



Issue 2 October 2017

Series Editor: Maureen Fordham

Guest Editors: Kimberly Clair and Cheney Shreve

Arts-based Recovery Methods

This second issue of **Doing Gender & Disaster** examines good practices for incorporating arts-based recovery methods into disaster response drawing on research conducted in Aceh, Indonesia. Dr. Kimberly Clair conducted this research during her doctoral studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. Traditional methods for addressing psychosocial impacts of disasters, employed by many aid agencies, may not be culturally appropriate, as they rely on Western medicine and norms. Arts-based recovery methods such as dance have therapeutic benefits, and may assist participants with reestablishing trust and cultural identity, further strengthening resilience. Kimberly interviewed psychologists, artists, NGO staff, and participants in various performance-healing programs for this research. In this issue, she shares insights, findings, and good practices to inform the design and implementation of arts-based recovery practices for disaster recovery.

Background When the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami struck Aceh, Indonesia, killing 130,000 individuals and leaving 500,000 displaced, Aceh had already suffered thirty years of separatist conflict. Social workers and mental health experts were thus tasked with addressing multiple, complex traumas in post-conflict, post-tsunami Aceh. Experiences of trauma were also gendered. According to the International Organization for Migration, women were more likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than men, particularly in Bireuen and Aceh Utara. The Indonesian Ministry of Health estimated that the majority of the 400,000 Acehnese suffering from trauma-related stress disorders were women.

Although over three hundred aid organizations entered Aceh in response to the disaster, only one psychiatric hospital and four full-time psychiatrists were available to serve a population of over four million individuals. Moreover, some clients criticized “Western” psychotherapy for over-diagnosing cases of PTSD and for failing to offer a spiritual healing component. As a creative alternative to psychotherapy, traditional Acehnese performance practices (including dance, music, and theater) were integrated into psychosocial recovery efforts.

Key Messages

- *Experiences of trauma vary by gender, race/ethnicity, social class, age, religion, and ability; there is no “one size fits all” approach to treating trauma.*
- *Dance can help disrupt isolative behaviors, facilitate non-verbal creative expression, and promote freedom of physical movement within nonjudgmental environments.*
- *Integrating traditional performance practices into trauma recovery efforts can reaffirm cultural identity and strengthen social bonds among participants, thereby building community resilience.*

What We Did

The integration of traditional performance into psychosocial recovery efforts took diverse forms. To evaluate the limitations and advantages of these arts-based healing efforts, a general typology was developed including: (1) workshops, performances, or other programs instituted by international NGOs; (2) workshops and performances initiated by local NGOs; (3) benefit concerts and fund-raising performances held by well-known Acehese artists. Effectiveness of these methods for addressing psychosocial needs, and good practices for implementation, were assessed through interviews with psychologists, artists, NGO staff, and participants of various performance-healing programs in post-tsunami, post-conflict Aceh.



Seulaweuet Rehearsal at Taman Sari (Aceh, Indonesia 2009)

How We Did It

Experiences of performance-based trauma recovery efforts and good practices for implementation were assessed through interviews with psychologists, artists, NGO staff, and participants of various performance-healing programs in Aceh. Additional support was provided by colleagues in The Aceh Institute in Banda Aceh, the cultural arts organization Tikar Pandan, the Traditional Arts and Lectures Organization (TALOE), and Flower Aceh. The researcher (Kimberly Clair) also undertook additional observations of Acehese dance and theater performances and participated in traditional Acehese dance rehearsals.

Participants were asked to identify their familiarity with traditional Acehese performance genres, the frequency with which they attended performance events, and the impact of observing/participating in traditional performance activities on their mood. Arts instructors were asked to discuss observations of participants' behavioral and emotional states before, during, and after their participation in arts initiatives as well as any gender differences.

Finding Participants to Interview

The researcher connected with participants through conferences, email exchanges, friends, and colleagues. Acehese artists participating in the project were overwhelmingly supportive of the research and were eager to share their knowledge. Many Acehese artists and arts instructors feared that interest in, and financial support for, traditional Acehese performance is waning.

Ethics and Consent

Although most interviewees were eager to participate in the research, some families whose children had participated in dance and theater workshops refused to be interviewed unless offered substantial payment. These families had witnessed, but not significantly benefited from, the influx of international humanitarian assistance and tended to harbor suspicion toward non-Acehnese individuals. The privacy of these families was respected and Acehese colleagues helped to recruit community members for interviews and informal conversations.

