

EMERGING RESEARCH ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN POST DISASTER RECONSTRUCTION

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Abstract

The seeming randomness of the occurrence of disaster, its impact and uniqueness of events demand dynamic, real-time, effective and efficient solutions from the field of disaster management and thus making this topic necessary. Although disaster management efforts are designed to benefit both men and women, in real practice a larger share of benefits and resources goes to men and women continue to remain marginalised. The lack of involvement of both men and women in disaster management has exposed them to more potential dangers. Recent studies have reflected the need for gender consideration in disaster management and emphasised its importance in building disaster resilient communities. Inclusion of women's contribution to the post disaster reconstruction is a major concern for policy makers and researchers in building disaster resilient communities.

A mid-term review of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction in the Yokohama world conference on natural disaster reduction highlighted the need for community involvement and empowerment of women at all stages of disaster management programmes as an integral part of reducing community vulnerability to natural disasters. Women are less likely to migrate to different places during post disaster phase due to their domestic responsibilities and other cultural systems which lead them to more vulnerable positions. This indicates the need to include women's needs and contribution in post disaster reconstruction. The concept of empowerment can be illustrated as a social process in addressing the above since it occurs in relation to others and as an outcome it can be enhanced and evaluated against expected accomplishments. In this context, this study seeks to identify and investigate the emerging research need in the knowledge on women's empowerment in the post disaster reconstruction in Sri Lanka. The study has been based on a theoretical as well as practical ideas obtained through a comprehensive literature review. It is expected that the study will serve as a platform for researchers who are interested in building disaster resilient communities in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Disaster, Empowerment, Reconstruction, Research, Sri Lanka, Women

1. Introduction

In less than half a decade, the world has witnessed numerous catastrophes which took away many hundred thousands of lives and caused huge damages to the economy with unimaginable human sufferings. In addition to man made disasters, experts predict that the rising global temperature from climate change is yet to cause severe natural disasters around the world. One of the unprecedented disasters that occurred within the last decade was the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. When a disaster strikes, the impact of the disaster depends mainly on the socio economic conditions of the particular community in addition to the scale of the cause itself. The extent of impact of the 2004 Tsunami on communities was immense mainly due to the hazards and vulnerabilities that existed in those affected areas. Hence, there is a need to include local needs and local knowledge on existing hazards and vulnerabilities in order to enhance the resilience of communities against future disasters. Although many governments take preventive actions to face disasters, the lack of incorporation of communities into these developments lead to further vulnerabilities within those areas.

Sri Lanka has faced many natural disasters such as floods, cyclones/wind storm, drought, land slide, epidemic, etc. During the nineteenth century, Sri Lanka has faced more number of flooding than other disasters. However, apart from Tsunami, more number of people were killed from windstorm during early decades. The Tsunami that occurred on the Boxing day in 2004 killed 35,322 people and displaced about a million people in 13 districts of the country (Government of Sri Lanka and Development partners, 2005). Besides the human loss, Tsunami caused extensive loss to dwellings and infrastructure, and interrupted livelihood activities and assets that were used for business

purposes. According to a joint report of Government of Sri Lanka and Development partners (2005), the socio economic impact was the greater consequence of Tsunami as it compounded with the previously existing vulnerabilities.

The lack of involvement of both men and women in disaster management has exposed them to more potential dangers (Childs, 2006). A core and often neglected aspect of the post disaster reconstruction phase has been the lack of inclusion of women and other vulnerable groups into rebuilding and community development. In addition, studies have reflected the need for gender consideration in disaster management and emphasised its importance in building disaster resilient communities (Ariyabandu and Wickramasinghe, 2003; Delaney and Shrader, 2000). Ariyabandu and Wickramasinghe (2003) state that disasters affect women and men differently due to different roles and responsibilities undertaken by them, and the differences in their capacities, needs and vulnerabilities. In most of the instances, although disaster management efforts are designed to benefit both men and women, in practice a larger share of benefits and resources goes to men while women continue to remain marginalised.

