



Women rebuilding Sri Lanka

International Women's Development Agency (IWDA) has committed to a five year reconstruction program in Sri Lanka. Money raised is being used directly by local people, like our partner Kantha Shakthi (Strength of the Women), to rebuild their lives.

Rohini Weerasinghe, Executive Director of Kantha Shakthi, says the need for psychological assistance is great. In mid January IWDA's Nora Fernandes visited affected regions with Rohini.

"The impact is devastating", says Nora, "Many people can't look at the sea as they are so traumatised. Everywhere there are reminders; trees have victims' clothes hanging in them – people were caught in branches and ripped out of their clothes."

Five Kantha Shakthi staff have already received training in grief counselling; initially funds raised are paying for one year's wages and transport so these Sri Lankan counsellors can provide support in key areas.

The counsellors will create support networks, and help people access available housing, health and education services which many are too traumatised to access.

"Some are staying away from makeshift camps because they are so shocked and numb," says Nora.

In 2006 we will expand the program to include livelihood programs such as providing vulnerable communities with small loans to help them to raise themselves out of poverty.

In the short term these people rely on the aid community and need intensive counselling support, but in the long term they will need economic independence — with your help we are building a fund to make this happen.

See reverse for further information and background on this project

Donations to the reconstruction program can be made via www.iwda.org.au or by calling to IWDA on 03 9650 5574

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BACKGROUND

The tsunami is believed to have left more than 800,000 people homeless and displaced in Sri Lanka, and has left wide-scale devastation and trauma in its wake. Many survivors moved to schools, mosques and temples, set up as temporary relief centres. It is currently estimated that 75,000 new houses need to be urgently built and another 50,000 need to be repaired. Infrastructure that took decades to construct will now have to be rebuilt in one year. The tsunami killed 7,500 fishermen and destroyed 80% of the country's fishing boats, which is a major blow to the lives and livelihoods of affected families and communities. People from the camps report there are many who are so distressed and mentally affected, they are unable to come forward to be registered. People are moving back in an unplanned and uncoordinated manner, which impacts on the effectiveness of service provision to the affected populations, such as water and sanitation, health care and relief goods. Temporary and semi-permanent schools are being constructed, and large numbers of children are still yet to return to school.

Women, as primary carers of their families, have been particularly affected. The IWDA Senior Program Manager, recently on tour with IWDA's partner organization in Sri Lanka, Kantha Shakthi, to two of the affected areas in the Southern part of the island, Matara and Hambantota districts, was able to witness the unfolding tragedy first hand. The agony women have had to suffer might also be exacerbated in the ensuing chaos and displacement, where potential risk of sexual violence towards women and exposure to diseases increases markedly.

IWDA works to empower women to actively participate in their communities and maximize their role in creating peaceful, self-reliant communities. IWDA will focus on supporting women and their families in affected communities as part of this long-term reconstruction project. The two main components of the project are to improve the health and well being of women, and enhance their participation in the restoration of their livelihoods and the rebuilding of their communities.

Immediately following the tsunami, People to People Dialogue (PPD), an NGO network in Sri Lanka, rallied to mobilise and train 60 community leaders from the affected areas/communities in various districts. Training included health education, group work, disaster relief and accessing entitlements. The network hopes to capitalise on the strong civil society response to obtain on-going support for communities and to include affected people in the process of reconstruction.

Through this project, IWDA hopes to enhance the capacity of the communities to participate in the rebuilding process, through the provision of much needed trauma counselling, livelihood/vocational skills development, and financial resources for women in districts located in the Southern and Eastern parts of Sri Lanka over the next five years. It is recognised that the healing of communities is a long-term process. The effects of trauma are multiple and can permeate every aspect of people's lives, often rendering them incapable of action for an extended period of time. For the successful rebuilding of people's lives and livelihoods, the issue of trauma needs to be effectively addressed through long-term strategies of facilitating people's re-engagement with community life.

This reconstruction project aims to address women's needs at community level and enable them to mobilize themselves to rebuild their communities in partnership with their men folk. It is recognized that women play an important role in reconstruction and need to be actively involved in community processes to not only enable them to get on with their lives but also help in the rebuilding of lives and livelihoods in their communities.