

Asian Breeze

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Women Today Toward Women-Friendly Cities

The magnitude 9.0 earthquake that occurred off Sumatra and the subsequent tsunami in Indian Ocean, both on December 26, 2004, caused devastating damage, unprecedented in recorded history. The total number of victims in a dozen countries exceeded one million. Of those, over 200,000 of these victims were in Indonesia, the country that suffered the greatest impact. People living near the coastline suffered particularly devastating damage. In Aceh Province, Indonesia, the majority of victims were women and children. Damage to housing was particularly remarkable. Having lost houses, families, furniture and jobs in a single moment, many victims escaped with nothing but the clothes on their backs. The destruction of the living environment by such a great earthquake often makes it difficult to gain safe potable water. This in turn increases risks to human health. Moreover, shortages of milk and food increase the number of undernourished children, further worsening infant/child death rates. In addition, securing equal and fair provision of food and other relief supplies is extremely difficult. All of these factors combine to exacerbate poverty, affecting women particularly. In such an environment, special consideration should be given to helping women who have lost their husbands in the disaster; women who have deep mental trauma and serious concerns for future life; and children who have lost their parents. Under the present chaotic conditions, however, in which no legal protection is provided for victims, many women in shelters are raped or sexually abused in return for food. Moreover, such women and children are extremely vulnerable to human trafficking. Consequently, we must plan future reconstruction programs by paying due attention to all these elements.

The UN-HABITAT (United Nations Human Settlements Programme), for which I am serving as a goodwill ambassador, is committed to improving the living environment, for example, the water supply and sanitary systems as well as resolving other problems related to human settlements. These include the need to eradicate poverty; create more job opportunities; and provide care for vulnerable people, especially, women. The highest priority, however, should be to integrate a gender perspective in post-disaster reconstruction and create "women-friendly cities."



Mari Christine

Ms. Mari Christine
Representative of Asian Women and
Children's Network (AWC)
UN-HABITAT Goodwill Ambassador

UN-HABITAT is currently promoting a campaign with the theme "Toward Women-Friendly Cities." By integrating women's perspectives in urban development plans and other policies to address social problems, the campaign seeks to create a global society that is comfortable for each individual to live in.

In this post-disaster context, women should be treated as key players in reconstruction. Utmost priority should be placed on rebuilding houses for widows; helping them find means of livelihood; and ensuring them fair access to relief supply distribution. Additionally, women should be given the right of decision-making and participation in aid projects and distribution of relief goods. Specifically, women should be given the means to claim land and other properties that have been registered under their husbands' names, and to build mutual aid systems that provide loans without mortgage.

Women are inherently good at developing partnerships and transcending political and religious barriers. Integrating women's perspectives can promote women's empowerment. I believe that this can be the first step in the long process of terminating prolonged armed conflicts and building peace.

It is my sincere hope that the process of reconstruction following the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami will focus on the vulnerable, marginal people including women and children. I also hope that the process of improving their living environment will eventually lead to their empowerment. With these objectives in mind, I will continue to serve as a UN-HABITAT goodwill ambassador.

Profile

Until 4 years old, she lived in Japan. She then lived in Germany, U.S., Iran and Thailand. A comparative culture graduate of Sophia University, she also has a master of Social Engineering from the Tokyo Institute of Technology ('94). Presently, as a representative of Asian Women and Children's Network (AWC) and Japan's UN-HABITAT goodwill ambassador, she is involved in international activities, lectures and literary activities. Some of the topics she addresses include comparative culture, urban planning, women issues, educational problems and human right issues. She is a public relations producer for EXPO 2005 AICHI JAPAN.