Although, the official statistics on the social conditions of women in Sri Lanka indicate the possibility of utilising their capacity during the post disaster reconstruction women's participation in this phase is often a neglected element especially at managerial level. In this context, the study based on which this paper is written, seeks to identify and investigate the emerging research need in the knowledge on women's empowerment in the post disaster reconstruction in Sri Lanka. This study has been based on a theoretical as well as practical ideas obtained through comprehensive literature review. In achieving the aim, the study initially describes the concepts involved in disaster management and later identifies the context of post Tsunami reconstruction and women's status within post Tsunami settings in Sri Lanka. Further, the study elaborates the concept of empowerment and its role in enhancing women's position. Finally, the study examines the promising research need in women's empowerment during the post disaster reconstruction in Sri Lanka.

2. Post disaster reconstruction in Disasters management

The report by United Nations Environment Program (cited Eilperin, 2009) insists the need to protect the world from increasing global temperature which is currently projected to rise up to 6.3 degrees Fahrenheit by the end of the century. The report further states that even if the countries accomplish their most ambitious climate pledge they will not be able to reduce the temperature rise. This will increase the occurrence of tropical cyclones and heavy rainfall, and it is predicted that the sea level may rise by up to nearly a metre. This indicates the need to build disaster resilient communities in order to face the future. The current number of occurrences of natural disasters and the scale of their damage are drawing the attention of various sessions and meetings around the world. Within disaster management settings, the need for building disaster resilient communities has been increasingly highlighted since vulnerabilities and needs of communities can only be identified through a process of direct consultation and dialogue with the communities concerned as those communities can understand local realities and contexts better than outsiders (Haghebaert, 2007).

Although disasters and devastations are not new to Sri Lanka, the extent of devastation to properties and lives in one single event took the breath of many on the 26th of December 2004, not only within the country but also around the world. Even though Sri Lanka had the experience of dealing with natural disasters such as floods, landslides and occasional cyclones, Tsunami took many by surprise by its scale of devastation. In the process of building disaster resilience, the built environment plays a major role during the post disaster reconstruction. The post disaster reconstruction can provide many opportunities in rebuilding social and economic status of the community (Thurairajah *et al.*, 2008). Hence, it is important to understand the post disaster reconstruction within disaster management and to examine the contexts of post disaster reconstruction in order to carry out effective developments for disaster resilience.

3. Disaster management

United Nations (2003) describes a disaster as a severe disruption of the functioning of a community or a society causing extensive human, material, economic or environmental losses which goes beyond the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources. Delaney and Shrader (2000) have acknowledged that disaster management is a circular model in which disasters and development are intertwined. Although in disasters it is difficult to differentiate between different stages, policy makers and researchers have identified a disaster cycle for management purposes. Ariyabandu and Wickramasinghe (2003) state that a disaster management cycle includes the shaping of public policies and plans that either modify the causes of disasters or mitigate their effects on people, property and infrastructure. According to Ariyabandu and Wickramasinghe (2003), disaster management is a collective term encompassing all aspects of planning for and responding to disasters which includes both pre and post disaster activities. Although different scholars use various ways of naming the phases, generally the disaster cycle includes disaster mitigation and prevention, emergency, rehabilitation and reconstruction. Each phase in the cycle requires particular types of interventions and programming.

During disaster prevention, the activities that are related to elimination or reduction of the probability of the occurrence or reduction of the effects from unavoidable disasters are carried out (Delaney and Shrader, 2000). The mitigation process includes building codes, vulnerability analysis, zoning and land use management, building safety codes, preventive health care and public education. During the emergency phase, relief agencies focus on preventing additional loss of life through actions such as search and rescue. The rehabilitation phase that follows is characterised by medium term interventions such as construction of temporary shelters and provision of basic foods to the affected population. On the other hand, the reconstruction period includes the long-term, and often substantial, investments in rebuilding the physical and social infrastructure of affected regions (Delaney and Shrader, 2000).

