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## **WHITE PAPER: Reaching Out to Women When Disaster Strikes**

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*The tsunami's swirling waves hit the Indonesian shoreline before anyone had time to react. In a split second, Tanya's entire life is washed away—her home and village gone, her husband dead. She sets off with the other survivors to a village on higher land. But Tanya struggles; she must also look after the welfare of her ailing daughter and sick mother.*

*At the tsunami refugee camp, Tanya lies awake at night, worrying about how she will feed her daughter and mother. She cowers in fear wondering whether she, like some of the other women at the camp, will be raped by her fellow refugees. When the international aid ends, she wonders how she will survive.*

On any given day, natural disasters—floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis or wild fires—can strike any area of the world. Disasters result in property damage, loss of life, and the creation of displaced persons or refugees needing assistance with safety, housing, nutrition and health care. When disaster strikes, relief organizations work to ensure that people are safe and have access to basic necessities.

In the last few years, disasters were on the rise and their impact continued to increase. In 2008, for example, 321 disasters were recorded, killing an estimated 236,000 people and affecting 211 million more. Today, a large number of people are still feeling the pain and suffering from recent disasters, such as the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in China and Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar 2008. (International Strategy for Disaster Reduction)

Just a few months into 2010, however, the world experienced a slew of costly and deadly natural disasters, from the catastrophic Haiti and Chilean earthquakes, to a series of snowstorms and freezing weather in China. In comparison to previous years, the number of casualties from natural disasters in 2010 is outside the norm. (Rettner, *A Disastrous Year: 2010 Death Toll Already Abnormally High*)

According to a landmark study by the United Nations, global disaster risk is increasing worldwide due to unsafe cities and the combined impact of environmental destruction and climate change. The U.N. International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) reported that over the past decade more than 3,800 disasters have occurred claiming 780,000 lives. After earthquakes, storms and extreme temperatures were the most deadly disasters between 2000 and 2009. (United Nations Radio)

While disasters create hardships for everyone, women and children are disproportionately vulnerable. During natural disasters, women and children are 14 times more likely to die than are men (Kristina Peterson). Following the 2004 Asian Tsunami, Oxfam found that women made up more than 70 percent of the dead. Women lack mobility and access to resources, have increased family responsibilities, and are susceptible to physical danger. Despite the vulnerable position of women prior to and following a disaster, their special needs are often ignored, as are their unique abilities to respond.

## **Why Women Are More Vulnerable**

Women suffer more in disasters for two main reasons: women occupy a more tenuous position in society prior to the disasters, and they have additional burdens as caregivers to children and the elderly. After studying the 1995 earthquake in Colima, Mexico, Researcher Carolina Serrat Vinas concluded that disaster “magnifies women’s responsibilities and impedes their activities.”

As a result of historical, political, cultural and societal conditions, women occupy an inferior position in society in most countries around the world. In a study of 141 countries, it was found that when it came to deaths, gender differences were directly linked to women’s economic and social rights. In societies where women and men enjoyed equal rights, disasters caused the same number of deaths in both sexes. (International Union for Conservation of Nature) The reality remains, however, that women make up 70 percent of the 1.3 billion people living in abject poverty worldwide (on less than \$1 per day). As a result, they are more vulnerable to the impact of disasters due to existing socio-economic, political and cultural conditions. (International Strategy for Disaster Reduction)

Therefore, women are at a disadvantage even before disaster strikes. Women often lack access to formal jobs, transportation, communication systems and secure housing. Women also make up the majority of those working in agriculture and in the informal economy, which constitute low-paying jobs with little or no security and benefits. When disaster strikes, these areas are hardest hit, resulting in women making up the majority of the unemployed post-disaster. (Pan American Health Organization)

In addition, women have responsibilities as caregivers. Women are most often responsible for taking care of children, the elderly and the disabled. This caregiver role limits their mobility and options during and after disasters. During disasters, women are less able to evacuate. Even if there is warning of a coming disaster, poor women lack the resources needed to flee. Evacuating is even more difficult for women with children and elderly women.

