

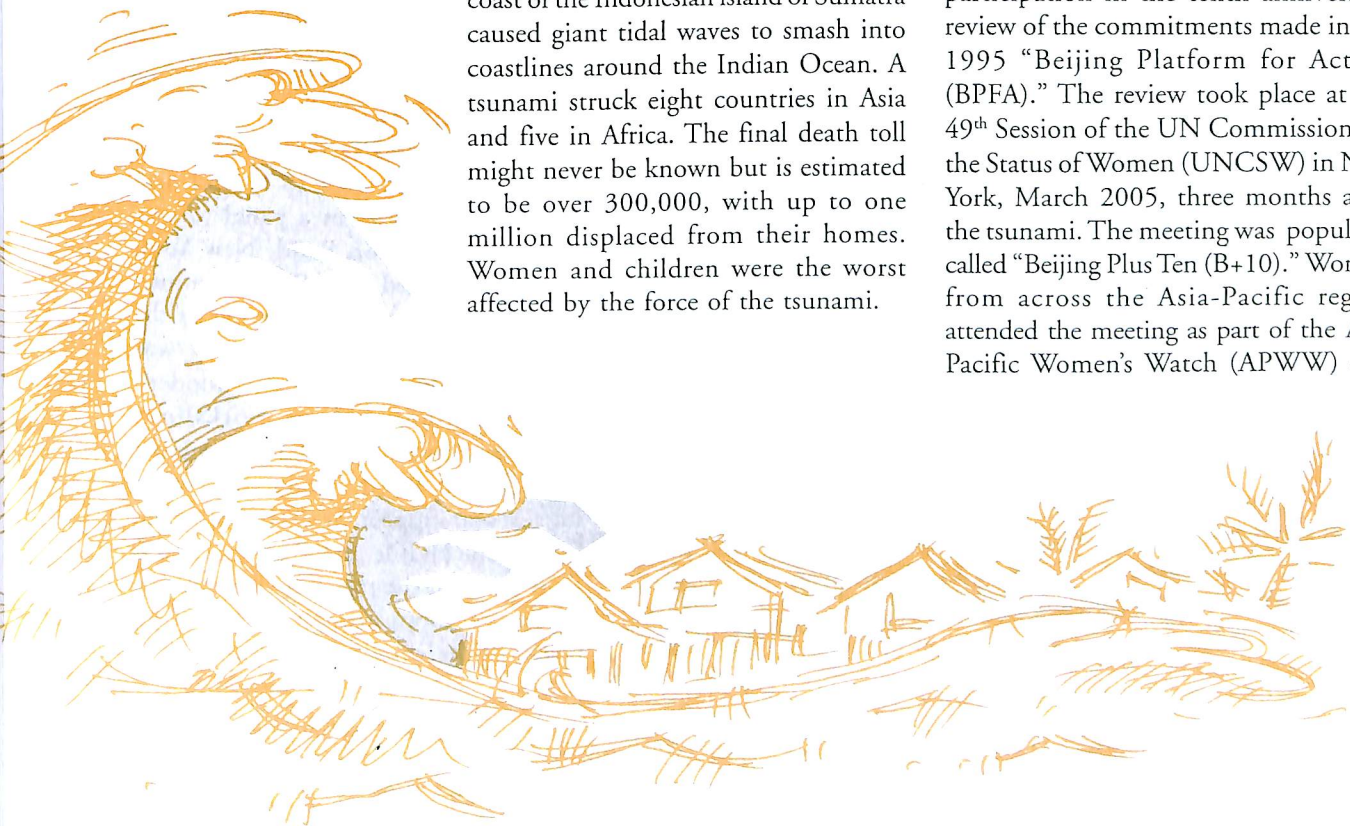
# Post-Tsunami: Seizing the Moment

*How APWW and the AP NGO Forum used the “Review of the BPFA” to strengthen the response of the international community to the needs of women and children affected by the tsunami*

by Eileen Pittaway

**On** December 26, 2004, one of the greatest tragedies of modern times occurred. A gigantic earthquake off the coast of the Indonesian island of Sumatra caused giant tidal waves to smash into coastlines around the Indian Ocean. A tsunami struck eight countries in Asia and five in Africa. The final death toll might never be known but is estimated to be over 300,000, with up to one million displaced from their homes. Women and children were the worst affected by the force of the tsunami.

