



GENDERING THE TSUNAMI:

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES FROM SRI LANKA



Neloufer de Mel
Kanchana N. Ruwanpura

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Introduction

"As many people do, locals and tourists alike, I stared out to sea and tried picture it rising in the way that it did in December 2004. It is very hard to imagine such a thing happening in this beautiful place." - Hamish Milne

When the unimaginable took place in Sri Lanka on December 26th 2004, the catastrophic damage the tsunami waves caused Sri Lankan people, killing an estimated 30,000, making 800,000 homeless and devastating 70.0% of its coastline is by now well-established.¹ Human tragedy and death, however, are not new to Sri Lanka. Even as the Sri Lankan psyche has been scarred in indelible ways by the tsunami, it is also a country that has been besieged by over two decades of armed violence, ethnic

* The authors' names are in alphabetical order. The research and writing-up of this paper was largely shared equi-proportionally to represent the research interest and expertise of each researcher. We likewise wish to acknowledge the crucial role played by Anushaya Collure for being the consummate research assistant throughout this project.

¹ TAFREN Newsletter, Colombo, June 2005. TAFREN was the task force established to assist post-tsunami reconstruction and rehabilitation.

conflict, and war. The areas worse affected by the waves, the North-East and Eastern districts, had been the battleground of the nearly twenty-year Sri Lankan armed conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Two decades of war, armed insurrection in the South with the JVP uprisings of 1971 and 1987-89, uneven economic development, high unemployment and poverty meant that at the time the tsunami occurred, the areas most affected by it were already embattled.

The temporality of disasters, therefore, occupies a complex paradigm. Even as we tend to think of the inaugural moments of the tsunami as being at a time and date when the first wave engulfed the shore (as marked, for instance, in the official memorializing of the event)² – the tsunami that hit Sri Lanka did not occur in a vacuum but in a space and time that had a prior history. This history is important to mark because it leads to an understanding of how and why the impact of a disaster like the tsunami took several forms with varying consequences, and points to issues of accountability. How people responded to the tsunami, the challenges and attitudes to relocation and post-tsunami livelihoods were, as this report will show, determined by prior experience whether of the war and/or economic under development and poverty, and social structures of gender, class and caste. At the same time, if the inaugural moments of the tsunami are understood as occurring with the earthquake that struck the Indonesian coast, that there was no professional, sufficiently attuned early warning system in place to forewarn Sri Lanka that a tsunami was on its way leads to important lessons learnt. Our responses to natural disasters are not neutral either, but mediated by various ideological, cultural, and religious

² The State's memorialization of the disaster at 9.30 am on 26th December marks the time when the waves struck the Southern district and has a purchase in ethno-nationalism that privileges the experience of the Sinhala South rather than the North-East and Eastern districts where Tamil and Muslim communities reside.

viewpoints as we seek meaning to what has happened. Similarly, the war, the process of militarization, ethnic polarization, and the breakdown of security were experiential processes that shaped people's responses to the tsunami whether they were its immediate victims, those working in humanitarian relief efforts, or the State in charge of controlling the situation. The tsunami, unexpected as it was, therefore brought to crisis several fault lines that had already developed during Sri Lanka's protracted armed conflict and particular economies. Moreover, the psychological impact of such disasters on those who experience loss and trauma because of them lasts for decades. The mourning and melancholia wrought by such loss can be recurring and in turn, impact the way survivors respond to the challenges of their daily lives so that a holistic post-disaster reconstruction can never be 'complete' like a 3 or 5 year project, but rather, continuously demands our attention.

Research has shown that amongst the worst affected by armed conflicts are women (Hoole, Somasundaram, Sritharan, & Thiranagama 1990, Lorentzen & Turpin 1998, Enloe 2000, Cockburn 2005). In Sri Lanka, women who have been affected by the militarized violence of war and political uprisings have lost their men who were forcibly disappeared or killed. They have suddenly become widows, single parents, heads of households, care-givers of disabled soldier husbands or children and elders damaged in one way or another by the war. They have lost homes, livelihoods and suffered multiple displacements (Samuel 1994, Kottegoda 1996, de Mel & Crusz 2005). The tsunami too claimed its fair share of women victims. While it left many men grieving for lost families, it is also the case that a significant number of women have again been widowed, displaced and traumatized. Even as people – family members, neighbours, friends, passers-by – helped save the lives of many women, they were also instances in which they were subject to rapes, robbery and sexual harassment (Abeyesekera 2005:2). In Sri Lanka as the tsunami affected the coastal areas already

scarred by militarized violence, this has meant that the women living in these areas have had to bear a double burden, experiencing widowhood, loss of livelihoods, homes and families, and a return to temporary shelters and welfare camps yet again.

To offer an evaluation of the ways in which Sri Lankan women across ethnicity and spatial location experienced the tsunami, we also need to acknowledge the equally vital ways in which their narratives were coloured against a historical and political backdrop of ethnic conflict, violence, and war. We purposefully, therefore, juxtapose this report on women's experiences in ways that is cognisant of the differences that are likely to take place between regional locations and ethnic communities. Our purpose is to study how already existing structures of gender within the local political economy and culture influenced the way women responded initially to the tsunami. Just as much as the ethnic conflict and war affected various communities in different ways, we found that so too did the tsunami and post-tsunami experiences as narrated to us.

In the pages to follow we offer our readers results of a 9-month long research project, which attempts to draw out the complexities and nuances of the tsunami and post-tsunami period in Sri Lanka. This report begins by setting the relevant stages of Sri Lanka's social space and then goes on to discuss the manner in which we approached our fieldwork. After providing this background, we proceed to discuss and evaluate the re-occurring themes that cropped-up through an analysis of interviews, conversations, and dialogues with different groups of people. On this basis, the report offers some tentative issues that need to be borne in mind as numerous institutions, whether local or international, seek to recreate the lives of people affected by the tsunami against a backdrop of ethno-chauvinism, violence, and conflict through the disbursements of foreign and local aid and assistance.

The Sri Lankan Space

Sri Lanka has often been considered an exemplar of human development. The country has done remarkably well in the social and human development spheres, which has been achieved despite low per capita income as well as the prolonged ethnic war (Sen 1988, Anand and Kanbur 1995, Basu 1995, UNDP 2001). The impressively high human development achievements for a developing country are also transmitted in seemingly equal ways between men and women, which is another reason to laud Sri Lanka's egalitarian gender relationships (Humphries 1993, Klasen 1993).

While macro-level indicators offer useful insight into the ways in which development policy ought to seek equality between the sexes, it should not be considered the holy-grail of gauging women's movement towards a favourable position in society. Indeed research done at the micro-level suggests a far more complicated story of Sri Lankan women's experiences, where their vulnerability has been heightened through and because of the armed conflict taking place in the country (Samuel 1994, Kottegoda 1996, Ruwanpura 2006). Additionally, human development indices that have been collected since 1983 have not included the Northern and Eastern provinces, the two locales that have been exposed to heightened war and violence. Maternal and infant mortality rates are double and triple, respectively, in the Northern and Eastern provinces vis-à-vis the rest of the country. Malnutrition is also a problem, where nearly 50.0% of children are noted to be underweight (Jayasuriya, Steele, Weerakoon with Knight-John and Arunatilake 2005:9). Moreover, notwithstanding national-level successes, particular districts, geographical locations and local communities have had a track record of performing below par – namely, the plantation Tamils and Batticaloa and Moneragala districts, where historically poverty and social deprivation has been rife (Jayawardena 1984, Kurian 1989).

Inserting these veiled dimension to social reality, which is usually not captured by macro-level indicators, underscores the need for social analysis that transcends the macro and micro dichotomy. It calls for recognizing that gendered structures of the political economy and on-going ethnic tensions are likely to have a bearing at the ground level and should be incorporated to our understanding of the ways in which the tsunami was experienced by a war-torn Sri Lankan society.

Our fieldwork sites were chosen so as to capture the multifaceted aspects to regional variations in the country. Hikkaduwa, located in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka, has typically relied on the tourist industry given the reputation it has gained for staking claim to some of the island's most beautiful beaches. A drive down Galle Road through Hikkaduwa marks it in every sense as a seaside tourist village that attracts and caters to the backpacker as well as the more discerning traveller (Milne 2006). Tourism also spins-off other local trades, which includes way-side clothing boutiques, fast-food restaurants, to local handicrafts of varying standards. The industry, itself, has however undergone vicissitudes of change during the past two decades. The onslaught of the ethnic conflict since 1983, the political turmoil that beset the Southern Province during the height of JVP insurrection in 1987-89 and events such as the Katunayake airport attack in 2000 have meant a growing recognition that the areas primary reliance on tourism brings with it occupational risks over which local communities may have little or no control.

Alongside tourism the other economic mainstay of the region for many decades has been coral mining. The landside to the Galle Road in-and-around Hikkaduwa was littered with coral mining furnaces that were in operation for years, despite governmental bans in more recent times to clamp down the activity and kilns because of the negative environmental impact. While a drive down the coastline in the early 1980s brought with it the smelly odour of coral burning and smoky clouds, the

subsequent banning of coral mining made these ovens less of a visible landmark. This, however, did not completely do away with the activity – and until the tsunami was a source of employment for people and families in the area.³

Being a coastal town and village, fishing is the other occupation of a notable number of villagers. However, the changing national economy, particularly since 1977, also brought with it notable numbers that commuted to their workplace in Galle and sometimes even as far away as Colombo, where people worked as clerical staff, shop assistants, security officials, low-level public servants and private sector employees.