Women’s responsibilities as caregivers also impede their ability to rebuild after the disaster. Following disasters, women are unable to migrate for work, as men do, and the number of female-headed households increases. When housing is destroyed and families are moved to refugee camps or temporary shelters, the “domestic burdens of caring for dependents increases at the same time that economic burdens increase.” (Pan American Health Organization) In addition, women are less able to access jobs available in the aftermath of disasters because they need to care for children and there is no access to safe or reliable childcare.

Furthermore, pregnant or lactating women face additional challenges, as they have an increased need for food and water, and their mobility is limited. In Kenya, for example, fetching water may use up to 85 percent of a woman’s daily energy intake; in times of drought a greater workload is placed on women’s shoulders, some spending up to eight hours a day in search of water. (International Union for Conservation of Nature). At any given time, an average of 18 to 20 percent of the reproductive-age female population is either pregnant or lactating. (Shrade and Delane) These biological factors create a highly vulnerable population within a group that is already at risk.

Women are also more likely to suffer malnutrition because they have specific nutritional needs when they are pregnant or breastfeeding, and some cultures have food hierarchies. As to the latter, in Kenya, men often eat first and are served the highest quality of food products. This unequal pattern of food distribution between genders within the household from childhood through adulthood may have long-term nutritional and health implications for women, especially during pregnancy and breastfeeding. (African Health Sciences) In south and Southeast Asia, 45-60 percent of women of

reproductive age are below their normal weight and 80 percent of pregnant women have iron deficiencies. (International Union for Conservation of Nature)

During and after disasters, women and girls also suffer from a heightened risk of physical and sexual violence. Women and girls' vulnerability increases when they are left alone because male relatives leave to migrate for work or are killed. The likelihood of sexual violence grows when women and girls are living in shelters or refugee camps. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, there were dozens of reports of rape in emergency shelters and relief facilities. Further, lack of adequate reporting procedures made it difficult for authorities to effectively track rape cases and apprehend perpetrators. (Lauer, *Rape Reporting Procedure Missing After Hurricane*)

In Haiti, violence against women has always been an unaddressed catastrophe, according to Haitian women's rights organizations that state that human trafficking and sex tourism were thriving businesses even before the earthquake. Prior to the devastating quake there, 72 percent of Haitian girls surveyed had been raped and at least 40 percent of women were victims of domestic violence. In the aftermath of the earthquake, the risk to women and girls has dramatically increased. (Bien-Aime, *Haiti's Women in the Aftermath of Disaster*) Sexual assaults are daily occurrences in the biggest camps, aid workers say – and most attacks go unreported because of the shame, social stigma and fear of reprisals from attackers. (Faul, *Rape in Haiti: Women, Girls Detail Violent Attacks in Aftermath of Haiti Earthquake*)

In a show of solidarity, outgoing Chilean President Michelle Bachelet visited earthquake-ravaged Haiti and joined forces with the United Nations Women's Fund (UNIFEM) to advocate for the women of Haiti. During her visit to Haiti in February 2009, Bachelet called for equal participation of women in discussion of Haiti's future, and also the need to focus on immediate needs, including preventing gender-based violence. She also presented strong recommendations of the central role of women in post-disaster reconstruction and relief work. (United Nations News Service)

The risk of forced marriage, labor exploitation and trafficking all increase in the uncertain times during and after a disaster. These issues came to light following the Asian tsunami in 2004. Oxfam reports that with the overwhelming loss of women, young girls are being forced into marriage with remaining widows. Furthermore, they are encouraged to have more children with less spacing between births in order to replace lost community members.

