

Picking up the pieces

Women are usually the worst affected when disaster strikes. And they're paying the price of climate change across Africa and Asia, says Sarah Gillam of ActionAid

● "You ask how the floods have affected me," said Mahajani Devi from India. "What can I say? It's been the same old story for as long as I can remember. No, we haven't seen any government food or money for flood relief. Hunger is our old friend here." And each year, many more are added to the list of those who suffer the onslaught of floods. The floods affecting Mahajani this summer swept across southern Asia, causing chaos for more than 50 million people, according to the IFRC (Red Cross international federation).

In East and West Africa, unprecedented rains in September destroyed crops, crucially affecting livelihoods and affecting 1.5 million people. In the rural areas, where 80% of the population live, women fetch water and firewood, grow crops for food, look after children and the elderly and tend the sick. But when floods or droughts hit, women's lives become doubly difficult. Trying to pick up the pieces after a disaster is difficult, causing significant psychological and social suffering. Such psychosocial impacts may be acute in the short term, but can undermine people's long-term mental health and well-being.

Research shows that, during emergencies, the number of people with mild or moderate mental health problems will rise by 5-10%. In

actual numbers, this means yearly that millions of people are affected emotionally and that their ability to function efficiently is compromised. "Women and children are particularly vulnerable in emergency situations," says Dr Unnikrishnan PV, who leads ActionAid International's psychosocial work. "Loss of family members, traumatic experiences, displacement and constant terror can rewrite their life stories." And the violence against women that's perpetrated in normal circumstances is further magnified in the aftermath of disasters, according to a survey of more than 7,500 women affected by the tsunami. A closer examination shows that violence against women extends beyond the physical, sexual or emotional to persistent discrimination and makes it very difficult for women to recover.

The result of a collaborative effort by 27 leading international humanitarian organisations (including ActionAid and UN agencies), the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) has released the first guidelines on mental health and psychosocial support in emergency settings. Guidelines stress that the way in which humanitarian aid is provided can have a substantial impact on people's mental health and psychosocial well-being. Coping with nightmares is often one of the many challenges for the survivors of disasters and conflicts, while several agencies repeatedly asking the same set of questions may be equally traumatic. The guidelines call for better cooperation among

various constituencies. ActionAid's ongoing psychosocial programmes in tsunami and earthquake situations show that a community-based approach that engages local people, especially women and children, can accelerate the recovery process.

Ffi: www.actionaid.org



Mahajani Devi

PIC: JACOB SILBERBERG/PANOS PICTURES/ACTIONAID

is on clearing landmines and unexploded ordnance in poor communities, and training local people in landmine clearance and other skills. Co-Laureate 1997 Nobel Peace Prize. **Contact:** 47 Newton St, Manchester M1 1FT. **Tel:** 0161 236 4311 **Email:** maguk@mag.org.uk **Web:** www.mag.org.uk

MEDICAL FOUNDATION FOR CARE OF VICTIMS OF TORTURE aims to provide survivors of torture with medical treatment in the UK, practical assistance and psychotherapeutic support. It also documents evidence of torture and provides training for health professionals. **Contact:** 111 Isledon Rd, Islington, London NW7 7JW. **Tel:** 020 7697 7777 **Email:** info@torturecare.org.uk **Web:** www.torturecare.org.uk

PEACE BRIGADES INTERNATIONAL (PBI) NGO that sends volunteers to accompany human rights defenders, their organisations and others threatened by political violence. The presence of volunteers backed by a support network helps to deter violence. **Contact:** International House, 56-64 Leonard St, London EC2A 4JX **Tel:** 020 7065 0775 **Web:** www.peacebrigades.org

PEACE PLEDGE UNION aims to foster a greater understanding of conflict and how it might be avoided or resolved without recourse to violence or injustice. **Contact:** Peace Pledge, Union 1, Peace Passage, London N7 0BT. **Tel:** 020 7424 9444 **Web:** www.ppu.org.uk

QUAKER PEACE & SOCIAL WITNESS works with and on behalf of Britain's Quakers, to translate faith into action. Quakers' historic testimonies to equality, justice, peace, simplicity and truth challenge them to alleviate suffering and seek positive social change. **Contact:** Friends House, Euston Rd, London NW1 2BJ. **Tel:** 020 7663 1000 **Email:** qpsw@quaker.org.uk **Web:** www.quaker.org.uk