In the recent past the number of disaster occurrences has increased (Altay and Green, 2006). This urges the policy makers and researchers to focus on enhancement of society's capacity to withstand disasters in order to reduce damage to both human and material resources. Within the disaster management settings, post disaster recovery and reconstruction can provide windows of opportunity for physical, social, political and environmental development not only to reconstruct the impacted areas, but also to improve the socio-economic and physical conditions of the impacted population in the long term (International Labour Organisation, 2003). However, in practice, too often disaster responses have not contributed to long-term development but they actually subvert or undermine it (Bradshaw, 2001; Anderson and Woodrow, 1998). This, results in lengthy post disaster reconstruction activities and the development opportunities are lost. Therefore, there is a need for built environment to adapt strategies to increase effectiveness and efficiency in post disaster reconstruction. Previous research found that despite the improvements in the emergency response to natural disasters, permanent reconstruction is often inefficiently managed, uncoordinated and slow to get off the ground (Jones, 2006). Further, in some occasions the constructed buildings or infrastructure do not provide the required level of service to the community or act as additional hazards for future disasters. This bespeaks the need to focus on the post disaster reconstruction and the involvement of affected communities in improving disaster resilience for future needs.

4. Post disaster reconstruction in Sri Lanka

The tidal waves that were created by a series of earthquakes that occurred in the sea near Sumatra, Indonesia on the 26th of December 2004 haunted many people. These tidal waves struck the Eastern, Southern and Northern coasts of Sri Lanka and also parts of Western coasts sweeping people away, causing flooding and destruction of infrastructure. The government of Sri Lanka has recognised the importance of having proper measures for rebuilding permanent infrastructure in order to carry out effective Tsunami recovery (Government of Sri Lanka and development partners, 2005).

The Tsunami damaged or destroyed more than 100,000 houses, which amounted to 13% of the total housing stock in coastal administrative divisions. Sri Lanka faces many challenges during its

reconstruction phase. Although guaranteed external assistance seemed to be more than adequate for reconstruction costs, the subsequent problems with regard to relief payments, providing credit facilities, distribution of funds, coordination of reconstruction activities, and mismanagement of funds hindered the reconstruction progress (Jayasuriya *et al.*, 2005). Further, poor coordination among domestic and external agencies has created serious problems in providing humanitarian assistance to people and in balancing sensitive issues in political arena. The study on post Tsunami recovery process in Sri Lanka (Ratnasooriya *et al.*, 2007) highlighted that housing reconstruction efforts have not succeeded in achieving the targets due to lack of consultation among all stakeholders, unawareness of those affected of their entitlements, confusion caused by the revision of the buffer zone and the resulting additional demand for housing, escalation of the cost of building materials, limitation on the capacity of the local construction industry, and the lack of sustained commitment of some of the donor agencies.

There was an extensive damage to the national roads by the Tsunami. Tsunami damaged a total length of nearly 700 km, representing nearly 5% of the total national road network since many national roads were located near to coastline. Even prior to Tsunami, an estimate of nearly 60% (Jayasuriya *et al.*, 2005) of the entire road network was in a deteriorated condition due to lack of maintenance and damage and neglect during the 20 years of civil war, particularly in the north and east. The total damage of Tsunami to the road sector was estimated to be approximately US\$50 million (Jayasuriya *et al.*, 2005). It was found that the donors were quick in committing funds for road rehabilitation.

Another important infrastructure facility that was severely damaged was railway infrastructure. Tsunami caused disruption to rail services in the north eastern, eastern and southern corridors. However, damages to north eastern and eastern corridors were not severe compared to the southern corridor. The total damage to rail track, railway infrastructure and rolling stock was estimated to be US\$ 26 million (Jayasuriya *et al.*, 2005). During post Tsunami reconstruction process, the restoration of rail services in the southern corridor was considered to be a speedy achievement. In addition to the prevailing water shortage in certain areas, Tsunami affected the water supply and sanitation systems of those areas. Although many efforts had been taken to restore this service and provide additional supply, it was observed that due to the relocation of communities some existing networks need to be expanded and parts of them have become redundant (Ratnasooriya *et al.*, 2007). Under the water sector, the government highlighted the challenges with regard to sustainable maintenance of water/gully bowers and packaged water treatment plants, securing local counterparts funding, commencement of sanitation studies and development of sewerage for new settlements, further improvement of hygiene practice and strengthening significantly the sanitation sector (Government of Sri Lanka and development partners, 2005).