The stress and economic uncertainty that results from disasters can also translate into increased domestic violence, which has been documented after natural disasters in several areas of the world. When shelters are damaged or destroyed and alternate housing is unavailable, it is more difficult for women to leave. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, at least six domestic violence shelters in Louisiana were destroyed, along with several others in Mississippi, limiting domestic violence services to women and children in need. Domestic violence is not a priority for overburdened police and disrupted courts. (Enarson, *Does Domestic Violence Increase After Disaster?*)

### **What Women Need**

In the aftermath of disasters, people need shelter, food, water, health care and new sources of income. Women need all of this plus recognition of additional assistance and protections due to their vulnerable position.

**Women need housing.** Depending on the situation, women need access to safe housing or shelter separate from men to whom they are not related. Women living in safe housing prior to disasters should be transferred to a new safe location and not housed with the general population, as this could

put them and their children at risk. Women also need access to safe and secure bathrooms that they do not share with men.

**Women need safety.** Women need special protections against the increased risk of sexual and physical violence. Yifat Susskind, associate director of MADRE, an international human rights organizations, states “in a crisis, the mechanisms that are usually in place to prevent rape, violence and molestation have disappeared. There are no family members to protect women and girls, no houses in which to hide, and fewer police and armed forces to dissuade would be criminals.” (Pikul) And, as stated earlier, women are also vulnerable to trafficking and domestic violence.

**Women need health care.** Women’s special health care needs must be addressed. Care packages should be designed for women to provide for their health and nutritional needs. Reproductive health care must be provided during and after disasters to prevent and reduce illnesses and disabilities during pregnancy and labor. (International Committee of the Red Cross) Swanee Hunt, Director of the Women and Public Policy Program at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, and Dan Steinberg, Senior Fellow at the US Institute for Peace, argue that during and after disasters “when emergency care is a priority, reproductive health is relegated to second place, which can lead to skyrocketing infant and maternal mortality rates.”

**Women need access to resources.** Women should have equal access to disaster relief resources. Many reasons exist why women lack access now, including the patriarchal structure of society; lack of access to transportation to get where the relief is being distributed; and a lack of knowledge about and inability to complete needed paperwork. Experience from past disasters also suggests that women and children in the aftermath of the Haiti earthquake may not be getting a fair share of the massive relief aid pouring into that country. Existing inequalities are made worse by disasters, according to Dr. Marijke Velzeboer-Salcedo, gender expert with the Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO). “Those who are stronger and more powerful, whether physically or psychosocially – or both – are going to have better access to scarce resources. But when women are deprived of resources, entire families are likely to be deprived, too.” (Relief Web)

Also, because women are the primary caregivers in families, they are often required to stay home or in shelters with children, the elderly or the disabled, while men can access resources. Women need to be directly targeted to receive resources such as food and water. The resources available should also be distributed in equitable ways that respect women’s traditional roles as caregivers and managers of the household.

**Women need equality before the law.** Hunt and Steinberg state that women have more difficulty replacing lost identification papers following disasters that are needed to access relief and social services. Both Oxfam and the Global Fund for Women reported that women had difficulty accessing disaster relief resources because government or insurance benefits had been registered in only the man’s name, and in some areas only male-headed households were recognized by authorities as being eligible for relief. Finally, around the world women are denied the right to own property. This problem is magnified following a disaster when women cannot claim ownership of the family property if their male relatives have died or cannot access insurance or other resources if the property has been destroyed.

**Women need earning opportunities.** Finally, women need access to both short- and long-term earning opportunities. Disasters can result in even more single female heads of household, and their need to rebuild their lives is crucial for them and their children. In the short-term, disaster relief for cash projects should be made available to women. And, in longer term planning, income-generating activities targeted to women also must be included. (Oxfam)

## **Participating in the Process**

A major component in assisting women during and after disasters is to involve them in the planning and implementing of disaster relief programs. Women are better able to communicate their needs and devise plans to meet them. Because women understand their vulnerability, they more often work proactively to put systems in place in the event that disaster strikes.

