

# Gender justice in disaster response

Gender mainstreaming—assessing the implications of any action on women and men—is a well-developed concept among aid providers. Despite this, many of the recovery efforts that followed the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami fell short of specific measures to address the needs of people marginalized by gender and, as a result, often perpetuated pre-disaster inequalities.

Oxfam joined with researchers from Anawim Trust in Tamil Nadu, India, to examine the good practices and challenges of international and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as they tried to implement equitable disaster relief and rehabilitation programs. This type of analysis can help aid practitioners plan future disaster responses that are more sensitive to the needs of women and girls, and in turn more effective at empowering them.

What the researchers uncovered and documented was a highly complex situation where lack of understanding of the local context counteracted many good intentions. The following summary highlights a number of these factors and suggests some ways forward for the international humanitarian community.

## Power structures are complex

During the distribution of relief aid and compensation, government agencies and NGOs delivering aid sometimes found themselves unwittingly reinforcing customs that marginalized women. In many instances, relief workers relied upon panchayats, or traditional village councils, to help distribute aid. But some panchayat leaders resisted delivering aid directly to women, following their customary style of working through male heads of households. Though this unjust practice has since come under fire, the situation reveals a complex set of gender norms, indicating a need for much deeper analysis and a more thoughtful response.



“After the tsunami, initially most rehabilitation aid was given to men, who received fishing boats,” says Shanti Devapiriam, director of the Indian NGO Anawim Trust. “So we focused on the women.” Devapiriam helped women—including the mothers of these children—form self-help groups and learn to run small businesses, and she joined forces with Oxfam and researcher Chaman Pincha to study the successes and struggles of gender mainstreaming in the aftermath of the tsunami. *Russell Miles / Oxfam America*

For example, the researchers suggested that placing high-value assets in the hands of women’s groups (see page 3) is one way to overcome biases against women, citing an example where women were given boats to rent to men. However, those women were threatened by men in a neighboring village, according to Chaman Pincha, team leader of this research project. When NGOs encourage women to confront and resist unfair norms, the women could be left more vulnerable when the NGOs pull out.

On the other hand, the men in the women’s own village supported them because women’s self-help groups had already been established there before the disaster, says Pincha. Having made changes to their social and economic roles within their community before the disaster, the women were able to maintain those standards afterward.

The researchers found examples of local NGOs successfully challenging the traditional panchayats, deciding to work instead through women’s self-help groups and federations,

## Key findings

- ❖ NGOs failed to address gender in their tsunami responses because, despite rhetoric and best intentions, their staff did not have a deep personal understanding of the importance of doing so, or the skills necessary to negotiate complex power relations.
- ❖ International gender mainstreaming tools are not specific enough to be applied to local contexts. Localized gender toolkits developed and implemented prior to a disaster—with input from local responders and communities—could help.

or to distribute relief directly. Other NGOs were able to negotiate new relationships with the panchayats, trying to promote more inclusive practices, such as joint ownership of housing or boats and the creation of new job opportunities for women and other marginalized groups.

Though NGO interventions are usually short-term, local people often take care of one another throughout their lives. As a result, true social change requires local ownership. Understanding this complexity is key to ensuring that NGOs and the women they are trying to help are making informed choices and managing risks.

“It’s jargon until you understand it. Then it changes you.”

—Chaman Pincha, gender researcher, Anawim Trust, on the concept of gender mainstreaming

### Gender means more than just women

The researchers highlighted the fact that navigating these complex power structures also requires NGOs to consider the differences between women, as well as the needs of men and those in power, when designing sustainable relief and rehabilitation activities.

Men and boys are subject as well to strict expectations concerning divisions of labor and norms. In some instances, these norms contribute to their vulnerability after a disaster. For example, a few men widowed by the tsunami resisted the social pressure to remarry. These men stepped outside traditional gender roles to tend to their children and homes while continuing to work. Few NGOs were equipped to identify and support such men in taking on those unfamiliar functions.

In addition, researchers found that tsunami-affected communities had a small transgendered population. Members of that group reported that they were denied temporary shelter and support for their basic needs because they would not identify themselves as either men or women. A more broadly conceived approach to gender by emergency responders would help protect the human rights of all people affected by disasters.

