

Gender, media and tsunamis

Ammu Joseph

Can there possibly be a gender angle to the tsunami story? Certainly, says Ammu Joseph, pointing out that women from economically and socially deprived communities usually bear the brunt of disasters, thanks to the gender dimension of social inequality and inequity.

We journalists are simply beachcombers on the shores of other people's knowledge, other people's experience, and other people's wisdom. We tell their stories,' said Bill Moyers, host of the public affairs series 'NOW with Bill Moyers', on the US-based PBS television network, speaking at Harvard Medical School in December 2004, after receiving the annual Global Environment Citizen Award presented by the Center for Health and the Global Environment.

Among the many questions this thought-provoking quotation raises are: who are the people whose stories we tell, what aspects of their stories do we choose to highlight, when and where do we look for stories, how do we tell the stories we find, and why do we tell some stories but not others? More specifically, now, as beachcombers on the many shores devastated by the recent tsunamis, whose experience, knowledge and wisdom do we draw upon to tell the many tales waiting to be told? Which are the stories that have remained untold despite the carpet coverage given to the disaster and its immediate aftermath?

Early critiques of media coverage in the wake of the tsunami tragedy of 26 December 2004 and beyond focussed primarily on the widespread use of extremely graphic images of the dead and injured, especially on television, in contrast to the discretion exercised by the international media during the 9/11 disaster in the US, suggesting double standards with regard to the dignity and privacy of human beings in the so-called First and Third Worlds.

There have been other manifestations of the apparently incorrigible bias of sections of the mainstream international media accessible from India – for instance, the excessive, if not exclusive, attention paid to post-disaster aid originating in Western nations, with little mention of inter-Asia assistance and, of course, scant reference to the tremendous outpouring of contributions in cash, kind, labour and expertise from civil society within the affected countries. Similarly, the relative coverage given to the impact of the disaster on different countries is fairly revealing – Somalia, for example, has barely been on the media radar whereas Thailand, where the maximum number of foreign tourists died or disappeared, was very much in focus.

The domestic media, too, have received some brickbats about sensationalism and voyeurism. And about the insensitivity with which grieving, traumatised survivors have been pursued, especially by television reporters anxious to feed the apparently insatiable hunger of 24-hour news channels for dramatic images and sound-bites.

It must be said, however, that in the days after disaster struck, journalists reporting from the affected areas were naturally scrambling to do the best they could to provide information about the unprecedented scale and scope of the devastation caused by the sudden, short-lived blast from the sea. Thanks to their energetic efforts, people elsewhere could at least try to imagine and understand the enormity of the calamity, and do whatever they could to help in a situation of such extensive death and destruction. It goes without saying, therefore, that any discussion on media coverage of the catastrophe is not meant to criticise as much as to learn.

Women affected by the tsunami

Among the many stories that remain to be told are those of tsunami-affected women. This is one aspect of post-tsunami media coverage that does not seem to have received much attention so far. It cannot be said that women have been missing from media coverage – on the contrary, the media tend to focus on women and children in any disaster situation, and this one was no exception. However, they have been appearing primarily as victims (weeping, wailing, awaiting or availing relief), as mothers (faced with bereavement and/or difficult choices, especially in their attempts to save children), and as heroines (for example, the Swedish mother and the British schoolgirl holidaying in Thailand). The question is whether or not such limited representations do justice to women's experiences, concerns and needs following a disaster.

It may seem irrelevant to raise the question of gender awareness in the context of media coverage of a natural disaster such as this one, which obviously affected all those who happened to be in the path of the massive waves – men, women and children. Can there possibly be a gender angle to the tsunami story? Is it at all reasonable to call for a gender perspective while covering the post-tsunami situation?

Assuming that the primary purpose of media coverage of disasters is to highlight the impact of such events, as well as their fallout, on diverse sections of the affected people, especially those at most risk, the answer to those questions is a very definite 'yes'. The fact is that gender, along with other socio-economic variables such as class and caste, race or ethnicity, age and health status, does influence people's experience of the events themselves, as well as their access to subsequent help in coping with the consequences and rebuilding their lives.

What journalist Praful Bidwai wrote a few days after the disaster is significant in this context:

'... Natural disasters are natural only in their causation. Their effects are socially determined and transmitted through mechanisms and arrangements which are the creation of societies and governments. Natural disasters are not socially neutral in their impact. Rather, they pick on the poor and the weak, rather than the privileged.' (The News, Pakistan, 30 December 2004).