While Hikkaduwa is, then, home to people from all walks of life, most people we spoke with during our field research belonged to low or lower-middle income groups. It is also an area of the country which, while poor and has undergone fluctuating changes in fortunes in the past two and half decades, is also not socially and economically deprived and has not been directly battered by the war.

Batticaloa, a coastal town/village located in the Eastern Province was the other area of focus for this study. The similarities between Batticaloa and Hikkaduwa do not go far beyond their locations as coastal town/villages and both communities relying on fishing as an occupational source. Batticaloa district is identified as one of the most economically deprived parts of the country from the period prior to the onset of the war that has affected the area intensely. Poverty and socio-economic deprivation is endemic in visible ways, compounded by the ravages of militarization and conflict that is a hallmark of the region. Statistical figures, as partial as they may be for these

³ Later on in the paper we will pick-up the reality of coral mining as a source of livelihoods through the narration of a woman affected by the tsunami. She got caught to the tsunami waves because she was picking up corals from the beach as this was a means through which she would supplement family income.

areas, testify to Batticaloa's poverty and deprivation (Sarvananthan 2005).

Because Batticaloa falls into the dry zone region of Sri Lanka, its extreme weather conditions makes the geographical terrain more suitable for cash-crops, such as cashew and red chillies. Although the market for these agricultural crops has in recent times witnessed soaring prices, the demarcation of the district into government-controlled and LTTE-controlled areas has meant a series of impediments for farmers. Security obstacles limiting movement between rural areas and towns plus having draconian tax burdens imposed upon local communities by the LTTE are daily realities that worsen structures of poverty.

Monsoon weather patterns make fishing a seasonal occupation.⁴ Migration between North-East and South-West deep-sea fishing communities was regularly utilized as a means of circumventing seasonal and regional weather conditions. However, security conditions today do not permit fishing communities to continue these traditional patterns of migration and ethnic co-operation. Regional mobility for this occupational group came to a virtual standstill with the onset of hostilities, which also made fishing within Batticaloa vulnerable to the vagaries of the war and conflict. Because the high seas have been a battlefield venue between the Naval Forces and the Sea Tigers, it effectively limited the areas in which fishermen could engage in their economic activity (Keethaponcalan 2006).

Moreover, while Batticaloa is home to a lagoon, where prawn and crab fishing is possible, fishing in the lagoon waters too has been subject to government curfews that make this livelihood an unstable alternative source of income-generation

⁴ We do not mention tourism as an industry generating employment in Batticaloa. Since 1983 tourism in the North and Eastern Sri Lanka has largely been decimated by the on-going hostilities and war. Furthermore, since many renowned beaches in Batticaloa are under LTTE-control, these 'tourist' spaces have been essentially no go areas.

for fishing families. The structural and militarized constraints imposed upon local people's ability to stake decent survival levels has meant a deterioration of economic conditions that has also had an impact on poverty levels.⁵ Poverty then visibly marks ethnic communities, Tamil, Muslim, and Burgher, residing in Batticaloa vis-à-vis Hikkaduwa – and the two coastline communities are markedly different from each other in their economic situation.⁶

Varying degrees of militarization and economic deprivation, which are not unrelated to the war and ethnic conflict, are likely to suggest that women across ethnic groups experienced the tsunami in different ways. The central import of our fieldwork was to focus on these underlying structures in the two communities so as to unravel the political economy and militarized dimensions to the ways in which women and the various ethnic communities experienced the tsunami. The next section of the paper offers an outline of the fieldwork approach adopted, which was the basis for us to examine the recurring themes that came up during our conversations with women, philanthropists, and NGO workers.

⁵ While a budding NGO sector in the area has opened up new employment opportunities for younger people with educational achievements, it is only a limited segment of the local community that have access to these prospects. Additionally, their lower middle-class standing is marked by residential locations that are interior from the coastline. [It should be noted, however, middle- and upper-middle class groups have increasingly built modern housing on the water-front of the lagoon signalling and emulating class-based aspirations of similar social groups across global communities.]

⁶ Two caveats are worth mentioning. First, we are not suggesting that poverty uniformly afflicts every ethnic community in Batticaloa. Clearly there are gradations to class positioning within and between ethnic communities. Secondly, even as economic circumstances differ in the three towns/villages, the underlying political economy structures that expose diverse communities to vulnerability was brought out with the tsunami in both locations.

Fieldwork Approach

The fieldwork for this study was undertaken during the July-December 2005 period. Because our study included Batticaloa, security conditions partially dictated our ability to access the area, while travelling to Hikkaduwa did not impose similar travel restrictions. During much of the time period a fragile cease-fire was in existence, although occasional skirmishes and violent eruptions were not uncommon in Batticaloa – and we did not get caught-up in these incidents during our time there.

Both of us had previously done extensive research in Batticaloa and our familiarity with the people, local institutional actors, and sections of the community eased access to the place. We used our previous networks to set up new contacts with the fieldwork trips to Batticaloa which also became an opportunity to renew old friendships and forge new alliances.

This familiarity was less the case in Hikkaduwa. Although both lead researchers – and the research assistant assigned to this project – had visited or travelled by this ‘down-South’ coastal town/village, neither of us had the intensity of contacts with local people and community as we did in Batticaloa. However, the second author had limited contact with a philanthropic organization based in Hikkaduwa, which became the basis for conducting fieldwork there. Quickly we were able to establish links with people, which while they initially began with connections made for us by the foundation, spread through information passed on about relatives and friends in neighbouring communities. However it must be noted that the scope of the project and the limited time frame of field work both in Batticaloa and Hikkaduwa did not permit us the opportunity for in-depth research that would, for instance, have enabled us to analyze sensitive issues such as caste which people speak of only once a certain familiarity and trust have been reached. While we are aware, therefore, that caste differential has an impact on livelihoods, neighbourhood arrangements and even aid

distribution, this is an area that we do not analyze in depth for the purpose of this report.

Each fieldwork trip lasted a time span between 5-10 days, and the time period in the field was determined by the resources that were set aside for field research in this study. The field trips were also done at different time periods, which the senior researchers did together or separately – although almost at all times we were accompanied by the research assistant⁷ and at other times by an additional translator as well. While we are able to communicate in spoken Sinhala, we do not have that skill in Tamil. The purpose of the Tamil-Sinhala or Tamil-English translators was to assist our communication and dialogue with local people from Batticaloa where this was necessary. There were occasions where people talked to us in English or Sinhala in Batticaloa – during which time we did not need the aide of the translators. In Hikkaduwa at most times the conversations were carried out by the two of us, with the research assistant coming to our aide during crucial moments when weighty Sinhalese words or idioms were used.

Our initial visit to the field started with a joint-tour to Hikkaduwa during July 2005, which was followed by three subsequent trips individually by the two of us which took place between the months of July to December. There were two trips to Batticaloa and each of these travels to Batticaloa was done separately, although during each occasion we were accompanied by the research assistant. The first trip to Batticaloa took place in October by de Mel, which was followed by a second trip in

⁷ Because the research assistant was responsible for transcribing the interview material, she accompanied us on almost every fieldwork trip. Our reasoning was that it was important that she had a good sense and feel for the different situations on the ground, as transcribing (or, for that matter translation) is never merely about a mechanical process. It is also about remembering and reading for nuances of situations, people, and communicative relations – although we recognizes the invariable losses in translating and transcribing that fieldwork brings with it.

December by Ruwanpura. We almost exclusively met with the same people during each fieldwork visit in both Batticaloa and Hikkaduwa, which was done to ensure continuity of relationships with people we had established contact with. There were a few communities and people that each of us met separately, and this usually took place in the follow-up trips when each of us came across people that we thought offered interesting nuances and readings to our study.⁸

Although neither of us are anthropologists by training (one is an academic in English and Cultural Studies and the other an academic in Feminist Political Economy and Development Studies) our intellectual proclivity has been to employ qualitative methods in doing fieldwork – an approach largely associated with anthropology.⁹ Our inclination towards doing fieldwork has been informed by our commitment to feminist politics and methods, which calls for varied approaches to conducting research that moves beyond orthodox empirical techniques (McDonald 1995, Berik 1997, Pujol 1997). Moreover, an integral aspect that we hoped to draw upon through this study is the central import of the socio-cultural institutions, the political economy, militarization and memory to understanding the ways in which people mediated their experiences of the tsunami. By engaging in conversation and dialogue, the narratives that were woven for us was the means through which we tried to make sense of their experiences – cognisant that our claim is not to represent the voices the people that we spoke with but rather be interlocutors that seek to intervene in the tsunami debates taking place in Sri Lanka.

⁸ We shared field notes and briefed each other on our engagement with these new people, and while we do use their narratives and experiences to shed insight and analysis we do so with the recognition that in these instances they are the interventions/analysis of one researcher rather than two.

