

# **Shifting Spaces of Women in Tamilnadu Transformation through disaster response Chaman Pincha<sup>1</sup> and N.Harikrishna<sup>2</sup>**

## **1. INTRODUCTION<sup>3</sup>**

This paper is based on an Oxfam supported study to document and analyse the gender differential impacts of tsunami and gender mainstreaming strategies of select NGOs in Tamilnadu state. The disaster management programme in the state of West Bengal has also been looked at from a gender lens in terms of the expanding spaces of women and the type of empowerment which the interventions have brought about. Briefly touching upon the gender differential impacts of Tsunami, the paper attempts to highlight those strategies of humanitarian agencies and some of the government responses which used the recovery process as a strategic opportunity to initiate the process of addressing strategic interest of women and girl children. The paper underlines the fact that in the process of disaster response, whenever there was an attempt to challenge the entrenched social arrangements, the process involved resulted in a pro- active shift of spaces for women in almost all spheres: social, economic, political and mental. The paper has linked the framework of spaces (Deshmukh, 2002) with some improvisation from the author, to two of the components of the gendermainstreamng framework proposed by Rao and Kelleher, i.e., gender infrastructure and institutional change (Rao and Kelleher, 2003)

### **1.1 BACKGROUND**

In India, the tsunami affected nearly 2,260 kilometres of the coastline, spanning the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Pondichery, as well as the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The tidal waves rose as high as 10 meters and penetrated up to 3 kilometres inland, taking at least 10,881 lives and affecting more than 2.79 million people across 1089 villages. The loss of lives and livelihoods was greatest for those who lived and worked in close proximity to the sea. In many places, raw materials and tools for livelihoods and income generation enterprises were damaged or completely destroyed. The tsunami also caused extensive damage to critical social, occupational, and physical infrastructure and the environment. This damage has a long-term impact on the rehabilitation and further development of communities and livelihoods, including micro-enterprises and home-based occupations.

The destruction caused by the tsunami was not just a natural phenomenon - it occurred in a social world shaped by gender roles that determine access to resources and social rights and

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<sup>3</sup> This article builds on the research project titled “Understanding Gender Mainstreaming strategies of NGOs in Tsunami Response”. The research was carried out by Anawim Trust with support from Oxfam America. The research project was carried out by Chaman Pincha and her team.

responsibilities.<sup>4</sup> In general, while some men face discrimination due to their ethnic, political, economic, and social backgrounds, most women face discrimination due to their gender, in addition to other kinds of social discrimination ( Though many men and women were affected by the tsunami, the severity of the impact of the disaster varied according to an individual's pre-disaster social, economic, and political power or vulnerability, with gender relations cutting across all social categorizations. These kinds of social norms influenced the capacity of men, women, boys, and girls to survive the disaster, and they affected the conditions that individuals faced afterwards. For example, official government data(Government of India, 2005) reveals that women and children were the largest number of people killed in these districts, and informants described the social, cultural, and economic reasons why women and children are more vulnerable to death from disasters(Unifem, 2005)<sup>5</sup>.

The widespread death and destruction and social upheaval also caused changes in gender roles and relations: a few widowers raising children, women in large number becoming breadwinners to sustain their families and aggravation in many facets violence against women (Early marriages, alcoholism and other forms of domestic violence etc.) Finally, the loss of home-based and informal work sites such as roadside stands was significant, but also more difficult to quantify and identify than the destruction of boats and other livelihood tools. This destruction of houses undermined many productive activities of women, but was often not addressed by relief agencies and programs.

Tsunami disaster in Tamilnadu, as briefly explained above, had laid bare the link between the pre- existing vulnerabilities of women and their invisibility/marginalisation in the disaster response. By exposing the gendered issues, the disaster at the same time pointed to the need for integrating strategic interest of women in all phases of disaster response. Given the gendered nature of the impact of the tsunami, how can humanitarian assistance provided by governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) challenge, change, or reinforces gender role stereotypes? Can NGOs design and implement gender-sensitive programming during disasters, and what may be the impact of this kind of intervention? If NGOs mainstream gender in their programming, can disaster response build back better after disasters so that communities are more equitable and gender just places to live in?

### Short Profile of the NGOs referred in the Paper

**CARE Trust:** Care Trust focuses on advocacy and lobbying for development and rights based issues including the human rights of women. Research and documentation remain its area of focus across Tamil Nadu.

**EKTA:** EKTA, established in 1990, with its base in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, is a resource centre for a woman which works with women staff of the NGOs, rural and Urban poor women through a gender and development approach.

**HOPE:** HOPE Foundation, established as a charitable society in 1991, is an independent affiliate of HOPE World Wide Ltd. Works for changing the lives of poor. It has been working in Nagapattinam since post-tsunami.

**PRAXIS Vision:** Works for empowering the marginalized, since 1980, by assisting them to create that will enable them to fight against injustice and exploitation for sustainable development.

**PEDA:** People's Education for Development Association, PEDA, has been working for the empowerment of dalits, fishers and backward community in Nagapattinam and Pondichery district since 1985.