The report by Government of Sri Lanka and development partners (2005) states that the national construction industry does not have required number of contractors, equipment, skilled workforce, modern management practice and access to necessary finance in order to maintain the required speed of the entire Tsunami reconstruction work. Hence, the government proposed to engage and team up with international contractors and to provide training to local contractors in order to solve the above problems and to develop the affected community. Further, under the cash for work schemes by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO), the community based organisations and small contractors were encouraged to get trained in labour based contracts to reduce the pressure on main contractors and to improve the quality of infrastructure.

Reconstruction process can play a major part in not only developing the affected area but also for future occurrence of disasters. The poor level of existing social and physical infrastructure facilities can turn hazards into disasters or the inappropriate development can itself be the cause of disasters. Hidellage (2008) emphasised that although many houses and infrastructure facilities were constructed, the effectiveness of their use do not provide adequate return to them (Asia Pacific Forum on Women Law and Development, 2006). This indicates the importance of considering the needs of local communities and including their local knowledge into reconstruction.

The social condition of Sri Lanka is much better than other South Asian neighbouring countries (Department of Statistics and Census, 2005) in the accomplishment of human development goals. Life expectancy in Sri Lanka is 72 years (Department of Statistics and Census, 2005). Further, the granting of free education facilities to the entire population has made a rapid upliftment in literacy levels, and given an opportunity for both the rich and the poor alike to pursue higher education. This makes the literacy rate in Sri Lanka to about 91.5%. According to Department of Census and Statistics (2009) the male literacy rate is 92.8% and female literacy rate is 90.3%. Hence, adequate measures should be taken to utilise the current social conditions in order to deliver a better environment for the community especially issuing their own resources. The inclusion of women can provide opportunities to develop required skills and income earning opportunities for their enhancement. The following section looks into the challenges that women face during post disaster reconstruction.

5. Women's challenges in post disaster reconstruction

Though, decisions regarding resource allocation, enforcement of land and building regulations, and investment on economic and social development are made with an intention to satisfy both genders many studies have highlighted the existing inequality in distribution chains and implementation phase. Most importantly, women's contributions to post disaster resilience have long been under estimated. Further, similar to using a generic term 'he' especially in written documents, linguistically females are subsumed under male. Pyles (2009) recognised that a core and often neglected element of disaster recovery has been the rebuilding and community development phase. Morrow and Peacock (1997) recognised that low income and marginalised communities are likely to suffer from downward spiral of deterioration after a disaster. Further, Sundet and Mermelstein (1996) found that high poverty rates in communities were associated with failures to survive. This can be seen in many occasions within the research on disaster. Therefore, in order to enhance women's position and to improve the post disaster reconstruction this section of the paper identifies and examines the problems that women face in post Tsunami reconstruction.

It has been widely stated that women have been mostly affected by the Tsunami and in many occasions they have been referred as vulnerable groups (Ariyabandu and Wickramasinghe, 2003; APWLD, 2006; Women's coalition for disaster management, 2005). While investigating the challenges that women face during post disaster it can be seen that, under different phases of disaster management cycle women's needs and challenges are different. However, while some needs may not continue to next phase the other continue to remain till a solution is given. Further, these challenges are interconnected. This section of the study mainly looks into the challenges that are directly related to disaster reconstruction apart from other challenges that are not directly related to disaster reconstruction such as poor access to health and other services, violence against women, other human rights issues, etc. Although the challenges under second category do not directly fall under reconstruction activities the link and interconnections between benefits and activities link them together.