⁹ The use of an approach associated with anthropology is not done without awareness of the strong and forceful objections that Ismail (2005) points to, which includes the dominant relations of knowledge production that offer incomplete and contestable accounts (2005:7-14)

Bearing this in mind, we spoke with six women and one man directly affected by the tsunami from Peraliya, Seenigama, and Telwatte, which are villages on the coastal belt that fall within the Hikkaduwa division. They were Sinhalese and cover a cross section of ages and livelihoods, although they were largely of similar class positions in being either fisher people or casual labourers. We also got the opportunity to speak with a government administrative workers' spouse and children. In Batticaloa we had the opportunity to converse with fourteen women and they came from the three different ethnic communities in the area, Burghers, Muslims, and Tamils and they cut across varied class locations, ages, religions, and livelihoods. They were located in Thiraimadu, Poonachchimoona, and Dutch Bar, which are all village divisions within the Batticaloa town limits.¹⁰

We also spoke with senior staff attached to various institutions and service providers, which was located in Batticaloa, Colombo and Hikkaduwa. Obviously our own class and social positioning influenced and shaped our interactions with people from various walks of life, and each situation differed in marked ways. At all times, however, we were aware that these power settings would colour our conversations and responses to varying degrees and attempted as much sensitivity as is possible to these different situations.¹¹ An illustration of our efforts to overcome these barriers was by re-visiting the same families over the six-month time period, which helped build a rapport and continue a fruitful dialogue about their changing circumstances.

¹⁰ When presenting and analyzing the voices of women and men in local communities and of various institutions we go with established convention and use pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

¹¹ The obvious is stated so as to acknowledge the importance of recognizing our positionality in doing this research and disseminating its findings.

Living and Livelihoods

In the aftermath of the tsunami picking-up the pieces at one level revolved around eking a living, whether for oneself or for immediate kith and kin – although usually the latter was the more common scenario. In this section of the paper we lay out for the reader the ways in which people went about doing this so as to disclose the options available to them. This discussion reveals the ways in which political economic factors circumscribe survival strategies adopted by various communities. Moreover, and somewhat disturbingly, it is also the case that INGOs working together with local communities seem to fall back on perpetuating existing gender hierarchies and relationships in the type of economic activities promoted through their humanitarian and development projects.¹² The following paragraphs discuss and detail these two points as they enunciated themselves during the fieldwork research in Batticalao and Hikkaduwa, and we present these two sites together so as to compare and contrast the themes that were paramount in the women's commentaries on the ways in which they got back on an economic footing.

Class positions are important markers in the ways in which communities are able to overcome adversity and destruction. A significant proportion of women were engaged in the informal sector, whether before or after the tsunami where the type of economic activity rather than the conditions of work

¹² De Alwis and Hyndman (2002) and Hyndman and de Alwis (2003) have done an extensive feminist analysis of humanitarian assistance and development projects in Sri Lanka underlining the links between gender and capacity buildings of local communities and the failures perpetrated by local/international organizations. Even while their research was conducted as an OXFAM (Sri Lanka) funded report aimed at making the non-governmental actors aware of the need for gender sensitivity in integrated and holistic ways, the ways in which similar problems continue to be committed was a disturbing find in our research.

changed. They, therefore, moved from coral mining to coir weaving, selling *kadayapam* (local fast food), setting up boutiques, growing and selling vegetables, knitting woollen baby clothes, and making handicrafts.

"I make coir ropes as self-employment... We buy coir worth Rs 500.00 a month from a mill and each of us earns a net profit of about Rs. 500.00 a month by making ropes. Three women are needed to operate the rope-making machine. Each woman buys coir for herself. We work together and make ropes for each of us. I received the machine and initial coir worth Rs. 1,000.00 from the Siyath Foundation to start work, three months after the tsunami. My earnings are spent on food items and other household necessities."

(Imali Kulatunga, a 53 year old woman from Hikkaduwa)

"I don't want to lie. On that Sunday morning my son-in-law and I were on the beach doing work related to coral mining... I earned a living by breaking large coral pieces into smaller ones. A number of women were engaged in this work. The money I earned from coral mining was used to renovate our house.... We lost all that to the tsunami..... We think the government should be strict against coral mining. We don't want to do coral mining again. Although there are regulations against mining, they are not implemented properly. I think we are partly responsible for the severity with which the tsunami affected our village. The sea gave us life and took it away."

(Lalitha Premaratne, a 47 year old woman from Hikkaduwa)

"...I have also started a home garden, but I am not selling these vegetables. We got together with some neighbours and knitted woollen clothes for babies and make handicrafts. We sell a doll for (and show's one to us) Rs 225.00 – and we sell it to the town people and those who stay here. We also sell sets of woollen baby hats and socks for Rs 175.00 Red Cross people only taught these handicrafts, and we got a loan of Rs. 25,000 from them – where each neighbour took responsibility for Rs 5,000.00 in repaying the loan."

(Renuka Devarajah, a 42 year old woman from Batticaloa)

The move from informal sector work with harmful environmental consequences, such as coral mining, to activities that are less so is commendable. Concerted efforts placed by humanitarian and development agencies were instrumental in the range of economic activities women undertook as a means of eking an income. Earning a livelihood was noted by these women to be of paramount importance for material and economic reasons as well as for a holistic sense of welfare they carved out for themselves and their families. Survival was not necessarily, however, the only issue at stake for local communities engaged in different livelihoods. Creating a sense of 'normalcy' and keeping themselves 'occupied' were equally vital themes reiterated through their conversations, where the ability to sell handmade ornaments, artificial flowers, and handicrafts signalling the ways in which local communities attempt to 'normalize' temporary shelters and abodes as habituated spaces.

There is also, however, an underside to these schemes that warrant discussion. Often income generation schemes attempt to instil an entrepreneurial spirit which, as Feldman (1997) notes, highlights the ways in which various socio-economic activities promoted by NGOs "prefigure the economic and social

reorganization of everyday life" (1997:46). Sri Lanka's own drift towards integrating into the global economy gets facilitated via self-employment schemes promoted by NGOs, and advocating such small-scale entrepreneurial ventures among rural communities is expected against the wider backdrop of the global political economic framework into which the country is increasingly integrated. However, many income-generation activities championed and spread among these rural areas rarely account for the institutional failures, informational asymmetries, and market conditions in the local economy. Consequently, while there may be short-term possibilities in selling goods and services to a captive audience, within the welfare camp for example, neither the traditional gendered skills training nor the continued gendered dichotomy of relegating women's socio-economic tasks into home-based work is likely to hold long-term promise of integrating women into the formal sector. Moreover, this shift from one form of self-employment activity to another ignores the lack of social protection, social exclusion, socio-economic vulnerability and economic insecurity that characterise work in the informal sector (ILO 2002). Ignoring market conditions as well as labouring forms, even as NGO actors instil market values through their skill training programs, is indicative of the conflicting shifts and 'violence of development' perpetrated by these institutions (Kapadia 2002).

In a disaster situation these contradictions become exacerbated and at times also inflected with difficult choices, particularly for feminist NGOs working in the areas of gender and development. The experience of the Coalition for Assisting Tsunami Affected Women (CATAW) which comprised four Sri Lankan women's networks¹³ with a mandate to provide financial or material assistance to tsunami affected women is instructive. Most of the women who approached CATAW for assistance

¹³ These were Mothers and Daughters of Lanka, ACTFORM, Women's Alliance for Peace, and Women's Alliance for Peace with Democracy.

sought its support for livelihoods they were already engaged in before the tsunami, irrespective of the fact that these livelihoods, such as lace making, choir and rope making and weaving were within traditional women's labour and the informal economy. Familiarity and continuity are, however, important psychosocial aspect in disaster recovery. Continuing with their pre-tsunami livelihoods enabled these women to regain their former daily work routines and take comfort in their already acquired expertise and knowledge of their respective industry. Arguing for a re-skilling of the women and in integration into the formal economy under these circumstances was seen by CATAW as a medium and long term task that was not within its mandate.

By scrutinizing these contradictory moments it becomes possible to point to the tensions that disrupt the dominant narrative, which is one where NGOs are often promoted as alternative actors enhancing the human security of affected communities (Wickramasinghe 2001).¹⁴ Our aim is to highlight the need for critical engagement with the ways in which communities are incorporated into the global economy in the name of development and modernization – where disaster relief and humanitarian assistance is increasingly utilized as an effective component of the process (Hyndman and de Alwis 2003).