For many months prior to this disaster, women’s groups around the world had been working towards their participation in the tenth anniversary review of the commitments made in the 1995 “Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA).” The review took place at the 49<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN Commission for the Status of Women (UNCSW) in New York, March 2005, three months after the tsunami. The meeting was popularly called “Beijing Plus Ten (B+10).” Women from across the Asia-Pacific region attended the meeting as part of the Asia Pacific Women’s Watch (APWW) and





Judy Pasirno

*Women tsunami-survivors, from different religions, attending a 3-day post-tsunami conference (by APWLD) inside a mosque in the province of Aceh, Indonesia*

the Asia Pacific Non-Government Organization Forum (AP NGO Forum). Many of these women came from countries affected by the tsunami.

Women activists who attend UN meetings are often questioned about the purpose of what they do and the value of the documents for which they work so hard to influence, such as the BPFA. At B+10, women from the APWW and AP NGO Forum used the opportunity to fight for the rights of the women and children affected by the 2004 tsunami. They linked the needs of the women to commitments made in the BPFA and successfully argued for governments to commit to ensuring that these commitments are respected in all aspects of disaster response. One of the important results that they achieved was a new Economic and Social Council

(ECOSOC) Resolution drafted by the NGOs from APWW, proposed by the Philippine government, and adopted unanimously by the member-states.<sup>1</sup> The Resolution provides for the integration of gender perspective in post-disaster relief, especially in the tsunami-hit areas. It is a major step forward and an example of the power of civil society to use the UN process to fight for the rights of marginalised groups. But this is going ahead of the story of the women's work at the BPFA review.

### How the Women Seized the Moment at the B+10

By March 2005, there were significant reports coming from tsunami-hit countries indicating serious gender-related concerns (*see boxed article on page 29*). Given the geographical location of the affected areas and the tsunami's impact on the women in the region, NGOs and women's groups acknowledged that it was also critical to raise gender issues in relation to the tsunami impact and response. At the UNCSW meeting in New York, APWW decided to host a "side event" for which it invited representatives from each tsunami-affected area to attend and present these issues in a panel forum. The UN Population Fund, New York, generously hosted the APWW seminar. The participation at the meeting by the women from the affected areas was financed by several international funders. This was one of three workshops focusing on women and the tsunami that were held at B+10. There was strong interest and support for the issues raised, both from NGOs and from the states represented at the meeting. The women in the workshops strongly advocated on behalf of the women back home.



A member of the Philippine delegation offered to propose a specific Resolution pertaining to the issues. The Philippine government then sponsored the “Resolution on Integrating a Gender Perspective in Post-Disaster Relief, especially in Response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami”. The Thai government supported the proposal. Much of the background work was done by NGO members of government delegations. Members of APWW and women from the affected

areas all had input into the draft and had lobbied to ensure that it reflected a human rights and community development approach. The Resolution was passed by consensus on the final day of the B+10, supported by the majority of governments present. This achievement was a major one because the Resolution reaffirmed all the commitments made in the BPFA as applicable to women in disaster situations and [called] upon governments:

### Women Hurt...and Still Hurting from the Tsunami

*As data on the horrendous death toll from the December 2004 tsunami is finally processed, it has been confirmed that by far the largest number of people killed were women and girls. There are numerous reasons why this is so—and many of these are cultural. Women and girls living in coastal communities were never allowed to learn to swim. Restrictive and heavy clothing dictated by some cultures caused many to drown, waterlogged. Others dared not leave their homes with their heads uncovered, and they died cowering in the women’s quarters. Conversely, the waves were so violent that many women were stripped of their clothes—some refused to climb naked into rescue boats because of shame. The corpses of many women were found intertwined with those of small children and the aged. All of these women died because of their gender (UNIFEM 2005).*

*Sadly, the impact of the tsunami on women did not stop there. Within days of the disaster came reports of an increase in incidents of rape and domestic violence in Sri Lanka. It has since been confirmed that this had occurred in all affected areas (UNFPA Workshop, 2005). Compounding the effects of violence was the lack of food and clean water, housing, and health care specific to the needs of women, many of whom were pregnant, lactating and caring for infants.*

*One group of women in Sri Lanka decided from the start that they were not going to stay silent about this additional horror and about the needs of the women affected by the tsunami. Protection from violence and the health-damaging effects of poverty affecting women and children have become their primary focus. The women formed a coalition and started to lobby for the rights of women to protection, rights to an adequate standard of health, to adequate service provision, and for a voice in the decision-making processes. Working with colleagues from across the Asia-Pacific region, they took this fight from the regional level in Sri Lanka to the United Nations (Pittaway and Rees, 2005; Rees, Pittaway and Bartolomej, 2005).*

