

WOMEN EMERGE MUCH STRONGER THAN MEN IN COPING WITH THE TSUNAMI AFTERMATH

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The tsunami that struck the coast of Sri Lanka on December 26, 2004, has had a major impact on the social, traditional and customary role of women in the country.

It has not merely reinforced the traditional role of women as home makers, but also given them an opportunity to play a key role rebuilding the family in particular and the society at large. In many cases women now play the role of mother as well as the head of the family, trying to make both ends meet.

Previously, women had a secure, sheltered life in a traditionally conservative Sri Lankan society, where they were confined to the kitchen and supporting the income of the family by carrying out tasks that were either home bound or in another secured atmosphere like a weaving centre or a small shop close to the house.

This was perhaps one of the main reasons for the large number of women getting killed by the tsunami. According to rough estimates, as gender disaggregated data of victims the tsunami is still not available in Sri Lanka, almost 80 per cent of those killed in the tsunami were women.

Most people who live by the sea are good swimmers, but a majority of women belonging to the fishing community in Sri Lanka do not know swimming. Women are also not taught to climb trees. The lack of swimming skills and inability to climb the coconut trees resulted in loss of lives of thousands of women and children. Survivors say that the traditional Sarees and tightly wrapped long skirts that most women wear in Sri Lanka prevented them from running away or even attempting to swim or climb the tree. Described as the weaker sex, women have been deprived of learning skills that could be life saving in the event of disasters like the tsunami.

According to a press report citing village elder Kanapathipilli Soundararajan of Batticaloa District, women made up the majority of the 1,300 bodies recovered in that area. The account of Daisy Lowe, of the Sri Lankan Association of South Wales, tells a similar story. She conducted a count at a camp in Batticaloa and found 1,589 surviving men and boys present, but only around 1,000 women and girls. (*"The tsunami's impact on women"* ; *Oxfam GB Briefing Note*)

Even on March 28, during the mass evacuation of people from the coastal areas of Sri Lanka in the wake of an earthquake in Sumatra, which sparked off a tsunami warning in the South and Southeast Asian region, at least 10 people were in road accidents, a majority of them women.

IMPACT OF THE TSUNAMI ON WOMEN

Beside the fact that a majority of the 31,000 killed by the tsunami in Sri Lanka were women, as usual they have borne the worst impact of the disaster.

Women feel safe and secure in the confines of their homes, surrounded by their families. The waves shattered their homes and their lives. Within a matter of 30 minutes three

large waves washed away thousands of houses and rendered nearly half a million homeless all along the coastline of the Indian ocean Island. Having lost their houses, families moved to public buildings and places of worship in search of shelter. The loss of home made women more vulnerable. They felt insecure in a new environment, which also lacked basic amenities. However, they had to cope with the situation while waiting for immediate relief that was provided by voluntary organizations and philanthropic individuals.

Life was not easy for women in these temporary accommodations. Aid agencies tried their best to provide toilets and other basic facilities to the displaced population, but this was barely sufficient.

Saraswathi was displaced from the Dutch Bar area of Batticaloa. She now resides in a school building in the town. "There are very few toilets and women have problems accessing these toilets. Moreover, we all have to sleep together and there's just no privacy."

The biggest fear in the minds of displaced women was the lack of security. Most of the temporary shelters provided to the families did not have electricity. After sunset most women and girls were scared to go to the toilet, which have been constructed away from the shelters. The fear of being violated was uppermost in the minds of women. Non governmental organizations working with women have reported violence against women in the camps, including rape. There were reports of young girls being lured away from the camps on the pretext of providing them with dry ration and clothes. In the southern district of Galle, a woman lodged a complaint of mass rape with the police, but the police have not reported any action on this matter.

To assuage the fears of camp dwellers, the government handed over the security of these camps to the Army, Navy and the Police Special Task Force. After the security forces took over the responsibility, not many reports of rape or sexual assault have been made. In many far flung camps, men have taken the responsibility of protecting the women. At Alles Garden Camp in the eastern Trincomalee district, men take turns patrolling the camp. In spite of these arrangements, women still feel insecure because they have lost their houses and also the livelihood.

Although traditionally men are the breadwinners in the family, women too play a significant role in supplementing the family income, while attending to daily chores. Most commonly women run small grocery shops either at their door step or close to their houses. Many women in the fishing community are involved in drying and packaging dry fish. Similarly, women are also involved in making coir and lace embroidered products and hand crafted items. Women along the coastline have lost their shops, lace making units and other livelihoods.

Incidentally, women are also one of the biggest foreign exchange earners for Sri Lanka. Thousands of Sri Lankan women are working mostly in the Middle East as house maids and their remittances support the families back home. Many of these women have also become victims of the tsunami, as they have lost their families while they were away in the Gulf countries. Many of them have returned to their families, who are now in camps and temporary shelters. The money these women had sent home to construct houses and provide better facilities for their children to study have been lost to the tsunami.

Ameena left her family three years ago to work in Kuwait. "I had sent money to build a house. My husband got the house constructed and he lived there with our three children and my mother. We have lost everything, the house has collapsed and my mother was taken away by the waves."

Pregnant women and young mothers are particularly disadvantaged because of the difficulty in access to medical assistance. The worst affected are those women who have lost their husbands, children and in some cases the entire family.

The loss of head of the family has suddenly catapulted these widows into a new role. They have to fend the family and look for a new livelihood. Women from the fishing community cannot go out fishing so they are trying to find some alternative source of income.