While we draw into the discussion issues in need of critical evaluation, the contrasting ways in which various communities went about re-building their lives and earning an income needs

¹⁴ Yet, it is important to note that this dominant narrative is also challenged by ethno-nationalist and fundamentalist sections in Sri Lanka for different reasons. Even as we contest the reading that the presence and activities of NGOs always engender human security and argue that it is important to disrupt this standpoint because of the ways in which their institutional practices differ from public pronouncements, we also distance ourselves from critiques levied by ethno-chauvinists and fundamentalists. We do so because our purpose would be to seek transformation rather than to advocate a position of disengagement, banishment, and foreign conspiracy as is the case with "nativist" critiques.

mention too. Irrespective of the origins of social groups, livelihoods of people were either interrupted or completely destroyed. A striking aspect to the manner in which local communities overcame obstacles in getting back on their feet following the tsunami is also mediated by the ways in which they experienced the war and conflict. For many people in Batticaloa, particularly the Muslims and Tamils, the destruction of livelihoods was not necessarily a novel feature given the backdrop of intense fighting in the area for prolonged periods since the 1980s. Yet, there were others, who encountered the destruction created by the tsunami an experience unlike any other – and subsequently, this caused a state of paralysis in the ways in which they responded with appropriate strategies. To a degree ethnic distinctions and regional locations marked these responses, of resilience and paralysis. Tamil women overcame the new adversities brought about by the tsunami that suggested a resilience and hardiness of having encountered decades of violence and conflict. Therefore, despite the notable general levels of poverty in the Batticaloa district, the level of economic activity in the temporary housing camp among them was remarkably entrepreneurial. The welfare camp we visited in Batticalao had in residence Burghers and Tamils, but the hive of local economic activity – which included numerous boutiques set-up in each compound – was in the main undertaken by Tamil women. This was in contrast to the Burgher women living in the same temporary housing camp, where they were more likely to note their dependence on assistance offered by the government and NGO sector. Moreover, they appeared to take for granted that there would be a continued flow of aid and assistance as long as their temporary living conditions did not change.

A similar situation, of paralysis and dependence, was found among the Sinhala communities we worked with in Seenigama, Peraliya, and Telwatte. An illustration clarifies this point. In Seenigama women often noted that they were either in or were hoping to find employment in socio-economic activities

created or funded by the local philanthropic organization. Women (and families) not in receipt of various schemes and projects implemented by the local institution were awaiting their turn and opportunity to be rewarded. When they did not belong to this category they mentioned their reliance upon other forms of goodwill and generosity bestowed by the philanthropic foundation. This telling dependence was signified by 'cynical' statements made by some villagers characterising the local situation as the "golden tsunami", where they pointed out that it was those connected and networked into the local patronage system that were able to profit from the aid flows, generosity and goodwill. Even when they were not currently benefiting from the "golden tsunami", there was a continued underlying expectation that each of them would have a change of fortune via the influx of foreign goodwill and generosity – as long as this lasted. This points to an important feature often ignored that the 'victims' or 'survivors' of a disaster are not an undifferentiated category and that aid-flows and access to aid create their own hierarchies, jealousies and tensions within the community itself.

It is important to bear in mind, therefore, that there wasn't necessarily any uniformity in the ways in which in local communities gained from the numerous forms of aid flow. Moreover, the state of dependence that marked particular communities as well as the initial trauma following the disaster effected a state of paralysis that people who have not previously been directly affected by adversity may now encounter. In this instance, hand-outs of aid are seen as a means of subsistence, even livelihood. Chamari Sujatha of Seenigama noted:

"I personally do not like relief aid. There are people now who are completely dependent on them. They do not make an effort to make a livelihood. I feel that those who lived comfortably lost everything in the tsunami disaster. But those who were poor and living a hand to mouth existence gained a lot by way of relief aid. Those who lived on wages earlier are

reluctant to make an earning on their own now. For instance when houses were being rebuilt people who did mason and labour work earlier were not willing to work."

(Chamari Sujatha, a 27-year old woman from Seenigama)

Similarly Daya Somasunderam (2003) has noted that repeated displacements and disruption of livelihoods have made people living in the conflict zones dependent on handouts, and that a marked loss of self-reliance, resignation to fate, and dependency characterize their lives. (2003: 14)

A marked feature in the Thiraimadu camp in Batticaloa, however, was that Tamil women, supported by various aid-flows, were engaged in various forms of livelihood to a degree not prevalent amongst the Burgher women. This may reflect the fact that the aid-flows to the camp particularly target the Tamil community, or that the Tamil women, mining their past experience of dislocation, are more resigned to a longer term stay at the camp than the Burgher women and have therefore begun economic activity, or both.

Where there is lack of aid-flow on the one hand, and passivity and dependency on the other, the consequences spill over to the ways in which the women neglect strategizing their livelihood options, which does not bode well for either the local communities or institutional actors that find they have inadvertently nurtured a dependent and detrimental relationship. Local communities are unlikely to be creating alternative futures within existing visions that define the current modus operandi of NGO and philanthropic foundations, where awareness of rights and resources is as important a corollary as is the humanitarian assistance provided. The most evident manifestation of this lapse is found in the ways in which permanent relocation and settlement were initiated and implemented for displaced persons. The next section discusses the critical issues at stake in this process.

Displacement, Relocation and Resettlement

Displacement: Familiar and Novel Experiences

Displacement is not new to Sri Lanka. The ethnic conflict and twenty-year war dislocated people in large numbers, where temporary and permanent relocation had become an indelible aspect of the country's social polity. Yet because much of this displacement was largely confined to the Northern and Eastern Provinces, and took place over an extended time period, and consecutive national governments in the past two decades pandered to the vitriolic rancour espoused by ethno-nationalists in the South, the adversity and hardships faced by displaced communities did not enter the national psyche in any substantial way. The rapidity with which the tsunami led to destroying dwellings and the ensuing large-scale displacement, on the other hand, immediately became ingrained in the national psyche. Consequently, contentious debates surrounding the relocation of displaced communities penetrated the mainstream media vigorously. It is against this backdrop that the concerns and anxieties regarding the material and political economy realities of displacement and resettlement were articulated by the people affected by the tsunami.¹⁵

Access to temporary shelters was influenced by patronage or ethnicity, where the former was prominent in the South and the latter more at play in the East. Experiences on the ground differed, therefore, to some extent by ethnicity – with our conversations with members of the Muslim community in

¹⁵ During our conversations with women from various communities, we also found that the spouses, fathers, brothers and other men kin members were keen to share their sentiments with us on the theme of resettlement. Their active interest on matters of property ownership and land rights presages Agarwal's (1996) thesis on the central import of access to land resources and property rights in determining power structures between men and women.

Batticaloa exemplifying unsettling attributes. The village of Poonachchimoona, which is located within the Batticaloa city limits, was devastated by the tsunami much like any other coastal village in the area. However, the Muslims residing in this village had received limited kinds-of formal assistance, whether through the government or the NGOs. Moreover, when support was forthcoming, these measures took place in a haphazard fashion. Just after the tsunami the initial aid came from the local Mosque offering affected communities shelter, food, and clothing. After their temporary stay at the Mosque, which did not extend beyond 10-14 days, the affected families returned to areas where their initial housing was situated. Even though their housing is placed within the 200 meter buffer-zone, which is fairly closely observed in the East, the affected families have either rebuilt on their own or by acquired temporary shelter shacks provided by a leading national bank. During the initial few weeks they had also received food, dry rations, and simple furniture from OXFAM, World Vision, and a Rs. 1,000.00 donation from a Saudi national.¹⁶ Since the early couple of months or so, they have had consistent visits from SURIYA, a Batticaloa based NGO, which has worked in the village during the past six years. SURIYA, however, is an activist based organization involved in awareness-raising rather than humanitarian relief.¹⁷ The families have been promised

¹⁶ Usually in our conversations with affected communities, donations from foreign nationals were noted as that coming from "suddha's" and "vellakaran" (white people) and very rarely would the nationality of foreigners be mentioned. Quite unconventionally, although unsurprising given the sharpening of ethnic sensibilities over the past two decades, the Muslims we spoke with were eager to point out that it was a Saudi national – and not just "vellakaran" – that came to their assistance. One can only surmise that drawing our attention to the nationality of the donor was, in this case, a way of marking religious affinity.

¹⁷ Elsewhere it has been argued that localised NGOs grounded in the lived realities of communities acquire a commitment to work through difficult and different tensions that transient development workers and institutional actors may not necessarily show (Ruwanpura 2007 *forthcoming*).

permanent housing by a Hong Kong group, but because they have not been allocated land this is yet to come to fruition. Their efforts at securing land and housing for relocation is done via an all-men village committee advocating their case with the *Gramasevaka*, which they hinted has not received sufficient hearing because their voice does not carry the same weight as Tamils in the area. Such specific instances exemplify the ways in which ethnic tensions seeped into the lived realities of different social groups, where inadequate access to temporary shelters and humanitarian assistance reveals deep-seated ethnic exclusions that continue to simmer. The failure to receive adequate measures also indicates the ways in which social groups fall within the gaps of available social protective mechanisms. In this situation there was an ethnic marker that distinguished this community from the others that we came across. For example the Muslims of Poonachchimoonai fell through the cracks of consistent reconstruction aid because they are politically marginal. These instances are important to record for they highlight how, even in the face of relocation and other facilities that fall short of standards generally, this aid does not even reach these groups because they are marginal within an already socially excluded group.

Tamils have directly borne a disproportionate burden of the hostilities, and consequently they have experienced displacement either for short or long periods of time. Their turbulent experiences have strengthened their ability to adapt to new situations, and despite the harshness of the temporary shelter in the housing camps they were optimistic that their permanent housing would be found within a reasonable time period. This time period was given as two years by some Tamil women we interviewed. Of significance too is the fact that many women expressed contentment with how their lives were shaping in the camp in comparison to their early pre-Tsunami life. For example, Sita Parmeshwari who has begun a home garden in her temporary shelter at Thiraimadu camp stated that she would find

it difficult to leave the place after the investment of labour she had put into the garden and facilities she has there. She and her husband went onto say that they would welcome permanent resettlement in the interior parts because the soil is “*nallam*” (good) for home-garden cultivation, despite their continuing main livelihood within the fishing industry. In another example of contentment with present conditions, Soundarie Devanayagam stated that the house provided to her family by St. Ignatius’s parish was better than the one she had because it was more solid, built with brick and a better roof. On the one hand, these types of response suggests the levels of poverty and deprivation these women experienced before the tsunami. On the other, it implies that the tsunami also brought opportunities – shelters of their own, subsidies of food, oil and kerosene and targeted livelihood training schemes – that the women can avail themselves of and therefore value.