Considering the gender-based inequality and inequity that mark most societies – certainly those affected by the recent tsunamis – women are clearly disadvantaged in multiple ways. It naturally follows that women from the economically and socially deprived communities that usually bear the brunt of disasters, both natural and human-made, are likely to be especially vulnerable in the aftermath of calamities, as well as conflicts, unless special care is taken to ensure that their needs and concerns are taken care of.

If disasters are not socially neutral in their impact, clearly policies and programmes for relief, recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction cannot afford to be socially neutral either. If the government and/or other agencies involved in post-disaster or post-conflict work have not yet learnt this well-documented lesson, it is surely up to the media to remind them – and society as a whole – of the special needs, concerns and problems of various groups, including women, in the aftermath of such events.

As a recent United Nations press release put it:

'The Indian Ocean tsunami may have made no distinction between men and women in the grim death toll it reaped with its waves but it has produced some very gender-specific after-shocks, ranging from women's traditional role in caring for the sick to increased cases of rape and abuse. Understanding and measuring these differences is essential for an effective response.'

Gender-related stories

There were a few, scattered glimpses in media coverage soon after disaster struck of the special vulnerabilities of women in such situations. For example, there was one story about women having been hampered by their saris in their bid to escape the waves. And another one about women being raped and molested in unprotected refugee camps. The latter, a Reuters report based on a statement by the Women & Media Collective in Sri Lanka, underlined the importance of expanding the range of news sources to be tapped and taken seriously even in a crisis situation that appears, on the surface, to have nothing to do with gender.

There were also hints of potential gender-related stories in some other early reports. For example, the unscrupulous tactics reportedly employed by some family members in Tamilnadu to corner the funds expected as compensation for deaths does not bode well. Countless earlier examples of post-disaster and post-conflict situations, including the post-Kargil scenario, have demonstrated that the most vulnerable in society – including women and children – often tend to lose out in this process.

Similarly, reports early on about the possibility of adoption-related rules and regulations being officially relaxed to facilitate the adoption of children orphaned by the disaster, raised questions about how the authorities planned to ensure that no predatory adults would exploit the vulnerability of these children – especially, though not only, the girls among them. Fortunately, subsequent warnings from child rights groups and clarifications from the government raise hopes that due care will be taken to minimise opportunities for abuse and trafficking.

However, a number of other important stories concerning women have, by and large, been missing from the media over the past month. For example, media coverage of the impact of the disaster on people's livelihoods seems so far to have focused primarily on the fishermen, their boats, nets, and so on. This may well be because that is what the government and several other agencies are concentrating on. Despite the mandatory, usually superficial and ill-informed quotes and sound-bites from the so-called man/woman-on-the-street that have become media staples these days, the media continue to rely excessively on the 'authorities', 'leaders' of various groups and sundry 'experts' for information on and analysis of crisis situations.

While restoration of fishing is no doubt an obvious and important issue that needs to be urgently tackled, too little attention is apparently being paid to other economic activities in coastal areas, including those involving women. A recent report by a team of volunteers who have just returned from the affected areas points out that rehabilitation packages for livelihoods formulated from a 'property owner centric' viewpoint tend to ignore the needs of people from the fishing and farming communities who do not own boats, nets, lands or shops.

According to them, thousands of people who contribute their labour and skills to the coastal economy and whose livelihoods have also been wrecked by the tsunami, are finding themselves left out of the reckoning. Among them are a wide range of workers, such as landless agricultural labourers, share croppers and tenant farmers, various categories of fish and boat workers, street vendors and petty traders, transport workers, construction labourers, salt pan workers, service providers like barbers, tailors and cobblers, and crafts persons such as basket-weavers.

Information gap

Unfortunately, even reports documenting and highlighting the callous, indefensible neglect of Dalit and Adivasi communities in the relief and rehabilitation process, tend to be gender-blind. Yet women, especially those from such marginalized communities, who form a major section of the informal or unorganised sector of labour, and who rarely own property, are likely to be even more invisible and unaccounted for in this situation. And such an information gap could have serious repercussions in terms of reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts, official and otherwise.

If women's economic activities, losses and needs are not taken into account, the relief, recovery and rehabilitation process may not address the livelihood concerns of a wide range of women, including female heads of households, widows, other single women, older women, destitute women, and so on. Consequently, they and their families may not receive the kind of help they require to survive in the short term, and rebuild their lives in the long term.

Such a situation could prove disastrous for a large number of families, especially among the poor, because many of these women may well be the sole earners and/or supporters of their families. In any case it is widely known that women's earnings generally go directly towards meeting the basic needs of their families, while a substantial proportion of many men's earnings is often spent on personal habits such as drinking, smoking and gambling.