Processing Research Material

Formal interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to determine person-centered notions of healing and recovery, the relationship between participation in arts activities and reported well-being, and the degree to which arts-based healing efforts addressed gender and diversity.

Additional data was collected through observation of dance rehearsals and text message conversations with Acehese dancers and arts instructors. Text messages proved useful for continuing conversations beyond formal interview sessions, allowing Acehese to respond when convenient. Research was shared both formally at academic conferences, including the International Workshop and Expo on Sumatra Tsunami Disaster and Recovery in Banda Aceh (2010), and informally with Acehese artists and trauma recovery organizations.

What We Learned

What We Learned About Arts-Based Recovery

Arts-based recovery initiatives can facilitate collective healing, creating a safe space for dialogue around trauma, loss, and cultural identity. Participatory physical performances such as dancing, marching, singing and chanting have been shown to enhance feelings of solidarity and to promote a coherent cultural identity, thereby challenging narratives of community fragmentation that abound in post-disaster and post-conflict environments. Traditional dances can also evoke a sense of continuity through collective memory, linking generations through shared movements and gestures.

The fast-paced and collaborative nature of many traditional Acehnese dances allowed practitioners to overcome feelings of isolation and mistrust generated by the conflict and the tsunami. For instance, performers of saman, a sitting dance involving eight to twelve individuals, use their bodies as percussive instruments while performing rapid, complex interlocking movements. Seudati, a standing dance, is also performed in a group of either men or women. As symbols of Acehnese identity and resilience, these traditional dances challenged negative representations of Aceh as a site of violence and disaster and intensified feelings of ethnic pride among practitioners. Observing traditional Acehnese performances at tsunami commemoration ceremonies and listening to new works dedicated to tsunami survivors that were broadcast on Acehnese radio and TV also strengthened feelings of solidarity and lifted audience member's spirits.

What We Learned About Diversity and Gender in Arts-Based Recovery

Integrating traditional performance into psychosocial health interventions represents a strengths-based approach, drawing from the knowledge, skills, and resources already present in Acehnese communities. As the first region in Indonesia to embrace Islam, Aceh is known for its adherence to Islamic principles; Acehnese performance traditions include movements and lyrics associated with prayer. Traditional performances thus reaffirm aspects of Acehnese identity considered to be unique, and thereby strengthen feelings of cultural pride. According to Mor Murtala of TALOE, participants experienced a "mental and spiritual awakening" in learning about an aspect of their identity that could bring pride to many people (friends, family, and others). Tikar Pandan, a traveling theater group, also drew on themes from Acehnese folklore, classic tales, and poems.

Performance may be particularly effective as a resource for individuals who have difficulty expressing their feelings verbally, whether because of age, stigma towards mental health issues, or spiritual beliefs. Tikar Pandan performed stories that both entertained audiences and encouraged them to speak openly about the conflict and the tsunami. The troupe's director, Fauzan Santa, found that "both the viewers and the conflict victims were actively involved in the performance, letting go of all the troubling issues that had, up to this point, affected their lives." Similarly, the group singing and drumming practices featured in traditional Acehnese dance facilitated collective grieving and traumatic expression and may be more familiar to Acehnese than one-on-one counselling sessions or other Western psychotherapy techniques. Traditional performance thus promotes both individual and collective resilience by creating safe, inclusive spaces and addressing communal wounds.

Local arts organizations aimed to create performance activities that were accessible to all community members, regardless of gender, age, ability, and social class. For instance, Tikar Pandan's theatre performances were lively and interactive, encouraging all community members to actively participate through singing, chanting, and call-and-response. However, most arts-based recovery efforts did not explicitly address gendered traumas and were primarily directed towards children and young adults. Some artists observed hesitation among Acehnese girls towards participating in public performances. Others found that some Acehnese women's performances were not well-received within the community.

What We Learned About Doing Research

Integrating performance activities into psychosocial healing efforts can take a variety of forms. While large, public performances can create spaces for collective healing and generate feelings of cultural pride, such programs may have a limited impact on practitioners. For instance, programs that culminated in a single performance, such as UNESCO's Rising Above the Tsunami program (December 2005 and March 2006), left few opportunities for participants to continue with dance and music activities after the program's completion. Alternatively, songs that commemorate tsunami victims and are available to purchase as recordings can have a lasting impact but do not necessarily promote collective healing.