Finally, men in power are also integral to women’s empowerment, which is increasingly the goal of aid agencies. For these programs to be successful and sustainable, they must win the endorsement of those who benefit most from the current hierarchy, usually privileged men.

### Rhetoric and reality

The researchers found that both international and local NGOs, while giving high priority to gender equality and women’s empowerment in their rhetoric, failed to address these issues effectively in their programs. For example, in the relief phase, many relief packages did not include essential items like sanitary napkins, petticoats for saris, or headscarves for Muslim women. In the rehabilitation phase, men’s lost fishing boats were quickly replaced, while the roadside stands where women sold fish were not. This could have been avoided if responding agencies had examined livelihoods differently, engaging in much deeper analyses of women’s needs and of equity between the sexes in each context.

Pincha believes that such discrepancies occurred because aid workers did not truly see through a “gender lens.”

“If I go and preach about change but I myself am not changed, then I will not be convincing. The change has to occur within me first,” she says.

One way for agencies to improve programs is to change the way they talk about women, says Bani Saraswati, an activist. By routinely identifying women as a vulnerable community, “NGOs involuntarily perpetuate the notion that women are weak and they need help,” Saraswati says.

Pincha takes this a step further. By using more accurate language about gender, she says, “[NGOs] will prompt the question of how and why women are rendered vulnerable, instead of taking it as fact that they are vulnerable biologically.”



Chaman Pincha, lead researcher on this study, believes that local responders should receive gender awareness training, because they will be able to apply it immediately in the field. Her team has designed a toolkit and training program for practitioners in South India. *Atul Loke / Panos for Oxfam America*

## Helping women scale the ladder



Aneestha is a Dalit girl from Tamil Nadu whose mother's self-help group now owns 15 fishing boats. Oxfam research points to the positive and potentially long-term impacts of placing high-value assets in the hands of women's groups. *Marie Banu Jawahar / Oxfam*

"Already we were working with [Dalit] women and children before the tsunami because they were the most oppressed in the community," says Devapiriam. "After the tsunami, initially most rehabilitation aid was given to men, who received fishing boats. So, we focused on the women."

Dalit women occupy the lowest rung of India's caste system, which continues to dictate social status in many rural areas. Before the tsunami, even Dalit men rarely owned valuable assets like fishing boats. Both men and women of Dalit castes worked in the most menial of occupations.

However, thanks to a highly successful joint venture with the rural development organization Anawim Trust, three self-help groups of Dalit women are now the proud owners of 15 30-foot fishing boats, which they rent to local fishermen. The trust's director, Shanti Devapiriam, says the self-help groups were organized after the tsunami to enable women to save, lend, and jointly invest money together. They also learned job skills and how to run a business.

"Earlier we used to work as laborers, but now we are the owners of boats," says Devika, who, like many villagers, goes by only one name. "Now men are working in our boats. And we have confidence that we can be the owners of more."

### Strengthening local NGOs can have an impact

The Anawim Trust researchers examined the practices of 11 local NGOs in three Tamil Nadu coastal districts. The goal was to help these NGOs, as responders to future hazards, become more effective in designing and delivering gender-equitable programs.

The participating local NGOs took a number of creative steps to ensure equity in aid distribution. Some joined forces with local women's organizations to cross-check distribution lists, making sure that marginalized people were not excluded. Others developed programs to serve single mothers, pregnant women, and the elderly. Still others ensured that aid supplies included appropriate clothing and undergarments for women, taking into account gender, age, and religion. One local NGO provided free educational materials to daughters of single mothers as an incentive to help them stay in school. Another offered a support group to help girls deal with trauma.

The researchers found that local NGOs can play an important intermediary role in empowering women by linking women to resources they need within government agencies or international NGOs and also by creating or strengthening community-based women's groups.