Insecurity has driven these widows to take shelter with their relatives. Some of the widow women have moved to adjoining or far away places to live with their relatives. They have been deprived of compensation and the monthly benefits that are paid by the government to the affected families, as many have not registered themselves with the local government authorities. Some women who have returned have been told that they were not present when the authorities were registering the affected families; therefore they were not eligible for the financial compensation and the monthly support payment.

Palliyamma Sinnaiah is in a camp in Batticaloa. The other survivors in the camp keep a watchful eye on this 60-year-old woman because she is threatening to commit suicide.
"I was picked up by some people who were in a boat, but I saw my husband and children getting washed away by the sea. Now I have nobody to live for. I have lost my entire family. I have no reason to live."

Many such widows may not get the permanent houses that the government plans to build for all those who have lost their homes. As they are not registered with the district government as beneficiaries, they will not be provided the alternative accommodation.

Widows are forced to depend on other families for assistance. The dependency has also resulted in insecurity as women are obliged to depend on men outside their family. Also, some of these women fear that the properties owned by their husbands may not be transferred to them and that the relatives - that unscrupulous people would grab the land and other belongings.

Loss of livelihood and changed living circumstances has also increased instances of domestic violence. With mounting alcohol abuse in the camps, women have become even more vulnerable to abuse at home.

THE CHALLENGE

In spite of these odds, women have emerged stronger than men in the post-tsunami situation. They are not merely doing the daily chores in the camps and transitional shelters; women are also taking up the responsibility of rebuilding their lives.

“In the first shelter we built I have visited a few families and I found two men who were completely disoriented. One had lost three children and the second one had lost two children. The men sat staring blankly. Wives of these men seemed better able to cope as they were able to speak,” (*Reflections by Pearl Stephen, Chairperson Women’s Development Centre*)

The biggest challenge before these women is to cope with the situation, while being the fulcrum of the family. They have to support the children and other members of the family, in many cases elder parents or in-laws.

Women are the nearest and more dependable counselors a family can find immediately. In many families women have begun playing the role of a counselor for their children. Overcoming their own pain and suffering, women patiently listen to their children and advise them. Coping with the camp life or life in a small accommodation made of galvanized tin sheets and wooden planks is not easy. Its women who spend more time at home than men and children. While men are away looking for employment, women do the housekeeping.

They are also supplementing the income of their families by taking up work at Cash For Work programs launched by aid agencies that are building temporary shelters.

In many families, young girls have taken up the role of mothers for their siblings. They look after the needs of their younger siblings while doing the domestic chores in the absence of their mother, who either works to supplement the family income or was killed in the tsunami. Some women have taken charge of children who have lost their mothers, this strengthening the social support structure within the camp society.

In Marathamunai area of Ampara district several Muslim women have returned to weaving cloth. Aided by the Women’s Development Centre, these women have been able to reestablish their weaving centre, though at a much lower scale and are producing traditional sarees, sarongs, bed sheets and other material at an affordable price. Here too, widow women are faced with the problem of rebuilding their lives, but most of them have emerged stronger than expected. They have taken charge of the family and are trying to find a suitable livelihood.

The lack of knowledge of law is turning out to be a major handicap for women. Most of them are unaware of their entitlements and of the laws of inheritance. They face possible exploitation in the courts by middlemen on whom they would depend for completing the legal formalities.

ADDRESSING GENDER NEEDS IN SRI LANKA

While planning the long-term action, an assessment of the needs of women is absolutely essential. The non governmental organizations could empower women by implementing programmes that empower them and help them overcome their grief.

- Ensuring proper electricity and sanitation facilities for women who are still in welfare centres and camps. Women have become more vulnerable after the disaster and need to feel safe and adequately provided for.

- Supply of undergarments and sanitary pads until families are able to get back their livelihood and provide for themselves.
- Women should be consulted while planning and building temporary or transitional shelters.
- Community consultation and formation of women's groups while deciding about permanent housing. The tsunami disaster is unlikely to change the role of women in the society. They would continue to play their traditional role of homemakers. Therefore, the permanent housing plan should incorporate the suggestions of women.
- Health care should be provided to women, especially old and pregnant women. Mobile health clinics could be an option worth considering. Awareness programmes for sexual and reproduction health should be undertaken.
- Train women to become midwives as new communities have formed due to displacement.
- Assist women in obtaining death certificates, title deeds and other documents to claim their right to property. In Sri Lanka besides the Roman Dutch Law, there is the customary law which deals with inheritance. In case these laws obstruct smooth inheritance, an advocacy campaign for amendment could be taken up. In the north there is a different set of laws called Desavalame which governs marriage and inheritance.
- Livelihood programmes and skills training for women are essential as this could supplement the household income. In case of women-headed households special attention needs to be paid to the requirements of the family.
- Creation of support groups within the community to help single parents. A number of men have lost their wives. They have to take care of their children. The support groups would be of great help to such parents. Similarly these groups could help widow women too.
- Assist migrant women workers returning home. Women migrant workers form almost 80 per cent of the Sri Lankan workers employed overseas. Most of them are working as domestic help in the Middle East. Amongst them a majority is from the coastal areas and their families have suffered. Livelihood and skills training needs to be extended to these women also as it is likely that when they return home they might find themselves homeless or destitute.
- Women should be trained in responding to early warning systems. Men are mostly away at work and also alcohol abuse is a major social problem in the country. It would be wise to build the capacity of women in the coastal areas to understand early warnings and respond to these in time.

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