Following disasters, women are generally better at organizing the community. Women form groups and networks to act on the most pressing needs of the community. They work by creating formal and informal groups to organize shelters, coordinate relief efforts, and re-activate existing women's groups to meet immediate needs. These networks often work across differences such as ethnicity, religion or politics. While men often rely on government aid and on strategies that take them away from the community, women are savvy at solving problems locally. (Viñas, Schrade and Hunt and Steinberg)

Women are fair and effective distributors of resources, and are more likely to ensure that food and other essential items are equitably distributed within the household. Men are less likely to understand household needs, and are more likely to sell or barter these items in order to engage in activities for their personal benefit. (Schrade) Including women in the distribution of relief resources limits the potential for exploitation, which can occur when men have control of the resources. (International Committee of the Red Cross) Furthermore, empowering women during disasters and in disaster relief increases their status as leaders. (Hunt)

Yet another reason to include women in the rebuilding process is the possibility of making long-lasting changes to improve the lives of women and girls within society. A disaster often creates an opportunity for women to challenge and change their gendered status in society. For instance, following Hurricane Mitch in Guatemala and Honduras in 1998, women proved themselves indispensable in responding to the disaster and were able to take an active role in what were traditionally considered "male tasks," such as constructing new shelters and digging wells. (Pan American Health Organization)

Speaking at a United Nations conference, Jan Peterson of the Huairou Commission on Women, Homes and Community stated "the challenge lies in looking at a disaster and making it an opportunity for development, supporting the work of grassroots women, and creating an international network of women who are experts on disasters at the local level. ..." Following a disaster and the subsequent recovery period, women may find they have carved out new roles for themselves in the community.

Women have special needs following a disaster and special talents to respond to the disaster. Disaster relief can only be successful when these needs are met and women's talents utilized. It is important, as the Oxfam report argues, that thinking shift from women as "vulnerable victims" to the understanding that women are citizens with specific capabilities and perspectives.

In addition, prevailing policies and frameworks do not adequately recognize and support the crucial role that women play in sustaining household and community economies and social networks. Participants of the International Conference on Gender and Disaster Risk Reduction from 43 countries gathered in Beijing, China, in early 2009, to promote gender equality in disaster risk reduction. Delegates recommended nine achievable actions before 2015, urging governments to make strong commitments to integrate gender analysis, data and perspective in disaster recovery and reconstruction. (Beijing Agenda for Global Action on Gender-Sensitive Disaster Risk Reduction)

An increasing number of governments are recognizing the importance of gender issues in their national Disaster Risk Reduction report to the UNISDR, although meaningful progress is far from adequate. In 2004, only 19 out of 118 countries mentioned gender or women's issues in their national reports for the World Conference on Disaster Reduction. By 2009, 51 of 62 national reports to UNISDR acknowledged gender as important to Disaster Risk Reduction, but there was still very little concrete mainstreaming in policies and programs. (United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction Secretariat; International Union for the Conservation of Nature; United Nations Development Programme)

For the most part, gender considerations are still largely marginalized from the disaster risk reduction progress. In daily realities, however, women, who suffer the most in the aftermath of natural disasters are also the most resilient forces. (Beijing Agenda for Global Action on Gender-Sensitive Disaster Risk Reduction)

### **Soroptimist Disaster Recovery Fund**

The Soroptimist Disaster Recovery Fund, funded by donations from Soroptimist members, is a grant program designed to assist women and girls who have been victims of natural disasters or acts of war. Funds are used to provide immediate assistance, as well as for longer-term recovery projects.

### **9/11 Disaster Recovery**

Although there was an enormous outpouring of financial support following the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City, women's needs were not being met. In response, Soroptimist sent donations to four domestic violence agencies operating in lower Manhattan: The New York Association for New Americans (NYANA); the New York Asian Women's Center (NYAWC); Sanctuary for Families; and Barrier Free Living. Each organization used their funds to help restore services that were disrupted as a result of the attacks. In 2002, additional donations were made to NYANA and NYAWC to ensure continued service. Donations made to these four organizations totaled \$84,000.