Burghers and Sinhalese located in the East and South, respectively, responded in a slightly different manner to the issue of relocation. The Burghers who lived throughout the war in Batticaloa were affected by the social and political changes wrought by the war, its daily curfews, *hartals*, electricity cuts, disruption of schooling etc.¹⁸ But as a community, because they were seen as neutral in the war, the Burghers were not directly targeted by either side of the armed conflict. Like the Sinhalese in the South therefore the Burghers did not face large scale displacement as a result of the war.¹⁹ Consequently, these two communities – Sinhala and Burgher – have had a more difficult

¹⁸ As to how the war affected the Batticaloa Burghers, see for instance the interview with Irene Ockersz in the *Bearing Witness* video archive collected by de Mel & Cruz.

¹⁹ The exception are the Sinhalese located in the “border” areas of Sri Lanka, who have been caught in the cross-fire when fighting has broken out between the state and LTTE forces or have been targeted for attack by the LTTE and other para-military units.

time adjusting to the discomforts of their temporary shelter. They were, hence, keen to point out the harshness of their living conditions, the lack of consultation and inclusion in the process of temporary housing, the subsequent problems with their housing and how these structures and materials had to be re-adjusted to suit local conditions – for example, the heat and rain. Helen Feltmann, a Burgher woman from Batticaloa who lost her brother, home and household goods in the tsunami, voiced the following concerns about transitional accommodation that effectively captures a range of factors that needs close scrutiny:

“The transitional accommodation in Thiraimadu is difficult to live in, especially during the rainy season. The rain water comes into the house. The corrugated iron roof is hot in the day and makes a loud noise when there are strong winds. It is difficult to cook in the kitchen too. That is why all the kitchens are covered against the wind coming in and that makes it impossible to stay inside as the kitchen fills with smoke. There are common toilets for about 4-5 families and tube-wells made for us. A couple of my sister’s-in-law and their children live next to our house in Thiraimadu. When these houses were distributed we were asked which house we would like to occupy. So we live here, like we lived in the Dutch Bar. Sometimes there are children without parents, and the relatives and community members take care of them. We don’t live in that house. We come here in the evening and on holidays. We live in the town in my grandmother’s house, as it is easy for my children to go to school. We heard that there are thefts happening there...”

(Helen Feltmann, a 34-year old resident of Thiraimadu Camp, Batticaloa)

A notable proportion of families did live in temporary shelters and irrespective of the frequent distress they underwent, they endured because their options to alternative habitable dwellings were limited. Their inability to find suitable residences, even if temporarily, implies that they belong to socio-economic groups that face economic deprivation or did not have middle-class connections that they could draw upon to shift away from temporary shelters. For this social group, which cut across ethnicity, the newness of displacement coupled with the discomfort of living in transitional shelters made their daily lives difficult, and they voiced resentment at their exclusion from a consultative process. Families that came from socio-economic quarters with a higher social capital base, however, were staking claims to temporary shelters to ensure that they would be allocated permanent housing. They, however, lived away from the camp, paying weekly visits to their transitional homes and cited the harshness of the camp area, the distance, and having relatives that were economically privileged as making this split housing arrangement possible. Helen Feltmann, as noted above, powerfully articulates the concerns of this position. Since these patterns of behaviour were found across ethnic groups in the East as well as among the Sinhalese in the South, it appeared that these practices were attributable to class rather than ethnic distinctions.

♦ **Relocation: Resistance and Reception**

There was not necessarily universal opposition to relocation so long as this was done according to perceived notions of fairness and justice by each household. The stories we heard about relocating into the interior of the country were mixed and conveyed various tensions reflecting fears and anxieties of affected communities. Contrary to the widely-held view that people did not want to be relocated into the interior from the coast (Shanmugaratnam 2005:14-15), we did not come across a collective consensus that echoed this standpoint. There were

those that did oppose relocation into interior areas, but there were also people that welcomed this transfer for several reasons.

Even though we came across very few people that endorsed the conventional view of resisting relocation at all costs, it is a view worth reiterating because it brings to the forefront inequality and power dimensions that informs this stance. Resistance to relocating into the interior of the country came mostly from the fishing community, where families and households depended upon fishing as the primary income source. Similar to other commentaries we too found that people from the fishing community voiced their opposition to relocation outside of the 100 meter barrier for reasons that ranged from the loss of livelihood to dispossession (Bastion 2005, Philips 2005, Shanmugaratnam 2005, Uyangoda 2005). The following excerpt from a conversation we had with a fisherman and his spouse who lost their home, household goods and fishing implements in the disaster encapsulates these views:

“Our family wants to retain this plot of land (even if it is in the buffer zone) and do not want to go to the interior of the country. Because we are fisher folk, we want to be close to the sea as it is convenient for the men to go to the sea. If we lived in the interior of the country our men won’t be able to do their work properly. Sometimes we might also lose the chance of extra earning by selling the fish that our men bring home, or make dried fish out of them. But if we are given a house just beyond the buffer zone we will accept it – because we can still see the ocean from just where the 100 meters cut-off and this would not hinder our work patterns in a way that is detrimental to our livelihoods. Still, I would like to keep this shelter.... There is also talk that the state is hoping to clear the coastline of shelters so that they can be used for beautifying the beach areas so that it more

attractive for the tourist and the tourism industry. This means that the government is not so interested in our welfare but more so in using our misfortune to benefit business interests and tourists.”

(Mrs. Indika Kulatunga, a 53-year old woman, and Mr. Hirantha Premalal Kulatunga from Peraliya)

The concerns expressed by Mr. and Mrs. Kulatunga sum up neatly the contentious aspects that have come to dictate the public imaginary in unravelling the various motivations for government directives and policies. Irrespective of the factors motivating the state (and the LTTE) to issue directives on maintaining buffer zones, it is legitimate that local communities voice opposition and unease regarding the new-found zeal for coastal conservation and guidelines that have not been adhered to in the past, particularly by the tourism industry. Where permanent relocation and resettlement would bar communities from effectively and efficiently engaging in a livelihood, their sense of injustice was aggravated by the perception that interests of capital were overriding the needs and priorities of affected communities.²⁰

There were also, however, instances where the dominant narrative was interrupted, with people not opposing relocation and resettlement into interior areas of the country. The willingness of this social group to do so was also dependent upon perceptions of fairness. They emphasised that as long as they received

²⁰ The desire to gentrify coastal areas rather than to justifiably protect vulnerable communities from exposure to potential tsunamis, tidal waves, and/or other natural disasters had support from events occurring on the ground. An illustration serves to make the point. There was a private hospital funded by a foreign collaboration being constructed in Peraliya which was well within the 100 meter zone – and it was being built with/after obtaining government approval. Clearly, the discrepancy between the ways in which regulations are implemented for local communities and outside (foreign) persons is a matter of legitimate concern that feeds into a sense of aggrieved injustice.

property that was commensurate with that which they considered to be fair compensation for what they lost then relocation was not necessarily a negative turn. The basic impetus for thinking in this manner had much to do with fearful recollections of the tsunami disaster and its aftermath, a sense of anxiety about encountering another such disaster, and alternative means of income which came from avenues other than fishing.

♦ *Resettlement: Settling the Modernist Impulses?*

Irrespective of whether communities resisted or accepted relocation and resettlement the issue of land and property rights has a crucial gender dimension. Sri Lanka's property rights regime has been upheld as a feminist haven for its bilateral and matrilineal inheritance patterns through customary and codified law (Agarwal 1996; Obeysekere 2004), which came under gradual assault in parts of the country through the Mahaweli development scheme (Rajapakse 1989). The need to uphold these property rights regimes have not, however, necessarily circulated among mainstream philanthropic foundations or some non-governmental actors.²¹ Somewhat disturbingly we found during our conversations with service-providers and institutional actors a lack of awareness or confusion regarding the prevailing property rights regimes. As a result where families were permanently resettled the title deeds of the house and land were granted to men, overriding generations of customary and codified inheritance patterns that had a modicum of gender-sensitivity, particularly in the East. Because maintaining gender equity in land rights and inheritance patterns are a cornerstone of promoting an egalitarian social system, Sri Lanka needs to strengthen rather than eradicate those social institutions that work in progressive ways towards the direction of gender justice. Resettlement that is not cognisant and does not reinforce a prevailing legal system that protects gender interests and rights is

²¹ Several feminist organizations were, however, cognisant of this fact and lobbied the relevant authorities on gender equitable property rights.

hardly supporting evidence of "building back better", and needs urgent intervention and consideration. Institutional actors should be made aware that their role is not simply about philanthropic goodwill (Bermeo 2006), but they have to maintain those pillars of society that promote social egalitarianism and gender justice. The active role taken on by private philanthropists, foundations and NGOs require concerted efforts to ensure that they are aware of the social issues at stake. Building homes, for example, undoubtedly provides permanent shelter to those in dire straights. Fixing one set of policy matters, housing, without integrating and incorporating the wider set of social structures, including property rights and gender equity, within which they are embedded is likely to create a new set of problems that undermine long-term social stability and progress.

