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## The Tsunami's Windfall: Women and Aid Distribution

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ELISABETH ARMSTRONG

## The Tsunami's Windfall Women and Aid Distribution

All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) is a part of a loose network of leftist organizations with a close relationship to the Communist Part of India (Marxist) (CPI[M]). In 1986, they estimated their membership at 115,000 women across the country (Calman 1989, 944). That number had grown to over eight million members by 2004. They are membership-funded with dues of one rupee per year. As one activist in their New Delhi national office described to me, "We don't take funds from the government or from donor agencies. We need our politics to be led by our members, not by our donors." AIDWA's independence from funding agencies and relative autonomy from their allied party and social groups contrast markedly to many other women's organizations in the Indian women's movement.

Two weeks before joining AIDWA activists in Chennai, on December 29, 2004, I interviewed Brinda Karat, the general secretary of AIDWA from 1993 to 2003. She described AIDWA's analysis and method of organizing as "inter-sectoral, inter-class, and crossing," and she explained their refusal to skirt divisive campaigns that crossed class and caste lines within the organization. "For example, if you were taking up dalit [oppressed, "untouchable" caste] women's issues, could your movement organize upper-class women in support of dalit women? Then you would say, 'Yes, this is women's unity, this is sisterhood.' So could you organize women who would normally not be eating in a Muslim household to come out in support [of Muslim women], to defend Muslim women against the state, not their own fundamentalists, but against the oppression on the state? . . . Are you prepared to go to Hindu localities and tell Hindu women that they are utterly wrong? And that is what women's unity is and must be."

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*“The sea was like boiling milk. But after the first wave, the sediment churned up by the sea made it appear like boiling milk with rice in it.”*

—Comment from a fisherman in Nalla Thanni Odai, North Chennai, India

On January 15, 2005, three weeks after the Tsunami, I visited relief camps in and around North Chennai, India, with the All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA), which was in the process of assessing damage and reconstruction needs. AIDWA, a national organization with 450,000 members in the state of Tamil Nadu alone, was able to provide its services in the immediate aftermath of the disaster in a highly coordinated effort across the coastal areas of the state. On the very day that the tsunami hit, December 26, AIDWA activists had already begun to visit hospitals, towns, and villages to help people. Their fundamental goal to help others simply survive was evident in the city of Nagapattinam, in the Thirukkadaiyur area, where a large group of refugees from local areas had gathered for safety from the flood waters. When local officials could not agree what to do with the sudden influx of destitute people, two AIDWA activists broke the lock of a public school and opened the door to the survivors. They then mobilized their city members to collect over 800 pounds of rice to feed the refugees.

January 15 was the last day of Pongal, a harvest festival in Tamil Nadu in which rice is boiled with milk until it overflows. The ritual symbolizes community hopes for a year of plenty, but in the wake of the avalanche of aid for tsunami victims, it appeared to also represent another kind of plenty: individual greed and official corruption in the distribution of resources.

As is true with so many large-scale relief efforts in the face of disaster, including, most recently, aid to the U.S. victims of Hurricane Katrina, unscrupulous practices, particularly by individuals and politics of color, are highlighted by the media and are often used as rationales to explain why such efforts often fail to reach the people most in need of them. But the discourse around corruption often stereotypes prospective recipients and ignores the specific consequences of inequitable distribution for poor women.

After attending meetings in three communities in North Chennai, it became clear that AIDWA’s efforts also had to include helping women in these fishing communities to demand accountability from local government representatives and to fight for their fair share of emergency aid—the latter of which included demands that the national bank forgive their self-help loans, and that the government reconstruct a women-run dried fish business. The

businesswomen's homes, near Powerkuppam, had been demolished by a recent fire, and there was speculation among AIDWA activists whether the fire might have been set by government agents so that the land could be appropriated to build a new bridge.

As we walked toward an adjacent locality called Dirinagar, a neighborhood where many lives had been lost as well as homes and livelihoods, North Chennai AIDWA members Mohanasudari, Mary, Saroja, and Lakshmi, who all wore AIDWA badges on their saris, showed me a government coupon for a "second phase" of relief in RK Nagar, a locality five minutes north of the fish market. The coupon, redeemable for a large vessel to store drinking water and other household goods, was not going to women from the locality, but reportedly to members of the ruling government party, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), in areas which were not affected by the tsunami. Even those women who had a relief coupon found it was not being honored. Women from RK Nagar planned an action for that day at the local AIADMK party secretary's office, where relief distribution was coordinated. The women would confront the local party secretary about his mismanagement and favoritism.