SAFERWORLD is committed to alerting governments of the need for a new approach to tackling and preventing armed conflicts around the globe. Working closely with a network of NGOs and other organisations, it looks for practical and positive steps toward controlling the arms trade and preventing conflict. **Contact:** The Grayston

Centre, 28 Charles Square, London N1 6HT. Tel: 020 7324 4646 **Email:** general@saferworld.org.uk **Web:** www.saferworld.org.uk

STOP THE WAR COALITION opposes military solutions to international terrorism. STWC opposed the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq and sees the so-called 'war on terror' as a grotesque excuse for erosion of human rights and for state-sponsored terror. It seeks peace through international justice. **Bath contact:** Monica Pearce **Tel:** 01225 312574 **Web:** www.bathstopwar.org.uk **Bristol link:** www.groups.yahoo.com/group/bristol-stop-the-war-coalition **National website:** www.stopwar.org.uk

WAR CHILD is concerned with the innocent victims of war and with defending the rights of children in conflict. **Contact:** War Child UK, 5-7 Anglers Lane, London NW5 3DG. **Tel:** 020 7916 9276 **Email:** info@warchild.org.uk **Web:** www.warchild.org.uk

WOMEN

AVON FEDERATION OF WOMEN'S INSTITUTES aims to provide the greatest possible scope to develop individual skills, talents and a sense of citizenship. **Contact:** Pauline Matthews (chair), W1 House, 11 Station Rd, Keynsham, Bristol BS31 2BH. **Tel:** 0117 986 4782 **Email:** secretary@avonfwi.org.uk **Web:** www.avonfwi.org.uk

BRISTOL & AVON CHINESE WOMEN'S GROUP aim to relieve sickness, hardship and distress by providing assistance, advice, representation and services among Chinese women. **Contact:** St Agnes Parish Church, Thomas St, St Pauls, Bristol BS2 9LL. **Tel:** 0117 935 1462 **Email:** admin.bacug@btconnect.com **Web:** www.bacug.co.uk

CENTRAL AMERICA WOMEN'S NETWORK (CAWN) London-based organisation that supports, publicises and learns from the struggles of women in Central America in the defence of their rights. **Contact:** *clo One World Action, Bradley Close, White Lion St, London N1 9PF. Tel:* 0207 833 4174 **Fax: 0207 833 4102 **Email:** info@cawn.org **Web:** www.cawn.org**

FEMINIST ARCHIVE (SOUTH) A collection of material relating to the women's movement from the 1960s onwards, both national and international. Reference only. **Contact:** Trinity Road Library, Trinity Rd, St Philips, Bristol BS2 0NW. **Tel:** 0117 935 0025 **Email:** femarch@femarch.freeseve.co.uk **Web:** www.femarch.freeseve.co.uk

HUMDARD provides a safe, secure environment where Asian women can meet and fulfil social, educational and recreational needs. **Contact:** Community Flat, Halston Drive, St Pauls, Bristol BS2 9JN. **Tel:** 0117 955 0895 **Email:** info@humdard.org.uk **Web:** www.humdard.org

INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR RESEARCH ON WOMEN (ICRW) tackles the complexities of the world's most pressing problems — poverty, hunger and disease — by demonstrating that a focus on women and gender is necessary for lasting social and economic change. Convenor of the Women Deliver conference (www.womendeliver.org). **Contact:** 1120 20th Street NW, Suite 500 North, Washington DC 20036 **Tel:** +1 202 797 007 **Fax:** +1 202 797 0020 **Email:** info@icrw.org **Web:** www.icrw.org

JOLIBA TRUST supports self-help development work with farming and nomadic communities in one of the poorest regions of Mali. Their particular focus is on projects to help women and on environmental work for long-term food security. **Contact:** Caroline Hart (coordinator), The Salt Box, Broadwoodkelly, Winkleigh, Devon EX19 8ED. **Tel:** 01837 682 841 **Email:** jolibatrast@hotmail.com **Web:** www.jolibatrast.org.uk

NATIONAL FEDERATION OF WOMEN'S INSTITUTES provide women with educational opportunities and the chance to build new skills, to take part in a wide variety of activities and campaign on issues that matter to them and their communities. **Contact:** 104 New Kings Rd, London SW6 4LY. **Tel:** 020 7371 9300 **Fax:** 020 7736 3652 **Email:** hq@nfwi.org.uk **Web:** www.womens-institute.co.uk

SEHATMAND AURAT (ASIAN WOMEN HEALTH PROJECT) provides emotional and physical support available in