

The Women's Voice in Aceh's Housing Program

By Rehan Kausar¹, Fany Wedahuditama²,

The role of women in the housing reconstruction has been crucial in Aceh and Nias. The December 2004 tsunami left behind not only the greatest devastation mankind has seen in recent times but also vulnerable groups of women-headed households, widows and orphans. Steps have been taken by many stakeholders to ensure their voices were heard, not only during the emergency phase but also for the long-term development of the coastal community in Aceh and Nias.

Community participation was an essential element of the preparation stage of the \$72.5 million housing program of the Earthquake and Tsunami Emergency Support Project (ETESP) financed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Women were especially encouraged to reflect their views and needs regarding the design of the house design and planning of their village. Their participation was integrated in the monitoring and evaluation of the house construction. The community participation during this stage was institutionalized through the community committee called *Panitia Pembangunan Rumah Gampong* (PPRG

- Committee for House Reconstruction). Men and women actively participated not only on their own future houses but those of their fellow community members as well. Even though at times female members were in the minority, women's concerns were usually highlighted. Concerns, important for the sustainability of the housing program included water and sanitation, privacy, house access for disabled people, and kitchen and cooking areas. The ETESP program made special efforts to incorporate suggestions put forth by the vulnerable group of women-headed families and made modifications to the overall housing design to reflect these..



Women's participation during PPRG (Committee for Housing reconstruction) meeting. Photo: Y. Soewondo

In locations where the reconstruction has been completed and the houses have been handed over, house maintenance and the improvement and maintenance of the surrounding environment became the focal issue. During the initial community meetings following the house hand-over, male and female beneficiaries put forth several ideas for the community maintenance program. Some ideas from the female beneficiaries included street labelling and house numbering, neighbourhood greening (one tree per house) to improve the microclimate and landscape, septic tank maintenance, and playing areas for the children.

Based on the gender perspective, there are three important points to be noticed from the post hand-over phase. Firstly, the fact that many important issues regarding the surrounding environment are put forth by the women shows that they are very much aware of household and community welfare. The women's gender perspective has made

¹ Housing and Spatial Planning Advisor, Project Management Office of the Extended Mission in Sumatera of the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

² Gender Consultant for the housing component of the ADB financed Earthquake and Tsunami Emergency Support Project.

them recognize these welfare elements that are generally less important for the male community members.

Secondly, the agreement on the community maintenance activity for street labelling and house numbering was initially proposed by the women. This highlights that women are capable of successfully voicing their concerns. This shows that women are



Women and children take part in house numbering activity in Gampong Pande. Photo: Y. Soewondo

capable to express their needs if they are given equal access to participate, which brings out the third important point, i.e. providing equal opportunity for men and women to participate is a matter of willingness and determination. For instance, when community meetings are planned, efforts need to be made to try and involve as many household representatives – male and females - as possible. Quite often women cannot attend the meetings because they are held at a time when they are occupied with domestic chores or are busy looking after the children. A proper planning of community sessions will ensure that the voices of women are heard and responded to.

The opportunity for the women to express their needs regarding housing helps to lay the foundation for women to overcome social inequality in their sometimes fragile lives. This is an important gender related impact of the housing program. Inequality in housing ownership and land titling is another area where the male household head is generally considered by default to be the rightful owner. Women's rights to property ownership and titling are protected by Article 9 (1) of the Basic Agrarian Law (no. 5/1960) which guarantees husband and wife or male-female couple to have equal land registration status. The ETESP housing program ensures that each house and the land it occupies is properly registered in the names of both sexes to balance the sense of ownership. The case is similar for surviving orphans, whether male or female, whereby the house and the land plot are registered in his or her name and not that of the guardian.



Women's participation in building their own houses – community contract scheme in Seuneudon. Photo: Adhitya Palgunadi

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