A common limitation to equity that the researchers found when examining local NGOs was that a high percentage of the NGOs did not have women, or people trained to address discrepancies between men and women, in leadership or program-implementing positions. However, organizations cannot just "add women and stir" to become better at addressing the needs of women: every person in a leadership position has to understand the value of gender analysis and mainstreaming before there can be large-scale institutional change. In addition, a deep understanding of this issue is required at every level, particularly among those working directly with people. Though this study primarily focused on local NGOs, further investigation should look at gender sensitivity of international NGOs as well.

### International principles, local contexts

The researchers learned that it is difficult to address the needs of women in a disaster response, especially when international agencies work through local partners, because there is a chasm between the ideals of the international community and local and cultural contexts. To bridge this gap, the research team—with the help of 11 local NGOs—designed a local gender-mainstreaming toolkit suitable for practitioners in South India.

# Points of interest for aid providers

- **Negotiating complex power structures:** Aid agencies have a role not only in empowering vulnerable groups but also in helping them negotiate healthy relationships with local decision makers, who should continue to invest in the groups' well-being after outside agencies have departed.
- **Thinking beyond women:** Gender shapes vulnerabilities for women and men, boys and girls, and transgendered people, who fall outside traditional definitions of gender. The researchers found that gender needs to be conceived of more broadly and analyzed more critically in a disaster response.
- **Taking action with gender jargon:** The researchers found that many agencies were not "walking their talk" when it came to gender mainstreaming. Sharing practical examples of success could help, as well as developing deep personal understanding and sensitivity in the responding staff.
- **Making changes from within:** An organization is only as good as its employees. Both local and international NGOs can improve their interventions by hiring people who are able to analyze actions according to the needs of men and women. They would also benefit from training current staff to do the same, and from fostering a serious commitment to gender equity from staff at every level.
- **Investing in local and international collaboration:** International NGOs need to support local partners in becoming more gender sensitive in their programs, including their disaster responses. Creating localized gender toolkits by using participatory approaches before the next disaster can lead to a smoother implementation of relief projects that improve the lives of both women and men.

## Oxfam's humanitarian field studies

This brief is one in a series of reports that summarize research Oxfam began with its partners in India and Sri Lanka after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami to study the impact of the disaster and the response. The goals of Oxfam's humanitarian field studies program are to help strengthen the disaster response and risk reduction programs of Oxfam and other humanitarian aid providers and to improve accountability to those we aim to help.

To read more about Oxfam's humanitarian field studies program, please visit [www.oxfamamerica.org/fieldstudies](http://www.oxfamamerica.org/fieldstudies).

The toolkit has also been translated into local languages so that it can be used easily by local aid workers.

However, as Pincha notes, "tools are useless unless people are prepared to use them." To prepare local NGO staff to use this toolkit, the research team asked local NGOs to scrutinize South Indian roles and norms to consider how they can render both men and women more vulnerable.

"Taking international gender guidelines and putting them through this participatory process to create a locally relevant gender toolkit is incredibly powerful," says N. Hari Krishna, Oxfam's disaster risk reduction and research specialist in India. "Replicating this accomplishment in other disaster-prone areas of the world could lead to better gender-based responses in future emergencies."

## Acknowledgments

This brief is based on research conducted by Anawim Trust, an Oxfam partner based in Tamil Nadu, India, and principle researcher Chaman Pincha and her research team. We would like to thank N. Hari Krishna of Oxfam who provided technical and advisory support throughout. We would also like to thank the hundreds of NGO staff, government officers, and community members who participated in the study and volunteered their time and insights. For more information about Anawim Trust, please visit [www.anawimtrust.org](http://www.anawimtrust.org). For more information on this research, please send an email to [pincha.chaman@gmail.com](mailto:pincha.chaman@gmail.com).

Oxfam International is a confederation of 13 organizations working together in more than 120 countries to find lasting solutions to poverty and injustice.

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## Conclusion

Most international aid agencies consider the empowerment of women among their goals. Yet the tsunami recovery effort highlighted obstacles to meeting the needs of women in a post-disaster environment. Translating this goal into effective programs during the post-emergency environment is a hugely complex challenge. It requires internal commitment at all levels of an agency, nuanced understanding of local cultural context, consultation with communities, and the buy-in of all stakeholders. Partnering with local agencies that share the vision of equity between men and women and helping to develop their capacity even further is crucial.



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