The nexus between resettlement and gender was also evident in the spatial organization of rebuilt homes. Women's spaces within restored homes were planned in ways that demonstrated a disconcerting lack of consultation with women for their usage of home spaces.²² Partially the modernization impulses that motivate a renewed opportunity for private philanthropists, foundations, and NGOs to effect a second 'gam-udawa' (village re-awakening) has meant relying on Colombo-based architects to design houses.²³ Consequently, architecturally

²² The exception to this general observation was in an instance in Batticaloa where rebuilding homes by the local parish church involved using local architects, engineers, contractors and labourers who were cognisant of neighbourhood conditions and requirements. The local parish church had been part of the community for over a couple of centuries, and so their commitment to the area was long standing. Thus, they were keen on integrating the concerns of affected persons in rebuilding houses and many inhabitants of the new dwellings did not voice or note any concerns regarding their living quarters.

²³ Relying upon Colombo-based architects, outside contractors, and workers also reflect the urban-rural gap that gets perpetuated through institutions involved in goodwill and charity, which also exposes the hierarchical spaces that are perpetuated during the moments of philanthropic and goodwill involvement.

aesthetic design-styles had not taken on board household members' life-styles and use of space. Thus homes built with half-walled kitchens unsuitable for the windy coastal belts reflected the disjuncture between lived and designed spaces. Inappropriately built spaces are not just about matters of practicality. There is also a distinct gender dimension in the way space is used and designed within a certain kind of modernity (McDowell 1999, Domosh and Seager 2001), which is replicated in the on-going local level village re-awakenings in the rebuilding after the tsunami. Where women cook on kerosene stoves, as is often the case, they complained that they had to continuously light the stove flames because of the wind blowing through their kitchens. Additionally, the half-walls did not offer adequate privacy and they would be the subject to the gaze of neighbours and passers-by. The need to dress-up or wear a housecoat to make a cup of tea was pointed out as an inconvenience of the design that is markedly gendered.²⁴

Modernity and modernization processes are marked by gender (Bergeron 2004) so that where resettlement is perceived as an opportunity to alter people's traditional and rural ways of living, this does not mean this alternation takes place within a framework that is gender and class neutral. The neo-liberal inclinations underpinning efforts at refashioning people's attitudes and life-styles to effect a bougeoisification of the village, was not evident simply through the grass fringed front lawns, decorative brick work and tiled portico entrances, but were also articulated

²⁴ In a particular case, the philanthropist is in the process of rectifying this mistake. What is noteworthy, however, is that while the lack of consultation by the state is denounced unequivocally by villagers, the shortcomings in the facilities offered by philanthropic institutions had to be elicited by us and even then the criticism was carefully tempered with praise for on-going efforts. This points to a complex power nexus in which visible philanthropic foundations acting as service providers occupy a position of hegemony much like a member of parliament used to enjoy, which also marks a shift of social and political capital from the state to the individual/private sector.

by a founding member of a local philanthropic foundation in the following way:

"Actually I have wanted to remodel my village for a long time. If not for the tsunami, I do not think I could have done it this way. By remodelling, I mean to give these people a better environment. We give them incentives to change their attitudes. For example, in July we informed people that we would bear the monthly food cost of the family that maintains the best garden environment. There is no point in giving them a lovely house and a garden as well as the monthly food cost if they go to their old ways of which even the waste disposal is not done properly. We also have volunteers to look into the matters of general cleanliness of bathrooms, toilets, etc."

(Views of a founding member for a local philanthropic foundation)

The shift from village homes made of kapock and thatched roof to units that unambiguously reflect an urban modernity is part of a circulating framework of global capital that has a purchase in building up a burgeoning middle class. Resettlement efforts appear to better inform and respond to the needs of neo-liberalism and capital, and do less well at positively reacting to the interest of local and affected communities. The failure of the latter also has associated repercussions for enhancing gender rights and social justice, which presumably must underpin the rhetoric of "building back better" currently circulated among Sri Lankan development policy circles (IPS/UNDP/ILO 2005; Bermeo 2006). Ultimately at stake here, is the sense of ownership of this vision and its projects, for even as the local philanthropist spoke about rewards and incentives for those who kept their gardens and surroundings clean, a recipient of a house from the philanthropic foundation was cynical about its outcome. The villager anticipated that whether one kept their gardens clean or

not, everyone in the scheme would be rewarded in turn. This point to the intricate web of patronage the village relies on that determines the actions of both philanthropist and recipient. On the one hand, the comment implies that the philanthropist had not adequately integrated the villagers into his vision of a 'cleaner and better environment' by convincing them that the issue of public health was for their own good and therefore a long-term project they had a stake in. In this sense, the cynicism of the villager could well point to how he perceived the changes to be merely cosmetic. On the other hand, in an absence of frameworks of rewards and incentives, whether by the state or private individuals, that are not seen by the villagers as equitable and just, the philanthropist also has a hard task of convincing the villagers of his intent, the benefits to all of his scheme, and his commitment to a fair competition.

Gender, War and Memory

An important aspect of our research was to discern and learn from the women interviewed, as to whether there was a differentiated response in how they experienced the tsunami as women when the disaster first occurred. Our observations so far on livelihoods, relocation and aid distribution have indicated that victims of a disaster are never an undifferentiated category, although quite often in both the popular and public policy discourse they are foregrounded as a homogenous 'community' (Action Aid 2006). Within a particular affected village itself there are distinctions of caste, class, gender and ethnicity that determine responses to disasters. Towards this, we set out to find out not only what significant and structural variegations operated within each 'community' itself but also what the differences were, if at all, between the experiential responses of the women from Seenigama, Telwatte and Peraliya on the one hand, and those from Batticoloa on the other.

The popular discourse on natural disasters that circulates in oral, visual and literary cultures posits such 'events' as great levellers: acts of God or Nature against which human beings are helpless or toil against, displaying both the fragility and might of the human spirit as it struggles against all odds. In this discourse, natural disasters are equalizers which can befall people from all walks of life, irrespective of difference and fell kings and peasants alike. The Tsunami that struck on 26th December 2004, the day after Christmas and during a holiday period, affecting the coastal areas that were popular tourist destinations, lent itself to such a discourse in which local and foreign, the elite and the poor, industrialists and daily wage earners were affected, their lives and property destroyed. The lives lost in the tsunami and the psychological impact of this loss certainly cut across class lines. However, a gender differential in the larger numbers of women to men who died in the tsunami indicates that there were significant variables in the immediate impact of the disaster itself. Although no gender disaggregated data is available at a national level – pointing to a lacunae in the state's system of gathering statistics²⁵ – the numbers of 8933 Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim women who died to 7581 men according to reports filed at the police department alone is evidence of larger numbers of women who died in the disaster.²⁶

There were several reasons for this anomaly that encompass the cultural, but not exclusively so. One reason points to women's labour outside of their homes on Sunday morning. The women, like Farida Sithy of Poonachchimoonai, Batticoloa, were washing pots and pans outside at the well, or like Lalitha Premaratne at the beach with her son-in-law engaged in coral

²⁵ Complete gender disaggregated statistics on the Tsunami in Sri Lanka is unavailable. The gender disaggregated statistics collected by the Dept. of Statistics are only of those related to destroyed/partially damaged houses (Alailama 2006).

²⁶ Department of Statistics, Police Headquarters, Colombo.

mining, or like Erin Rosairo of Dutch Bar, Batticaloa, waiting with her daughter at the fence for a three wheeler to take her to the Sunday market, or like Manel Lakmali of Seenigama, already at the market. The waves crashed on shore at a time and day in Sri Lanka, when many villages hold such markets known as *polas*. In the coastal areas, as these *polas* often take place at intersections on the road or by the railway that parallel the coastline, and many women gather there not only to market but also to sell their produce, they were particularly vulnerable to the disaster. Manel Lakmali of Seenigama who lost her daughter, home and households goods in the disaster stated:

"I was at the fair when the waves came... When I saw the wave I ran back, passed the railway tracks and went to the station. I was wearing a maternity frock. I heard that women who were wearing tight skirts got caught to the wave and died as it was difficult for them to run."

(Manel Lakmini, a 26-year old woman from Seenigama)

The point about dress here indicates that there is an understanding that clothing is not neutral but over determined by gendered practice (Wickramasinghe 2003) and that it restricted women from seeking safety in a manner that did not affect men in the same way. Although we did not find a uniform pattern to support the theory that dress was a significant cause of women's deaths, there was an articulated sense of shame at being almost naked which may have had an inhibiting impact on women and in turn, their chances of survival. Lalitha Premaratne of Seenigama who lost her eldest daughter and grandson in the tsunami and had two other daughters miraculously survive the Peraliya train tragedy recalled:

"I was injured when I tried to hold on to a glass pane of a window. Then I saw my son-in-law about five meters away from me. I called him to help me."

