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WHITE PAPER: Reaching Out to Women When Disaster Strikes

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, disasters can strike any area of the world. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines disasters as “any occurrence that causes damage, ecological disruption, loss of human life or deterioration of health and health services on a scale sufficient to warrant an extraordinary response from outside the affected communities.”(World Health Organization) Natural disasters can include volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, floods, cyclones, or more long term epidemics, drought or famine, resulting 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 2007, there was a marked increase in the number of floods compared with the last seven years, with Asia hit hardest. Last November, more than 4,000 people were killed by a cyclone in Bangladesh, with more than 3,000 fatalities from severe floods reported in Bangladesh, India, North Korea and China. (United Nations/International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, *Disaster Figures for 2007*)

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). Dr. Eric Neumayer of the London School of Economics and Political Research confirmed that in his longitudinal study (1981-2002) of 141 countries, reporting that “more women than men die as the direct and indirect result of natural disasters.” When his study was released in 2006, Professor Neumayer stated: “Natural disasters are a tragedy in their own right but in countries with existing gender discrimination women are the worst hit.”(Neumayer, p.1)

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. Women make up 70 percent of the 1.3 billion people living in abject poverty worldwide (on less than \$1 per day). 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)

Socially determined roles in certain countries also impact women during and after disasters. For example, following an earthquake in Maharashtra, India, more women and girls died because they were at home, while men were out in open areas or in the fields, and the boys were at school. One study on a 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh noted that women died with their children at home because they had “to wait for their husbands to return and make an evacuation decision.” Another report from Bangladesh describes a father who was unable to hold on to both his son and daughter being swept away in a tidal wave. He helplessly released his daughter because he said his son had to carry on the family line. (World Health Organization)

Those gender roles also were witnessed in the response phase of Hurricane Andrew in the United States. In one study, women were found responsible for “caring for family members, stocking supplies and preparing the household, while men were responsible for securing external areas of the house.” In other countries, cultural norms may also inhibit women from accessing relief centers or help, or often, they cannot leave their homes due to child-care responsibilities. (World Health Organization)

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. According to American writer Kathleen Bergin, Hurricane Katrina was a “highly racialised and gendered event” which hit African-American women hardest. “More than half of the women in the city of New Orleans were single mothers, independently responsible for ensuring they and their children survived the storm,” she says. (Disaster Brief)

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. In some cases, post-disaster “flight of men” occurs, leaving women as sole earners. This has been observed in Miami, rural Bangladesh, the Caribbean and Brazil

where it was reported that men abandoned women and families and used relief aid for themselves. (World Health Organization)

Furthermore, pregnant or lactating women face additional challenges, as they have an increased need for food and water, and their mobility is limited. 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. Studies have reported adverse reproductive outcomes following disasters, including early pregnancy loss, premature delivery, stillbirths, delivery-related complications and infertility. A study from Israel reported an increase in delivery rates during the 48 hours following an earthquake and a significant increase in the premature delivery rate. (World Health Organization).

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*) Furthermore, a recent study funded by Soroptimist pointed to a shortage of housing as a factor leading to physical and sexual violence. Extended families are forced to share housing and battered women are forced to return to abusers because of a lack of housing. (Jones-DeWeever, 10)

In addition, women and girls are more vulnerable and may be coerced into sex for basic needs such as food, shelter and security. The sex industry often becomes part of the interaction between the refugee or displaced population and the local community. (World Health Organization). Also, incidents of trafficking for sex were reported after the Asian Tsunami when unaccompanied girls and young women were at an increased risk.

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. Following a major Australian flood in 1990, one observer noted that women experiencing violence in the home, who were socially isolated, became even more isolated and there was an increase in domestic violence. And after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquakes, the director of a battered women's shelter in Santa Cruz, California, reported a 50 percent increase in requests for temporary restraining orders. (World Health Organization). In addition, 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

Many times male-dominated recovery groups see disasters "through the eyes of men" and may organize relief work in a manner that does not take gender differences and women's specific needs

into consideration. For example, contraceptives, sanitary napkins and counseling services for domestic violence are rarely available in emergency situations. In addition, in the aftermath of disasters, women need the basics: shelter, food, water, health care and new sources of income, but also need additional assistance and protections due to their vulnerable positions. (World Health Organization)

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. Following disasters, affordable housing must be made available to women and their children to limit their risk of sexual and physical violence.

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. 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) For example, after the October 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, the worst natural disaster in that country's history, Pakistani women took an active role in building disaster-resilient communities. (Reuters Foundation AlertNet)

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.