During planning and designing of shelters, women find that poor procedures in capturing women's demands and their ways of living lead to construction of inappropriate houses (Women's coalition for disaster management, 2005). Further, guidelines used by the agencies/institutions were not clear about the definitions and about the people to whom that the support can be provided. For example, a government initiated agency which worked on disaster reconstruction claimed that it will encourage 'household-driven housing reconstruction' while it does not clearly define the word household, especially where extended families live in the same house (Women's coalition for disaster management, 2005). Women's coalition for disaster management highlighted the importance of providing compulsory criteria for including women in decision making bodies in order to avoid dismal representation. Since certain organisations such as the Village Rehabilitation Committees and Divisional and District Grievance Committees play a very important role in the reconstruction such as, taking responsibility for making the beneficiary lists, administration and disbursement of grants, and resolution of disputes, it is important to maintain representation from all in order to avoid any discrimination. Further, Women's coalition for disaster management (2005) emphasised that tsunami

recovery, rehabilitation and construction process has to be based on the promotion and protection of rights rather than on a 'victim focus' which is limited on a welfare and dependency approach.

Further, time constraints in utilising the loans given for reconstruction process added additional burden to people who are in affected families. The eligibility for special loans was based on the capacity to pay back the loan rather than on the vulnerability of people whose accommodation has been destroyed by Tsunami. The increase consumption of alcohol by men lead to misuse of funds allocated for reconstruction purposes (Women's coalition for disaster management, 2005). This shows the need to consider the equal distribution of funds to both men and women and to maintain a monitoring mission in order to provide effective distribution of funds for the purpose.

According to the study by National committee on women (2006), it was found that female headed households face discrimination in terms of their civil status, family and community support, property ownership, and access to resources. Patriarchal systems that exist within the community suppress women's legal rights such as property rights and land titles. Since land titles are allocated to the head of household who is generally registered as being male made concerns over the entitlements of women within the reconstruction phase. Although the Sri Lankan law does not state that male is the head of household, the patriarchal systems tend to locate women in secondary position within the family based household (National committee on women, 2006). However, government payments and interventions in the post Tsunami context target the family based household as the unit that receives payments. Further, the head of household is eligible to receive these benefits. This leads to women in a more marginalised position. A woman is usually recognised as a head of household especially in the Tsunami affected families only when her spouse departed or who is unable to provide support to the family (National committee on women, 2006).

Women's participation in reconstruction of dwellings is not always anticipated. Many women from certain parts of the affected communities mainly carry out their income earning activities in their houses. Their lack of alternative housing, and also with other cultural factors forced them to live in marginalised positions. Lack of experience/knowledge on construction of houses and their dependency on others to complete the project led them to more vulnerable positions. Further, misuse of the constructed houses for women's by others made them more vulnerable. In addition, it was found that lack of knowledge on the usage of new technology within their houses did not offer any benefits to them (Hidellage, 2008).

Above problems that women face in post disaster reconstruction bespeak the need to address women's position within post disaster reconstruction. Bearing in mind the social conditions of women and the opportunities that the post disaster reconstruction can offer (Thurairajah *et al.*, 2008) to the community, the concept of empowerment can be applied in order to enhance women's position. The following section describes the construct of women's empowerment prior to the discussion on its application in the post disaster reconstruction.

6. The construct of women's empowerment

The origin of empowerment as a form of theory was traced back to the Brazilian humanitarian and educator, Paulo Freire (1973 cited Hur, 2006) when he proposed a plan for liberating the oppressed people through education. Although, Paulo did not use the term empowerment, his emphasis on education as a means of inspiring individual and group challenges to social inequality provided an important background for social activists who were concerned about empowering marginalised people (Parpart, et al. 2003). The concept is conceived as the idea of power since it is closely related to changing power by gaining, expending, diminishing, and losing (Page and Czuba, 1999).

7. Meanings of empowerment

Empowerment has been defined in several ways by many authors for different contexts. Even though the meaning of the terms delegation and empowerment may look similar they are different to each other. While describing empowerment, Nesan and Holt (1999) state that, empowerment is more a

philosophy than a set of tools or management principles to be readily applied to business organisations. Though the term empowerment has been used frequently in management literature, it is been defined in several ways by organisations and scholars. Accordingly, empowerment is a diverse concept which is open to a number of different interpretations. During the last decade the term has become a widely used word in the social sciences across many disciplines such as community psychology, management, political theory, social work, education, women studies, and sociology (Lincoln et al. 2002).