### **Tsunami Disaster Recovery**

In response to the 2004 earthquake and tsunami in Asia, Soroptimist donated \$10,000 to the United Nations Population Fund to help meet the urgent health, hygiene and protection needs of women in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Maldives. Funds were used to provide women with: obstetric care; psycho-social support; access to basic services including water, sanitation, and food; support services following incidences of violence; and for personal hygiene products.

At the one-year anniversary of the tsunami, three additional donations were made. Soroptimist donated \$40,000 to the Center for Women's Development and Research in India to create and strengthen employment opportunities for single women; provide health services to women; and to provide supplementary education, life skills and vocation skills-training to adolescent girls.

Soroptimist also donated \$29,000 to Project Sri Lanka to assist with the reconstruction of a girls' school; and an additional \$18,000 was donated to establish a scholarship program enabling low-income girls to attend the school. Thirdly, Soroptimist donated \$33,000 to MADRE and INFORM in Sri Lanka in support of their project: *Women in the Reconstruction Process: A Human Rights and Relief Initiative for Tsunami-affected Sri Lankan Women*, which helped ensure that women and girls were included in the planning and implementation of resettlement and reconstruction efforts. Funds were used for the construction of a resource center to house the offices of INFORM and other local women's organizations.

### **Hurricane Katrina Disaster Recovery**

Following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Soroptimist donated \$10,000 to the Louisiana Coalition against Domestic Violence. Funds were used to provide basic needs for women and their children, such as food, diapers, clothing and prescriptions. Funds were also used to help relocate domestic violence victims whose shelters were destroyed by the hurricane.

Soroptimist also donated \$34,500 to the Institute for Women's Policy Research to fund their study, [\*Women in the Wake of the Storm: Examining the Post-Katrina Realities of the Women of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast\*](#). The study chronicles the effects of the disaster on the women of New Orleans and the surrounding affected areas of Mississippi and provides concrete information about what women need both during and after disasters, including affordable housing, non-traditional job training and laws that protect against job discrimination, quality child care, schools and health care services.

Two years after Hurricane Katrina, as women's agencies in New Orleans still struggled to keep their doors open, Soroptimist donated \$20,000 each to the SARA Center of the Metropolitan Center for Women and Children and the New Orleans Women's Health Clinic (NOWHC). The SARA Center used the funds to provide clients with legal services and transportation to court and medical appointments. NOWHC used the funds to help pay salaries of the clinic's nurse practitioner and medical director.

### **Kenya Election Violence Recovery**

In 2007, following the disputed general elections in Kenya, political violence erupted throughout the country, resulting in an estimated 255,000 people displaced from their homes. Soroptimist donated \$52,000 to clubs in Kenya to help aid in disaster recovery efforts. Funds were used to address the needs of women and girls, including providing basic necessities, such as food, personal hygiene items, blankets; clothing, and shelter; financial support for women to start/restart businesses; and financial support for girls to attend school.

### **Haiti**

Because Haiti is part of Soroptimist's European federation, SIA made a donation in 2010 of \$10,000 to Soroptimist International of Europe to support disaster recovery efforts for women and girls.

### **Soroptimist Disaster Recovery Grants**

Each year, Soroptimist awards disaster recovery grants to clubs so that they may address post-disaster needs of the women and girls in their communities. In 2008-2009, Soroptimist granted \$70,000 to clubs for their disaster recovery projects. For example, Soroptimist International of Cedar Rapids/USA received \$20,000 to rebuild the commercial laundry facilities of a domestic violence shelter that had been damaged during a flood; while clubs in the Philippines, following a devastating typhoon, received \$20,000 to build an employment skills training center and to establish a micro-lending business to help women start small businesses.

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