While most disasters cannot be prevented, policy makers, international and humanitarian organizations must develop better policies to address the special needs of women in the wake of large-scale disasters. (Neumayer, p.1)

On International Women's Day 2008, the director of the secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, Salvano Briceno, stated: "Today I encourage governments to recognize and seize hold of the immense potential gains in socioeconomic development and resilience that can be made by adequately incorporating women's needs into national disaster risk reduction plans ... however, advancing gender perspectives and women's rights is not just a job for women. More men must advocate at a high level for the empowerment of women, and for the incorporation of gender budgeting into national and local development (disaster risk reduction) plans." (United Nations/International Strategy for Disaster Reduction. *International Women's Day 2000*)

A need to assess the impact of disasters on women is also noted in the Hyogo Framework for Action (2005-2015). Endorsed in Kobe, Japan, by 168 governments shortly after the tsunami in the Indian Ocean, that framework offers a number of concrete measures to make communities and nations more resilient to any type of disasters. It reads, in part: "A gender perspective should be integrated into all disaster risk management policies, plans and decision-making processes." (United Nations/International Strategy for Disaster Reduction. *International Women's Day 2000*)

WHO also recommends the "urgent need for international data" and better research concerning the impact of disasters on women. It also points to the needs for disaster relief programs and policies to better incorporate gender-specific needs, such as gender training of emergency managers and health service providers. (World Health Organization)

Soroptimist Assistance

Soroptimist has a long-standing Disaster Relief Fund, which is supported by voluntary donations from members. Prior to the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, funds were disbursed to general disaster relief efforts—regardless of whether these efforts specifically targeted women. The special challenges of women were particularly evident following the terrorist attacks in New York City. Even with the enormous outpouring of financial support, it became clear that women's needs were not being met. Therefore, Soroptimist sent donations that it had received from around the world to four domestic violence agencies operating in lower Manhattan. The New York Association for New Americans (NYANA) Center for Women and Families, the New York Asian Women's Center (NYAWC), Sanctuary for Families, and Barrier Free Living each received grants to help restore services that were negatively affected as a result of the attacks in New York City. In 2002, additional donations were made to NYANA and NYAWC to ensure continued and effective service to all clients, bringing the total contributions to about \$84,000.

Tsunami Disaster Relief

In response to the December 26, 2004 earthquake and tsunami in Asia, Soroptimists from around the world donated money to help women and girls in the affected areas rebuild their lives. In January 2005, Soroptimist made an initial \$10,000 donation to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in response to its appeal to meet the urgent health, hygiene and protection needs of women in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Maldives—the three countries affected most by the disaster. The UNFPA plan was to assist women with childbirth and emergency obstetric care; provide psycho-social support to women who had become heads of households as a result of the disaster; promote the access of unaccompanied women to basic services including water, sanitation, food and healthcare; prevent and treat cases of violence against women; and distribute tampons and sanitary napkins.

Soroptimist pledged to make additional donations to help women and girls rebuild their lives at the one-year anniversary of the disaster. The three projects to which Soroptimist has donated support funds are:

Center for Women's Development and Research, India. Soroptimist awarded about \$40,000 for a project that is creating and/or strengthening the employment opportunities for 100 single women, providing health education and health services to nearly 2,500 women, and providing supplementary education, life skills and vocation skills-training to 250 adolescent girls.

Project Sri Lanka. Soroptimist awarded \$29,000 to assist with moving a girls' school—one of Sri Lanka's leading national schools damaged by the tsunami—and helping to fund the reconstruction of four classrooms. In addition, Soroptimist is currently working with the organization to form a scholarship program and will fund an additional \$18,000 enabling low-income girls to attend school.

MADRE and INFORM, Sri Lanka. Soroptimist granted about \$33,000 to the organizations' project, *Women in the Reconstruction Process: A Human Rights and Relief Initiative for Tsunami-affected Sri Lankan Women*. The project will ensure that women and girls are fully included in the planning and implementation of resettlement and reconstruction efforts. Soroptimist's donation will fund the construction of a resource center that will be used as an office for INFORM and other local women's organizations.

Hurricane Katrina Disaster Relief

Soroptimist International of the Americas made a \$10,000 disaster relief donation to the Louisiana Coalition against Domestic Violence (LCADV). The LCADV, a non-profit network that works to end domestic violence against women, is helping women and their children with basic needs such as food, diapers, clothing and prescriptions. In addition, the group, which lost three shelters and closed four others due to the hurricane and floods, relocated domestic violence victims who were staying at the shelters prior to Katrina.

An additional \$33,000 was given by Soroptimist to fund a research study conducted by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR). Called "Women in the Wake of the Storm: Examining the Post-Katrina Realities of the Women of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast," the study found that women faced and continue to confront special challenges to their health, safety, and economic wellbeing in the lingering aftermath of hurricane Katrina; that women were at an increased risk of exposure to sexual assault and domestic violence; and that they encounter greater economic hurdles when rebuilding their lives. The study can be read at <<http://www.iwpr.org/pdf/D481.pdf>>.

Finally, two \$20,000 grants were given to the New Orleans Women's Health Clinic and the Sara Center to provide women with needed access to health care and legal assistance in matters of sexual and domestic violence.

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