Handy (1993) explains empowerment as encouraging people to make decisions and initiate actions with less control and direction from their manager. Avrick and colleagues (1992) state empowerment as giving authority commensurate with their responsibilities to initiate positive change in their organisation. This demands total commitment, involvement, support and trust from management. While explaining about empowerment, Rubinstein (1993) states that every individual is responsible for acceptance or rejection of the quality of prior work; self inspection and control of current work; and acceptance or rejection of finished work. In the above studies the authors have explained the term from a similar perspective within the management of organisations.

In a study within the construction industry, Nesan and Holt (1999) collectively define empowerment as the process of giving employees the authority to take decisions, relating to their work processes and functions, and within the limits provided by management, but requiring them to assume full responsibility and risk for their actions. Further they state that, empowerment is not an act or incident that can visibly or physically happen, but it is employees' perception or realisation that they believe in, and control what happens to their work processes; and that they are capable of controlling those processes efficiently. Even though Eylon and Bamberger (2000) view empowerment from two different perspectives: a cognition (psychological approach) or social act (sociological approach), in their gender related study, they accept that empowerment cannot be neatly conceptualised as either a cognition or social act.

8. Women's empowerment

The concept of women's empowerment begins from the understanding that women's empowerment is about the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices can acquire such an ability (Kabeer, 1999). According to Magar (2003) women's empowerment is an outcome of a process whereby individual attitudes and capabilities, combined with collaborative actions, and reciprocally influenced by resources results in a transformation to the desired achievements. Kabeer (1999) describes women's empowerment as a process by which women acquire the ability to make strategic life choices in terms of three interrelated dimensions that include resources (preconditions), agency (process) and achievements (outcomes).

Magar, in her study on empowerment approaches to gender based violence, constructed a framework using the findings from earlier studies (Kabeer, 1999; Stein, 1997). In her framework, she highlights individuals' attitudes and capabilities, which allow participation in various types of collaborative behaviour which leads to empowerment. Under this framework the empowerment process comprises of two levels: the level of individual capacities observed in individual attitudes and capabilities and the level of group capacities (Magar, 2003). Individual attitudes (self-esteem and self-efficacy) along with specific types of skills, knowledge, and political awareness, are key ingredients to achieving empowerment at these two levels. Self-efficacy or agency is defined as the experience of oneself as a cause agent, not in terms of skills but rather in terms of one's judgment of what one can do with whatever skills one has (Bandura, 1995).

In a study within rural India Roy and Tisdell (2002) refers women's empowerment as a process by which women can gain power to diminish the forces of institutional deterrents considerably to their development. Further, they state that the right to land is an important factor for women's empowerment as it is a more permanent source of income and it indicates that the person has a long-term interest in preserving the fertility of the land and therefore will be interested in investing in land.

Furthermore, when income is higher this will increase the person's capacity to spend on consumption of food, housing, education, health and other necessities which will uplift the living conditions.

In Sri Lanka, the concept of empowerment is becoming an important concept to address women's difficulties especially to those who are in more vulnerable state. The introduction of Millennium Development Goals made a tremendous impact on the way the construct of women's empowerment has been viewed at political level to enhance women's representation and participation in productive activities. Currently, non-governmental organisations are working on women's development in order to address women's safety and health related issues and, few of them are involved in enhancing their status with regard to their incoming earning activities particularly within the small cottage industries. Women's representation in Sri Lankan Parliament stands at 4.05% and in Local Government 1.9 %. The percentage of women in Municipal Councils and the Urban Councils is 3.0% and 3.4% respectively (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 2008). In Sri Lanka, Ministry of Child development and women's empowerment is the governmental ministry which is responsible for women's development. Under this ministry, National Committee on Womendrafted a women's rights bill in 2003 covering a wide spectrum of activities for district representation and powers to resolve women's issues. However, the bill was subjected to many debates and ultimately went out of the scene with the dissolution of Parliament in 2004.