We reached the street outside the party secretary's office. Many women sat on the road blocking traffic, a "road roko," while uniformed police milled around. Since AIDWA had been active in the locality since the tsunami struck, women staging the protest gathered around them to explain their grievances. They told us, "When we went to Nagalingam (the local AIADMK secretary), we asked him why he did not give us our relief goods, and why they were going to AIADMK members instead. He said, 'Because I'm having sex with them. If you people come to me everyday, keep your legs open, then I will dump the materials.'"

Vasuki, general secretary of AIDWA in Tamil Nadu, listened to the anger and frustration of the women and began to speak with the police and the MLA's officials about Nagalingam's aggressive sexual slurs against the women and his refusal to distribute aid equitably. The voices of the men rose with a blind fury, while Vasuki remained calm and persistent. Other groups of women (members of AIADMK), who had received government relief, joined the fray of accusation and denial. Buses and cars began to line up on both sides of the women blockading the road, and the police demanded that the women rise and the crowd move. The police warned the women that they could be arrested for disturbing the peace, but the women did not relent.

They wanted Nagalingam to apologize for his verbal sexual assault against them.

The assistant commissioner of police urged the buses forward to drive over us as we blocked the street. The women did not move but continued to demand an apology. "Let them fight each other!" he said of the angry debates surging through the crowd. The assistant commissioner did little, however, when the MLA entered the crowd with his supporters. As the hefty men pushed, yelled obscenities, and threatened the protesting women, the police merely watched. The MLA had no apologies for the local secretary's words or his actions, but blamed AIDWA for inciting the crowd. He left with vague promises to investigate what happened.

After the MLA left, many women began to disperse. AIDWA lodged a complaint with the deputy commissioner of police against Nagalingam and the assistant commissioner of police. When they filed the complaint, the deputy commissioner offered to apologize for police rudeness, but he did not mention restitution of relief materials for the women from RK Nagar. AIDWA filed the case, and the struggle continues for fair distribution of household goods, loans, and future livelihood means, such as repayment for fish and baskets lost in the tsunami. Vasuki characterized the relief work of AIDWA as only in part a role of collecting and distributing aid, rebuilding people's communities and trades for survival, and those many other important tasks reported by the media. She had early described their central mission was to "to bring the government relief in an orderly way to reach everyone" (Vasuki, January 15, 2005). The organization's support for women's struggles to rightfully receive government relief, not on the basis of "benevolence" of the state but as a matter of their rights to livelihood, as in the case of RK Nagar, is critical to that goal.

## AIDWA, Women's Mobilization, and Women's Representation

AIDWA's strategic solution to systemic inequality has a parallel logic, away from greater policing by outside agencies towards the mobilization of the people most affected by the lack of resources. As among the fisherwomen of RK Nagar, AIDWA seeks leadership among women to demand fair representation, fair distribution, and, in the case of the tsunami, to define what aid and equitable reconstruction should be. "Distribution is a real problem," Vasuki told me bluntly before we left AIDWA's office in central Chennai. "In the villages and areas where we [AIDWA members] concentrate our relief work,

we are trying to bring the government relief in an orderly way to reach everyone.” Unlike many NGOs, after the tsunami, AIDWA organized women to direct government relief efforts more fairly and to counter discriminatory practices that shut out poor women from receiving their share of aid.

AIDWA members in Tamil Nadu, as in the rest of the country, come from diverse class, caste, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. In a time of reconstruction, these connections to caste-based organizations, churches and mosques, and ethnicity-based cooperative societies in particular proved invaluable. Vasuki described the process simply, “Even now, to provide relief materials you have to take the permission of the leaders. Many places, the materials have to be handed over to them.” Yet, throughout their work, AIDWA creates other possibilities for women’s organization and a means for AIDWA to bypass traditional community leaders. “We go into the villages and convene a meeting of women. So we help them elect a smaller committee from among themselves . . . the next year onwards, that committee will meet with us, so that together we can do the work.” AIDWA emphasizes locally-based leadership and the formation of alternate women-run networks of power to their more conservative traditional locations. Their coordination of local political work across regions and across the country marks all of its activism.