Successfully integrating traditional performance into trauma recovery programs also requires an understanding of gender dynamics within Aceh's cultural and political landscape. The protracted separatist conflict as well as the more rigid implementation of Islamic (syariah) law in 2001 has left women and girls more vulnerable within public spaces. Even after the Helsinki Accord brought the conflict to an end in August 2005, syariah police continued to punish women for their manner of dress or their comportment on a motorcycle. Inviting women and girls to perform on stage for a large audience of international observers ignores these gendered experiences of trauma and may have contributed to feelings of shyness, shame, or discomfort among female participants.

What We Learned

What We Learned About Doing Research

The large number of male instructors and staff members may have reinforced girls' assumptions that performance in general, or performance as a healing tool, is a predominantly male activity.

Finally, arts interventions were constrained by time and funding. Local artists relied on evaluations of and formal reports about their work to secure funding from national and international organizations; however, few studies documenting the benefits of arts activities were conducted as researchers focused primarily on diagnosing cases of PTSD.

What You Could Do

Humanitarians, local practitioners, NGOs, and others engaged in conflict or disaster recovery planning can utilize arts-based recovery to help reestablish a sense of trust and reaffirm cultural identity for survivors. Such individuals should consult with local artists and arts organizations to discuss the structure of the proposed intervention (community performances, rehearsals and workshops, competitions, etc.), the content (which dances, songs, plays, or stories to incorporate), and gender- and culture-specific methods for addressing complex traumas.

To create a safe and welcoming environment, practitioners should include female instructors who can serve as role models for girls and women. Gender-segregated workshops may also minimize feelings of shyness and encourage greater freedom of movement among female participants while respecting cultural norms. Incorporating arts workshops into existing programs, such as those that develop employment skills, may help attract those participants who cannot justify either to themselves or to their families spending time on recreational or cultural activities.

To extend the benefits of arts-based recovery efforts, organizations may wish to invest in instruments, lessons, and rehearsal spaces, creating opportunities for long-term arts engagement rather than one-time performance events. Individuals can support arts-based recovery programs by attending performances where available, volunteering time or financial resources to arts-based recovery initiatives, and helping to raise awareness of the many benefits of arts-based recovery.

How To Do No Harm

Practitioners should consider any cultural sensitivity that could potentially put participants' wellbeing or safety at risk. Women and girls are often subject to both formal and customary laws and practice.

Practitioners should follow existing performance models utilized by local artists and arts organizations and consult with local organizations on gender norms.

Mobile theater troupes that invited audiences to observe and/or participate in performances proved most inclusive and accessible. Such activities might be combined with post-performance discussions conducted by Acehnese counselors and psychiatrists to formally assess the impact of performances on individual and collective mental health. For activities that target specific populations, such as children, opportunities should be created for other community members to participate.

Investing in instruments, lessons, and rehearsal spaces to support arts-based recovery initiatives helps to ensure the longevity and maximum benefit of these programs.

How To Be Transparent And Accountable

Practitioners should make explicit the aims, timeframe, and available resources of proposed arts initiatives. Community members should be informed about whether their participation in arts initiatives will be recorded or used in psychological assessments as well as whether they will be offered compensation, instruments, lessons, or other materials in exchange for their participation so that they can decline or reduce their participation if they wish.

How To Reach Out And Engage

Practitioners can recruit local artists or organizations in disaster and conflict prone regions to co-develop, advise, and implement arts-based recovery initiatives. Sangeeta Isvaran's work with UNESCO teaching dance in Nias highlights the need for a community-specific approach that acknowledges differences in religion, language ability, and knowledge of traditional arts among community members. Practitioners might also consult the IDEP Foundation (Bali, Indonesia) on how to use performance traditions to raise awareness about disaster resilience in socially-inclusive ways.

Key Messages

- Performance-based trauma recovery programs are most effective when workshops are informal, long-term, and rooted in shared cultural traditions.
- Including equal numbers of male and female practitioners and creating gender-segregated spaces can help women and girls feel more welcome in performance-based healing initiatives.
- Small, informal rehearsals can generate intimacy among participants and provide opportunities for creative expression that may not be possible in large, formal performance settings.

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About the Series

The Doing Gender & Disaster series focuses on methods, processes, practices and research aimed at gendered disaster risk reduction (GDRR); sharing knowledge is important but only action leads to change.



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