- ... to integrate a gender perspective into all disaster response and to include women in the decision-making processes (paragraph 1);
- ... to meet the needs of affected populations, such as food, clean water, shelter and physical security, and to provide service such as health care including reproductive health, psychological health, and psychosocial support and education, taking into account the particular needs of women and girls. (paragraph 3);
- ... stressed the need to utilise the expertise, knowledge and networks of women in promoting gender equality in the context of disaster relief ... (paragraph 7); and

*Rebuilding their lives: Achenese women taking an active role on post-disaster construction in their own communities.*

- ...to take necessary measure, including the development and implementation of gender-sensitive codes of conduct; to protect women and girls from sexual exploitation, sexual abuse and all other forms of violence in the context of natural disasters; and to provide appropriate care and support for women and girls who have been exposed to sexual abuse and other forms of violence” (paragraph 8 ECOSOC, 2005).

The Resolution was more significant than what the women from the nongovernment sector had hoped for.

### Where to from Here?

Effective advocacy work can generate an enduring process of action and community-led recovery. In the case of bringing the concerns of the tsunami-affected women to the B+10, significant gains have been made at an international level. The challenge now is to ensure that the momentum gathered in the "disaster" phase of the recovery is not lost.

The Resolution obtained in New York is a strong and important document. However, it will only achieve its purpose if it is actively used by all key players in the tsunami response, including governments (and also donor governments) international agencies, and local nongovernment and community-based organisations. The problems affecting women are a gender issue, not just a women's issue; clearly, men need to be included in the changes so as to improve the status and well-being of women and their communities.



Judy Pasimio



The challenge now is to ensure that the momentum gathered in the “disaster” phase of the recovery is not lost.

A first step is to engage communities in dialogue concerning the Resolution document. This action will help create an awareness of the Resolution’s potential and how communities can use it to uphold their international rights to gender equality and access to engendered services that respond to improve the health of whole communities. A training kit on the Resolution and its potential is being planned, and a consortium of interested parties is preparing an information dissemination strategy.

This story highlights the power of an advocacy strategy where women activists used a UN meeting and UN documents (B+10 and the BPFA) in a positive and productive manner to strengthen the women’s human rights framework. It

illustrates the importance of having NGOs taking an active role on government delegations. A major aim for the Resolution is the establishment of a measured and tested gender response to be applied in every disaster situation. Too often, women have been forgotten and the gender difference ignored in the provision of disaster relief. Hopefully, one positive outcome of this dreadful disaster will be the application of rigorous interventions to prevent some of the same horrors from happening again. ☺

Eileen Pittway is the Director of the Centre for Refugee Research, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. She lectures in the area of International Social Development. She has been actively involved in refugee resettlement policy, with a focus on refugee women, and the women’s movement for over 20 years. She is a member of Asian Women’s Human Rights Council and Co-Chair of Asia Pacific Women’s Watch. In 2001, Eileen received a Human Rights award from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (Australia) for her work with refugee women.



UNSW website

#### Endnote

A resolution is a formally endorsed outcome of a UN meeting and is signed by governments that are UN member-states

#### References

- ECOSOC (2005) *Resolution, Integrating a gender perspective in post-disaster relief*, E/CN.6/2005/L.6/Rev 2, New York, ECOSOC.
- Pittaway, E. (2000), in Real, M. J., Aggarwal, A., Pasimio, J. (eds.) *Intersectionality of Women’s Human Rights*, Chiang Mai, Thailand, Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law, and Development (APWLD).
- Pittaway, E. and Rees, S. (2005), “From the Village to the United Nations: Advocacy to reduce violence and improve women’s health in tsunami-affected Sri Lanka”, *unpublished*.
- Real, M. J., Aggarwal, A. and Pasimio, J. (eds.) (2002), *Intersectionality of Women’s Rights*, Chiang Mai, Thailand, APWLD.
- Rees, S., Pittaway, E and Bartolomei, L. (2005) “Waves of Violence - Women in Post-Tsunami Sri Lanka”, *Forced Migration Review (submitted for July supplement edition)*.
- UNFPA (2005), *Workshop Report*, Colombo, January 2005.
- UNIFEM (2005) *Presentation, CSW 49<sup>th</sup> Session*, New York, [www.apwld.org/tsunami\\_survivors.html](http://www.apwld.org/tsunami_survivors.html)