To call the women’s fight for aid in RK Nagar simply a fight against corruption shifts the systemic problem of unequal distribution of resources to one of regional government mismanagement or individual failing. The trope of corruption also diverts attention away from the sexual and physical violence of women’s relationship to the state. After the road blockade, and before any restitution of aid or even apology for sexual threats, women thanked AIDWA for joining the rally. One neighborhood woman described to an AIDWA activist, “usually we get beaten up by the police whenever we demand something—this time we were spared.” To be treated fairly by the government, then, means to be treated without violent reprisals for confronting inequities. Natural disasters, such as the tsunami, make these inequities particularly visible, since victims have such palpable and immediate needs for aid. They are so clearly victimized by the chance havoc wrought. But the unequal distribution of wealth, power, and resources transcends the sudden devastation of an earthquake or other natural disaster.

Only three days before I met with women in Tamil Nadu, the United Nations (UN), NGOs, and the Indonesian government held a day-long seminar on corruption in Jakarta, Indonesia, one of the countries most devastated by the tsu-

nami. Participants at the conference argued that rehabilitation and reconstruction aid is more vulnerable to corruption than emergency relief aid. But even with these nuances, “corruption” obscures as it minimizes the problem of people’s exclusion from relief programs. The language and solutions developed from this meeting sharply contradict the UN’s “Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.” This document states that authorities should take “special efforts . . . to ensure the full participation of women in the planning and distribution of these basic supplies” (UN, “Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement”). Potential solutions to corruption, when ascribed to individual officials or to greedy individuals more generally, sideline any meaningful participation of large numbers of women. The planning and distribution of aid, when fully democratized to include women from the affected localities, could be the UN’s best solution to corruption. In New Orleans this concept has coalesced around a slogan originally coined in the South African disability rights movement, *Nothing About Us, Without Us, Is For Us*.

The discourse of corruption tends to frame potential solutions as top-down, bureaucratic, and undemocratic. Clean up the officials through increased outside surveillance, this explanation suggests, and the problem of corruption disappears. What this avoids is an engagement with inequalities in the system that cannot be blamed on individual dishonesty. Public discussions about internally displaced people from the tsunami and Hurricane Katrina share increasingly globalized discourses of individualism. As problems framed by individualism, they shift the burden of corruption to individual fraud and dishonesty rather than seriously examine how localities, whether Chennai or New Orleans, produce their relations of inequality. The inequality of resource distribution is a global problem, but the particular systems of oppression are often profoundly local. Syed Hussein Alatas pioneered sociological studies of corruption in Asia in the 1960s. His nuanced historical and geopolitical analysis of corruption in Asia has framed suggestions that are anything but individualized. He advocated working “towards the direction of a social order based on human rights and social justice integrated with the Asian traditions that would ensure the elimination of poverty, corruption, despotism, political thuggery and opportunism, injustice and oppression” (Alatas 1999, 132).

Our answers to individualized corruption, in marked contrast to those suggested by AIDWA or Alatas, usually require greater policing and monitoring of relief donations and largely ignore these structural inequities. In this framework, “accountability” means solutions such as greater transparency



of funds dispersal and tracking of government, UN, and aid agency spending. Price Waterhouse Cooper, the U.S.-based accounting firm, is presently working with the UN to create an Internet-based tracking system of relief funds, so donors can rest assured their money is well spent. Notably, in this discussion, accountability does not refer to ensuring the government's increased accountability to the citizens they represent but to the donors who give them aid. Corruption does not define the problems for women and their families in RK Nagar; instead, discriminatory and unfair distribution of resources more accurately describes their struggle. The local party secretary and the area's MLA are guilty of misrepresenting their constituents when they divert aid to their supporters, away from families in need.

In contrast to efforts to streamline surveillance of relief funds from above, groups such as AIDWA organize for government accountability to their public, and work to make women's demands heard without violence. Only after extensive discussions with women in villages across the coastline of Tamil Nadu, AIDWA has framed a list of demands. The first regards distribution: "Relief materials should be distributed in a fair manner." Their recommendations for fair distribution pay particular attention to women's issues. AIDWA demands that relief programs should recognize those subsidiary fishing industries with large numbers of women workers, such as collecting shells, fish trading, and fish selling. They also support relief for women's agricultural livelihood, such as rice paddies destroyed by sea-water flooding. AIDWA also pressures the government to write off self-help loans, loans often given to women. Their charter of demands suggests better policies around the form of relief given: whenever possible, relief in kind, rather than money that should be distributed. When money is distributed, AIDWA argues, women in a family should be the recipients of the funds. In addition, AIDWA voiced women's demand to close the state's government-run liquor shops for one month to ensure relief money is not spent on alcohol. Whether organizing in a time of relative scarcity or plenty, AIDWA, like many other groups who envision better futures, supports a more just distribution of our resources. Whether working to alleviate sudden devastation or to enable daily survival, AIDWA relies on building the collective power of women to win their equality.

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