In a study on the difficulties of women who work in factories, the concept of empowerment was considered while exploring the violence against women free trade zone. Factory women who participated in this research (Hancock, 2006) rated violence against women as a key way to measure women's empowerment. This indicates seriousness of the problem itself at the societal level and provides a firm need for women's empowerment. Although, government's one of the ministry has interest on women's empowerment they do not have any legislations specifically on women's empowerment. However, compared to earlier days enhancement of women's position within the society has been recognised and interest to take further actions have been considered to lessen the gender based violence which act as a major barrier to women's empowerment.

According to a study on rural women in Bangladesh, Parveen and Leonhäuser (2004) describe empowerment as an essential precondition for the elimination of poverty and upholding of human rights, in particular at the individual level it helps building a base for social change. A study on empowering women through community development approach views empowerment as a multidimensional and interlinked process of change in power relations to expand individual choices and capacities for self-reliance (Mayoux, 2003 cited Acharya et al., 2005). In order to address females submission, silence, sacrifice, inferiority and obedience, problems in female illiteracy, lesser mobility of women on employment in Nepal, the project considers the concept of empowerment of women through facilitating self-help group activities which are truly self-reliant, literacy programmes, group savings and credit programmes. Although many organisations work on women's empowerment, the application of this concept in developing countries has its interconnected key issues, such as the role of culture, tradition, education, religion and economics.

9. Discussion: Women's empowerment in post disaster reconstruction

The unprecedented Tsunami affected many buildings and infrastructure such as houses, roads, bridges, railway tracks, fishing ports, landing centres, small scale industrial units, hotels located near to seaside, irrigation systems, etc. In addition to the physical damages, the increase in gender violence and gender insensitive procedures during the post disaster reconstruction led women to a more vulnerable state. Further, women's dependency on other sections of the community for support in reconstruction, and management of their finance, the patriarchal systems that exist within the society also led them into a more marginalised position in the post disaster reconstruction. In certain cases, for example, women's needs and demands weren't included in the planning of houses. The existing customs and cultural systems with regard to legal rights of land and properties together with administrative process made women into economically disadvantaged positions. In addition to above, there was a need to provide sustainable income generation for living for women and their dependents.

Acar and Ege (2001) found that during post disaster phase, there is a 'double suffering' on women, created by natural as well as social, economic and cultural forces which shape the way they experience natural disasters. Further, they found that women in patriarchal societies, developing economies and traditional cultural contexts are precisely in this position. Acar and Ege (2001) recognised that gender-based prejudices, patriarchal values and behaviour patterns are likely to take new vigour and scope during post disaster context when the conditions of mass anxiety, helplessness and insecurity felt in the face of life threatening disasters. In addition, they found that this reinforces the communities to follow the same old familiar patterns of behaviour and tends to reject the differences.

Enarson and Fordham (2001) state that exclusion of women's full participation in forming disaster will-resilient communities will hardly lead to its success. Further, they emphasised that the reconstruction of safer communities cannot be done with elites or technical specialists, but through regular consultation with women across deep divides of class and culture and of women and men working together toward a common future. Exclusion of women will create 'gender-blind' post disaster reconstruction. This will simply build women's subordination which will leave the communities even more vulnerable to future disasters.

Due to lack of experience and exposure in handling the post disaster reconstruction process women tend to fall into more susceptible positions. However, identification of their need and their capacity to contribute to the reconstruction process can uplift their current economic and social position within the society. During reconstruction phase, expertise from those who are knowledgeable about women's human rights in the areas of resource use, work and employment, immigration, housing, health and reproduction are required in order to build a more resilient community (Enarson and Fordham, 2001). Since the Institute for Construction Training and Development of Sri Lanka provide educational courses and training to communities to develop their construction related skills, an initiative focusing on the process of bridging the available support and women's interest and knowledge can develop women's empowerment using the reconstruction phase as a platform.