He came and tried to drag me to a nearby king coconut tree. In the process I felt I was losing my skirt in the water. I told my son-in-law about it and he told me not to worry. My privacy was not important but I felt ashamed at that moment. I was trying to save my life. But nobody could see me naked as I was in the water. Later I saw people with less clothes than I was in. When we reached the king coconut tree, he gave me his T- shirt which I tore and wrapped around myself."

(Lalitha Premaratne, a 47-year old woman from Seenigama)

Many women we spoke to also told us that when the first wave came ashore they looked to the safety of their children and grandchildren that points to the gender constituted role of caregiver which may have meant valuable time lost for those women who did perish in the disaster. A variety of reasons contributed therefore to the greater vulnerability of women that encompassed patterns of women's mobility and labour on Sunday mornings as well as their domestic and public roles.

It was clear from the women interviewed that they lived in a constant state of fear and trauma as to the possibility of a repetition of the disaster. They told us that children no longer played on the beach with ease for fear of the waves. Rumours of more tsunamis or tidal waves are common, spread by people genuinely concerned at a big wave that crashes ashore, or by village youth out of a sense of mischief. That there is no credible early warning system, no drill training in place as to what to do and not to do in disaster situations make these rumours the source of confusion and catalysts for the original trauma to be re-experienced in memory. On our first visit to Seenigama, we witnessed, first hand, the pandemonium caused by such rumours. As we approached the premises of the private foundation that has carried out philanthropic reconstruction and rehabilitation

work in the village, we saw many people running towards higher ground and the direction of the Buddhist temple where they first sought shelter after the tsunami struck. Chamari Sujatha of Seenigama was carrying a big blue woven plastic fibre bag. When we asked her about the bag she noted that many women have such a bag ready, with their important documentation and some items of clothing in case another tsunami strikes. This shows the extent to which the women have been made insecure by the tsunami, and live out their lives in the shadow of another disaster from the sea. When we asked Chamari Sujatha whether she was aware that many Tamil living in the North similarly kept suitcases packed with their important possessions to run into the jungle with when they heard the approach of Sri Lanka Air Force fighter planes,²⁷ she said she did not know about this and thereafter engaged in conversation with us about the commonalities faced by Sri Lankan women who have now experienced both political and natural disasters.

All the women we interviewed were in agreement that disaster relief should reach all affected communities, irrespective of their ethnicity and without discrimination. This is significant given that our research was conducted during a period when the controversial Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (PTOMS) was being debated in the country. When asked what she felt about aid distribution to those affected in the North and East, Chamari Sujatha of Seenigama stated *"I think those who are in the North and the East deserve relief aid regardless of race and faith"* – a view also echoed by Kumari de Silva of Telwatte who lost her home and household goods in the disaster. These women did not perceive the weaknesses of aid delivery in the South and to themselves as linked to a re-direction of funds and goods to Tamil and Muslim survivors in the North and East, and reiterated the need for fair play and equity to the victims of the

²⁷ Kohila Mahendran, personal communication to Neloufer de Mel, Jaffna, March 2003.

tsunami in the North and East. While the common bonds of humanism that transcends ethnicity and region can be discerned here, it is also the case that the window of opportunity to build afresh from the ashes of the disaster that many politicians, religious and community leaders and policy professionals looked for did not happen.²⁸ In this discourse of 're-awakening', the enormity of the loss wrought by the disaster was recognized, but also foregrounded as an opportunity to get beyond ethnic difference and social divisions. What follows are the reasons as to why this is a view that emanates, by and large, from the outside, or a relatively privileged vantage point even if from within the affected community.

It was clear from the narratives of the women that memory played a pivotal role in determining their post-tsunami decisions in various ways. In relocating to the Thiraimadu camp in Batticaloa, both Helen Feltmann and Thangeswaridevi stated that they opted to keep to the same neighbourhood patterns as they had occupied in the Dutch Bar and the village of Thiruchandur respectively before the tsunami. This meant that pre-tsunami social structures were carried over to the post-tsunami re-settlement sites. At one level, it was clear from the women's narratives that they perceived many advantages in belonging to a tight knit community. When family members got separated by the tsunami waves, got lost, or drowned, it was members of the community – as neighbours, teachers, friends and relatives – who helped identify those affected and brought families together. This knowledge of being known gave women a sense of security which is also why, when they moved to welfare camps, entire neighbourhoods moved in as they had been

²⁸ Both a senior Buddhist priest in Seenigama and a Catholic priest in Batticaloa we spoke with voiced regret that the opportunity after the Tsunami to build bridges between ethnic and political groups had failed to materialize. The Buddhist priest in fact blamed the Buddhist clergy itself for not taking the lead in this.

configured in the village. It was also clear that the authorities in charge of re-settlement at the welfare camps continued with the administrative divisions of the respective villages that made their task of aid distribution and registration of persons easier. The continuity not only had administrative benefits but also the advantage of providing a sense of 'normalcy' in recouping the sense of life and security that had been lost in the disaster. In as much as familiarity, already stressed in our report as an important psychosocial factor in providing a sense of continuity important for recovery determined the traditional livelihoods women opted for after the tsunami, the same neighbourhood and kinship patterns in welfare camps meant that prior divisions of class, ethnicity and caste were, by and large, continued as well. This was clear from the fact that the ethnic and caste enclaves at the Thiraimadu camp meant that Burgher and Tamil communities lived on parallel sides of the road but did not have much interaction and did not collectively organize to demand better services from the service providers. We were, however, told of three Burgher families who live on the Tamil side of the camp. These examples are important to note even if they are in the minority, as they go against the dominant narrative of entrenched ethnic exclusion. An illustration of this was the case of Ann Felsingher, an older Burgher woman who had earlier lived amongst the Tamil community of Thiruchandur and stated that she felt more comfortable living in the Tamil section of the camp rather than amongst people of her own ethnic community. She reasoned that this was because the Tamils had been more helpful during her ordeal after the tsunami in contrast to her own Burgher relatives. It was also for/in the Tamil community that Mrs. Felsingher plied part of her trade in fortune/sastra telling, even though she worked as a free lance nursing home attendant/midwife for Burgher families, so that there was already a prior familiarity and interaction with Tamils in Thiruchandur. While her story suggests in important ways her rationale for going along with this alternative living arrangement, and a prior sense of intimacy

and belonging with the Tamil community that determined her choice to move into the Tamil section of the Thiraimadu camp, at another level such instances also denote the ways in which different people may have intimate interactions that differ from the orthodox account where clear distinctions are apparently maintained between ethnic communities. In short, inter-ethnic relations are likely to be more porous than claimed by the dominant position – and particularly by ethno-nationalist versions of the ground reality.

The memory of the war also had a direct bearing on how the women experienced the tsunami and its aftermath. Manel Lakamli of Seenigama stated:

"On the day the Tsunami happened I was at the Sunday fair. People were crying that the LTTE was attacking. The noise of the wave crashing against the shops and buildings must have been so loud that everyone thought the Tigers were bombing the area. I thought I lost my child and my mother-in-law in the bombing."

(Manel Lakmini, a 26-year old woman from Seenigama)

Evident here is that the women made an experiential connection between features of the war and the tsunami that attest to the war as an overt, if not spectral presence in the public imaginary. Comments from the women at the Thiraimadu camp on the barbed wire, armed soldiers, barrels and road blocks evident at the camp also pointed to how the war and the trappings of militarization govern their conditions of existence. Thangeswaridevi's statement that *"During the war the military used to round us up. Now also when there is a disturbance the army comes into the camp, rounds us up and searches from door to door. So there is no difference in our lives whether during the war or after the tsunami"* points to how the conditions of war, ironically also provided a site of continuity between past and

present but this time, one they did not cherish. All of the Tamil women we interviewed were hostile to the military presence at the camp. The Burgher women on the other hand, were indifferent, reflecting their distance from the armed conflict. Helen Feltmann stated that *"there were no problems with the police"*; that they had not lost property in the war; that the war did not affect the Burghers and that the police provided security at the camps for which they were grateful. Helen's statement that the war did not affect the Burgher population of Batticaloa denies its impact on the daily lives of people who, irrespective of their ethnicity, had to adapt to curfews, shut down of schools, power cuts, *hartals* and various other disruptions during the course of the war. Her statement brings to the foreground however the fact that these disruptions to normalcy and normal life have been so internalized by those affected by war, and that the war itself has become so naturalized that it is only its worst and most extreme manifestations such as bombings and loss of property that accounts as war. In her statement to us that *"The tsunami is like war. It destroyed property and lives. We never thought the water could do such devastation. I hope that we could all live together without war"* is a poignant plea that everyone return to a normal life as soon as possible: but it is in the quality of that normalcy, and the threshold of what is accepted as normal or not, that the real 'violence' of the war and the tsunami has taken place.

Conclusion

Our report has been concerned with highlighting the gendered impact of the tsunami that struck Sri Lanka on 26th December 2004. We have set out to study the reasons as to why more women than men were vulnerable to the tsunami itself, and the already existing structures of gender within local political and cultural economies that determined the way women responded to the disaster and set about re-building their lives. We were also interested in the differential responses of women themselves to the tsunami and its aftermath and how these

responses were determined by factors not only of gender but also of region, ethnicity, class and caste.

