FORED) in Eastern Ampara District. Learn how this resilient survivor of Violence Against Women is helping other women make a positive change to their own lives.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN (VAW).

I got married when I was 17, after being displaced because of the war. My husband worked as a storekeeper in a tile factory. He drank a lot, even while on duty, which resulted in his suspension. He hit me, burnt my dress and tried to kick me out of our home. He said it was because of our age difference. I think another reason was our low income. **This kind of violence occurs in the village, but no one is prepared to tell others because they are not strong like me.** My husband left when I was 26. Now I am 32 and staying at my parents' home with my three children. I started working at FORED as a volunteer.

“We must also give awareness training programmes for both women and men.”

WHAT IS FORED DOING ABOUT VAW?

FORED is running an awareness campaign on sexual violence. Since the tsunami and war many women are compelled to live in temporary shelters or in other people's houses. With no residence, income or security, they are highly subjected to this kind of violence because of their dependency. **Some women try to hide the truth about what is happening.** My job is to look after the awareness campaigns, women's rights workshops, psychosocial programmes, seminars, micro-finance schemes and legal aid support. It is important for affected women like me to be able to share their experience with other affected women.

WHAT CAN OTHER ORGANISATIONS DO ABOUT VAW?

I think that NGOs who want to work on this issue must include the appointment of women staff. They must give women options for a sustainable livelihood and help to develop their capacity so they can feel confident and free from risk and fear. Also, FORED has found that women are the most needy group when it comes to permanent housing, since it reduces their dependency and makes them less vulnerable to sexual violence. This year in partnership with ActionAid Sri Lanka we have built semi-permanent houses for 32 families.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE IMPACT OF VAW ON YOUR LIFE?

I face positive and negative impacts. **The positive things are that I am now able to make decisions independently.** After my husband left all the responsibility fell on my shoulders. Also, I got a good job. My future plan is to become a teacher and speak English very well. On the negative side, the community is fearful to engage with women who are affected by violence, because they don't want to interfere in traditional family issues.

WHAT URGENT MEASURES MUST BE TAKEN TO ADDRESS THIS CRIME?

VAW policies exist in writing in Sri Lanka and there is a VAW body in government, but they are poorly functioning and need proper implementation. Violence-affected women must take legal action against their perpetrators and they must approach VAW organisations for support. **We must also give awareness training programmes for both women and men.**

FORED is working with conflict-affected families in extreme poverty. They are especially committed to promoting peace among youth and future leaders in the local communities.

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ActionAid works with 14 million poor and excluded people in 47 countries in Africa, Asia and the Americas to support them in securing their rights and eradicating poverty. Our tsunami programme works with 400,000 affected people in India, the Maldives, Somalia, Sri Lanka and Thailand

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