By highlighting women's economic roles and requirements, the media could prompt the authorities and other decision-makers to pay more heed to them. A relatively simple way to do this would be to talk to members of the women's Self Help or Savings and Credit Groups (SHGs and SCGs) that reportedly exist in most of the tsunami-hit villages and highlighting their members' livelihood-related concerns and needs.

At present these groups are being ignored by the government, other agencies as well as gram panchayats in the process of planning and decision-making, according to preliminary reports from a team, including five women survivors of the Latur and Gujarat earthquakes, which visited 13 villages in the worst affected areas in Nagapattinam district in mid-January to share experiences with and assess the needs of fellow disaster-struck women.

The team of grassroots women also uncovered gender disparities in access to available health services – not on account of discrimination per se but because of the general lack of attention to women's special needs and concerns. For instance, in Madatikuppam and other villages where government health teams have been operating since the waves wreaked their havoc, the medical staff on duty said that most of their patients were men and children seeking treatment for fractures, diarrhoea, as well as coughs, colds and fevers. At the same time, many women and girls told the team that they were too embarrassed to go the health camps even though they needed medical attention, because all the doctors were male and the facilities did not provide any privacy for check-ups. Again, the media could play an important part in helping to remove such hurdles to women survivors' access to healthcare.

Tapping women's experiences, knowledge and wisdom for post-disaster media coverage is important to ensure not only that they and their families get a fair deal but also that their communities are helped to recover from the trauma and rebuild their lives in the most appropriate and effective manner.

It is clear, for example, that women are best placed to provide insights into the kind of relief measures and/or materials that would be most useful in the initial stages since they are likely to be the ones trying to ensure that their families are fed and clothed. In view of the vital role they play in ensuring family survival and well-being, their views also need to be subsequently sought on issues such as how and how long the temporary relief camps should operate, what assistance people need when they are in a position to return to their villages, what part the affected people themselves – including women – can and should play in rebuilding their homes and lives, what precautions need to be taken to ensure that reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts take the interests and needs of women and other disadvantaged groups into account, and how to make sure that the situation of women and other traditionally deprived sections of society is better, not worse, in the post-tsunami scenario.

Involving local communities

The experience of survivors of the Latur earthquake – which has since been shared and built upon with earthquake survivors in Gujarat, Turkey and, now, tsunami survivors in Tamilnadu (and, possibly, Sri Lanka) – highlights the immense value of involving communities, particularly women, in the design and implementation of post-disaster plans and programmes, as well as in more long-term efforts towards appropriate, holistic development in the affected areas.

According to Prema Gopalan, executive director of Swayam Shikshan Prayog, a Mumbai-based organisation that facilitated women's involvement in reconstruction and rehabilitation after the 1993 earthquake in Marathwada district, 'The key lesson from Latur is to listen to grassroots women's groups and give them a central role in matters that affect their lives.' This view was echoed by Noeleen Heyzer, executive director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), in a statement issued on 5 January 2005, which called attention to the importance of women's networks for emotional, social and economic recovery, and stated that 'women must be at the heart of the relief efforts and the rebuilding of shattered communities.'

The point is that, while gender is often seen as a narrow, special interest issue far removed from the hurly-burly of hard news coverage, gender awareness can actually lead to a better, more holistic understanding of any event and its after-effects. Taking the time and trouble to talk to women and women's groups - even in a crisis situation – can not only yield insights into the larger picture but point the way to special stories that are not only interesting but significant.

The media – and media professionals – stand to gain by recognising that there is a gender dimension to virtually every event, process, institution and/or individual experience covered by the media, including disasters and conflicts. And that women, including poor and illiterate women, have information, knowledge and opinions on practically everything. Failure to tap women – including those now attempting to resume life after the disaster – as sources and resources can only impoverish media coverage and diminish our understanding of the post-tsunami scenario, as well as many other similar situations.

According to Heyzer, 'The special protection needs of women and girls require attention, and the voices and perspectives of women and women's support networks need to be given visibility in national strategies for relief and reconstruction, by aid organisations, and by the media. By responding in this way, we can turn the crisis into an opportunity for laying the foundations of a future where all people can live with dignity, security and justice.'

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Ammu Joseph is an independent journalist and author based in Bangalore, India, and writing primarily on issues relating to gender, human development and the media. This article is partly based on a presentation on gender-sensitive journalism at a Creative Media Workshop organised by the Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group in Bhubaneswar, 7-10 January 2005.