We have highlighted the fact that disasters do not occur in a vacuum but a time and space which have prior histories. The tsunami had its worst impact on areas in Sri Lanka that had already been affected by two decades of war, and a longer period of ethnic conflict and economic underdevelopment. The coastal areas that bore its brunt had already been depleted of its natural protection in the loss of mangroves and coral reefs. The women affected by it, particularly the Tamil and Muslim women, were those who had already experienced displacement, loss of loved ones and livelihoods due to war and/or political violence. A finding of our research was that this prior history and its continuity within memory was an important determining factor in how affected women set about re-building their lives. If, as a group and a community, they had experienced displacement before, they were much more likely to accept the conditions of their temporary housing, put down roots, plant home gardens and begin livelihoods within the camp itself. If they had not experienced displacement and the consistently brutalizing effects of protracted war, they were much more likely to voice resentment at their exclusion from a consultative process that should have taken place in determining their temporary shelters etc. in the first place. When a community with prior experience of traumatic loss and displacement and one that has not suffered to the same degree come together, as in a 'transitory' welfare camp, the divisions and differences become starkly apparent. Distinctions such as heat-producing tin roofs for one community and cooler thatched-roofs for another in the premises of the Thiraimadu welfare camp provided by different organizations for instance do not help to break-down these divisions and in fact exacerbate existing tensions. It is in this respect that any intervention of aid flows, including immediate humanitarian aid, needs to take cognisance of these histories which include complex political backgrounds so as not to exacerbate prevalent fault lines and tensions within

communities. Here local expertise of the micro level is important and the planning of aid calls for a participation of both affected communities and local professionals. We are aware however, that there are multiple voices and even conflicting interests that inflect affected communities – as they are amongst international donors and aid groups themselves (IFRC 2005). Policies and aid flow needs, therefore, to target all affected segments with the notion of equity and fairness however difficult this may be.

At the same time we have pointed to the various impulses and contradictions that underpin the paradigms of aid flows and approaches to 're-awakening' or 're-building' following the disaster and how these have had a direct bearing on women. From issues of retraining in livelihood skills meant to instil an entrepreneurial spirit to the design of domestic spaces we have pointed to a neo-liberal vision at work that does not always take into account issues and concerns of gender equity and rights. Aid flows that continue to relegate women into the informal sector serve as illustrations of the patriarchal structures of some international and local NGOs engaged in livelihood support. The encouragement of private philanthropy is also within the neo-liberal paradigm that not only creates spheres of influence within local communities that aren't subject to mechanisms of accountability but also paves the way for the gradual privatization of welfare that is known to adversely affect women (Esping-Anderson 1990, Folbre 1994). We have also pointed to regressive state policies that deny women customary and legal rights over land and property all of which is to say that despite repeated interventions by feminist activists and scholars in drawing attention to the issues of gender equity and rights in situations of conflict and disaster, the same 'mistakes' seem to be repeated. We have noted with concern that it is also the case that NGOs working together with local communities seem to fall back on perpetuating existing gender hierarchies and relationships in promoting particular types of livelihood and development projects.

We have also pointed to how affected groups are not undifferentiated categories but constructed along gender, ethnic, class and caste identities. We have, at all times, attempted to present a nuanced account of an affected community, highlighting both the singular and the general, the norm and the exception. We have taken particular pains to highlight the exceptions – whether they are of Burgher families living with Tamils in the Thiraimadu camp, or fishing families who express a willingness to be relocated inland – because, even though they constitute a minority, what they stand for is important for showing that dominant narratives of ethnic exclusion and livelihood commitments are porous, which in turn points to complex social dynamics that also reflect ethnic co-operation, traditions of migrations and group accommodations. A finding of our research therefore was that there wasn't necessarily any uniformity in the ways in which local communities viewed, or gained from various forms of post-tsunami aid flows; nor was there uniformity in how people coped with the disaster although there was uniformity in the overwhelming sense of shock and loss that those immediately affected by it felt and will continue to experience for a number of years to come.

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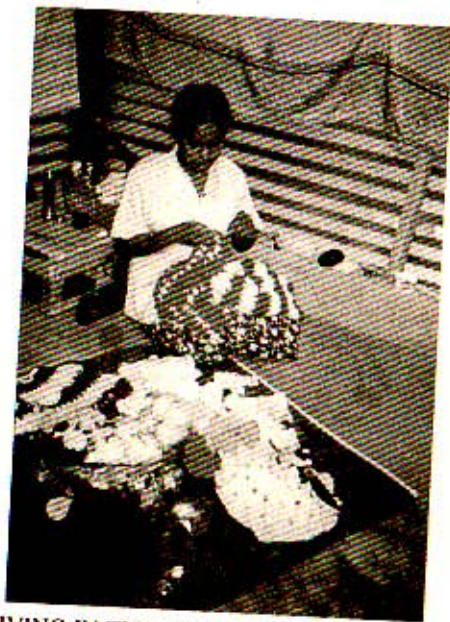
DESTRUCTION IN DUTCH BAR, BATTICALOA



A FISHING BOAT WASHED ASHORE, TELWATTE



REBUILDING FAMILIAR FUTURES - BATTICALOA



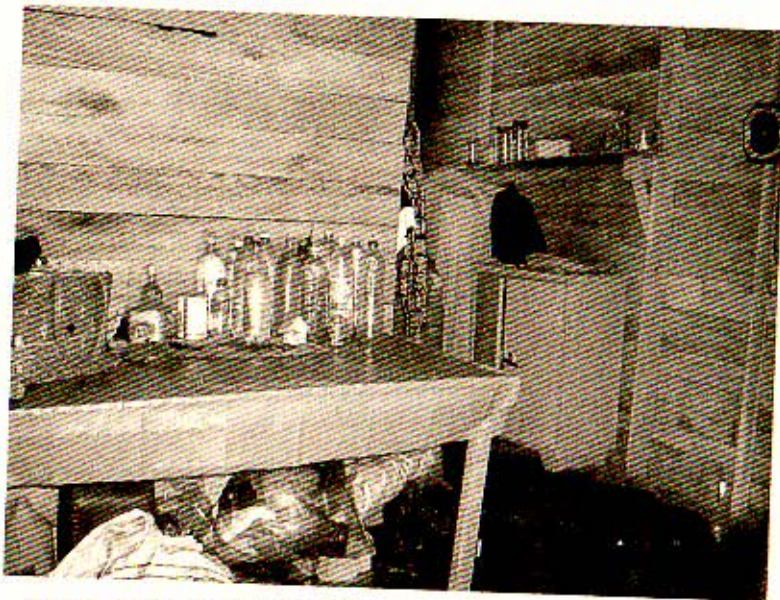
MAKING A LIVING IN THE GENDERED FASHION - BATTICALOA



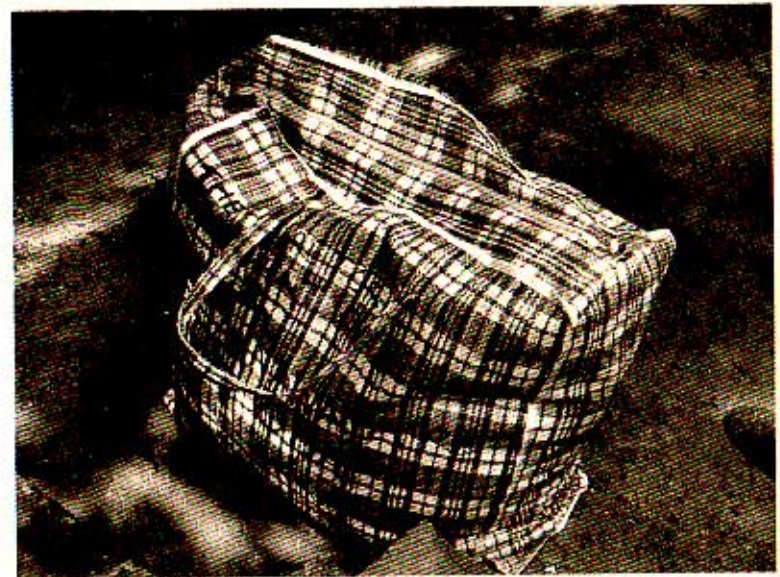
THE SPACE, BEFORE & AFTER - PERALIYA



LIFE BEGINS AGAIN - SEENIGAMA



MAKE SHIFT KITCHEN IN A TEMPORARY HOUSE - PERALIYA



PACKED & READY TO GO?



OPEN KITCHENS: GENDER BLIND & IMPRACTICAL - SEENIGAMA

On December 26th 2004, the Asian tsunami caused catastrophic damage in Sri Lanka. Human tragedy and death, however, are not new to Sri Lanka, a country besieged by over two decades of ethnic conflict and war. As much as the tsunami did not occur in a vacuum, its impact was neither neutral nor uniform. This report focuses on how the tsunami affected Sri Lankan women in particular. Studying the affected areas and people of the south coast of Hikkaduwa and the eastern coast of Batticaloa, the *Gendering the Tsunami* report presents analysis and the views of Sri Lankan women on their experiences, regaining livelihoods, aid distribution, service delivery, relocation and strategies of coping and survival.

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