Bearing in mind the literacy rate of women and other social conditions of women in Sri Lanka, and the introduction of policies and laws such as Sri Lanka Disaster Management Act, No 13 of 2005, Tsunami Housing Policy and Tsunami (Special Provisions) Act; and amendments and reinforcement of laws in the registration of death and declarations against gender based violence could create a better environment for women's empowerment. Further, the operation of Ministry of Child development and women's empowerment, Women's bureau and National committee on Women can contribute to for its development. In addition to above, many non-governmental organisations are emphasising the gender consideration in reconstruction process. However, it is rarely evident that any initiatives have been undertaken to empower women within reconstruction from built environment's perspective. Since post disaster recovery and reconstruction can provide windows of opportunity for physical, social, political and environmental development not only to reconstruct the impacted areas, but also to improve the socio-economic and physical conditions of the impacted population in the long term (International Labour Organisation, 2003) efforts should be taken to bridge the gap existing between women's empowerment and community resilience through this phase. Within this gap further studies can be done on how women's contributions can be incorporated into the post disaster reconstruction that can enhance the disaster resilience while improving women's position within the community. While carrying out this research a detailed study needs to be done on the promoters and hindrances of women's empowerment that exists within the post disaster reconstruction in addition to the facilitators. The existing systems can play a major role in developing the application of the concept. Since the application can not be done on a similar way through out the country a framework can be developed on how the concept can be adopted into the national and local levels especially by considering various factors that lead the difference.

The marginalised positions of women bespeak the strong need to uplift them socially and economically, and since the post disaster reconstruction can offer opportunities to reconstruct a better environment, women's representation in reconstruction process need to be strongly supported. In this context, the application of the concept of empowerment can provide an environment to women to

acquire the ability to make strategic life choices in terms of their own life which will uplift their status and reduce their vulnerabilities. This will not only uplift the conditions of women but also the community around them and improve the post disaster reconstruction. Although, currently many projects and studies have been carried out on women's empowerment in livelihood sector, the utilisation of reconstruction process for women's empowerment is hardly evident within the literature available in this area apart from its recognition for further development. Therefore, on one hand studies need to focus on linking the opportunities that the post disaster reconstruction can offer and the capacities of women that can be utilised for the above. This can lead to satisfying the needs of the construction sector and the needs of women from the affected community not only for the reconstruction phase but also for their living. Moreover, further studies can be carried out on women's capacity development within the built environment.

10. Conclusion

For the first time in history, Sri Lanka experienced the devastating effects of a Tsunami which was caused by giant waves created from massive earthquakes in Sumatra. In addition to huge physical damages it caused severe human sufferings. However, the post disaster reconstruction offers opportunities to the communities to enhance their positions. This study recognises that women's empowerment is one of the key factors in the reconstruction process towards sustainable ways of living and that can address vulnerabilities, promote justice and reduce other risks. Although this study specifically focused on women, the study does support that both women and men must be empowered as disaster decision makers at all levels. However, careful considerations should be made in cases where men's and women's interests are different and women's political voice is still too rarely heard. This can not only develop women but also others who are dependant on them.

In the process of empowerment, women need to be facilitated for self reliance. Since the post disaster reconstruction can offer opportunities to build disaster resilient communities it is wise to search for hidden resilience displayed by communities affected by disasters through themselves. Therefore, further studies should be undertaken without any delay to bridge the gap existing between women's empowerment and community resilience by researching on how women's contributions can be incorporated into the post disaster reconstruction which can enhance disaster resilience while improving women's position in the community. This will require conscious strengthening of local knowledge and wisdom while finding solutions to problems. This process can develop economic possibilities while supporting political, social and economic empowerment of women without much of dependency on externally parties in the long run. This can lead government to take initiatives to develop women and reduce the vulnerabilities.

In this context, while considering the current conditions and support that exists within Sri Lanka, there is a strong need to research into the ways in which women can be empowered. Research into women's empowerment in the post disaster reconstruction can not only contribute to the knowledge but also add tremendous value to increase women's self reliance which can decrease their dependency that in many occasions leads them to vulnerable occasions. Similar to the creation of the Ministry of National Disaster Management and Human Rights to cope with future disasters the Tsunami can act as a catalyst in developing women's empowerment during the post disaster reconstruction in Sri Lanka.

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