<sup>4</sup> International Labor Organization, *A Conceptual Framework for Gender Analysis and Planning: Moser's Gender Planning Framework*, Available at <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/region/manila/gender/module.htm>, Accessed on July 12, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> For detail analysis of gender differential impacts of Tsunami, please refer to the full report on Gender differential impacts of Tsunami and NGOs gender mainstreaming strategies in Tamilnadu. Please contact [HKrishna@oxfamamerica.org](mailto:HKrishna@oxfamamerica.org) for the full report.

**PURA:** PURA, run and managed by women, has been engaged in working for the upliftment of oppressed women and destitute children in rural areas in Kanniyakumari District since 1993.  
**SASY:** Social Awareness Society for Youths, a support centre, has been working for the emancipation of dalits and protecting and promoting their human rights in the state of Tamil Nadu since 1983.  
**SNEHA:** Social Needs Education and Human Awareness, is engaged, since 1885, in Nagai district for the empowerment of unorganized and marginalized fishing community and allied fish workers, especially women, children, dalit , minorities and other marginalized sections.

## **2. Gender mainstreaming and spaces for women**

We functionally define gender mainstreaming as that process, which by integrating the strategic gender interests of women or addressing practical needs of women and men in such a way that expands the social, economic, political and mental spaces for women ( Deshmukh, 2002) to bring about equal relationship between women and men at all levels, i.e., Individual, family, communities, state and markets. We understand by space the degree to which a person empowers herself to do what she intends to do. It allows a person to move, manoeuvre and to negotiate capabilities. In any institution. It is the expansion and contraction of spaces that explains the relative positions of its members. Space embraces both material and non material aspects which determine a person's capability to take decisions (Asset ownership, education, collective and personal motivation, capacity to critically analyse the life situations etc.)

In the event of a disaster of such magnitude as tsunami and the unprecedented humanitarian interventions in the recovery process, there remains ample space with policy makers and humanitarian agencies to bring about such institutional changes in the process of disaster response that strengthens the strategic interest of women, i.e., ownership rights, awareness of legal rights, and political participation at all levels: domestic and public. The paper which is based on an Oxfam-America supported study has documented and analysed such transformatory processes in the disaster response of both the state government and NGOs who were the major players in the process of relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction. The paper brings these responses under the ambit of Gender mainstreaming. In relation to gender mainstreaming we are particularly concerned with the institutional changes and its impacts on the expansion of spaces and to that degree empowerment of women. These institutional changes are initiated at the policy level by the state, and through women sensitive interventions by humanitarian agencies as well as collectives of women themselves.

### **2.1 Shifting Spaces of women *in the context of Tsunami: A few example of pro-women government response:***

1. The provision of joint entitlement for spouses in the permanent housing policies of the government, in the reconstruction phase, is an example of its pro –women approach. It should be noted that even prior to tsunami, the government had given joint entitlement to land ownership for habitats in some areas. This is a fine example of how pre-existing transformative policies are replicated in the context of post-disaster reconstruction.

The provisioning in the Government Order<sup>6</sup> has challenged structural inequality in the power relationships and prevailing norms of male ownership and control of the land and housing by stipulating that the houses cannot be transferred to one's husband. The order also considers the sale of the house null and void for the first 10 years. The G.O. challenges patriarchal customary norm of male inheritance by lying down that the inheritance right would go to the eldest child, thus underscoring how reconstruction can move beyond returning to status-quo.

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<sup>6</sup> GO Ms.No.172-30-3-2005 is transformatory in nature as it attempts to institutionalize gender equality in housing and housing rights.

2. Though there are many adverse impact related to the disaster response in terms of monetary compensation to those who had lost immediate family members, there was a pro-active shift to expand space for girl children in the stipulation (G.O.Ms.No. 6 dated 8-1-2005) that money should be spent on self employment/ education/ for adolescent girls in the age group of 18 and unmarried women above 18. This G.O. challenges the stereotype notion that the provision of money for the girl children is to marry them off. Underpinning the non –mention of marriage is the political will to transfer agency to girl children by addressing their strategic interest for higher education and initiating their own business.

3. In the initial phase, the delivery of relief was not based on an understanding of the gender roles of women and men. Hence, with the exception of women-headed households, cash relief was delivered into the hands of men. This money, in a majority of households, was spent on alcohol, aggravating the vulnerabilities of the households and putting women, children, and the elderly at a great disadvantage. Subsequently, however, another government order recognized the critical role of women in managing household resources, making it mandatory that relief, including cash for incidental expenses, be handed over to the women in the presence of community leaders<sup>7</sup>. **This shift of recognising women's gender role and their practical needs had at least theoretically linked the ownership of economic resources to the care taking role that women perform at home. In some cases, it did provide space to women to have control over the money and take decisions on managing the household (focus groups in Kanniyakumari).**

The best thing that has happened due to proactive policies of the government is to release mental spaces for adolescent girls and women. Whether there are immediate gains out of these responses or not, there is a strong recognition of the link between women's position in the society and how the state responses can bring about an empowering change.

**Expanding Mental Spaces: Questioning the status-quo**

Like how the government has taken steps to put the foot down on joint ownership, something could have been done to address the issues of unmarried women living in a family. We mostly did not get married to sustain our families (alcoholic father, father dead, mother sick and widow etc.) but we are not considered as individuals who are entitled to get the house in our on rights. When government is able to bring so many changes, why not this?  
Manchuria, 45 years, fish seller in Nagapattinam

That grassroots woman have started critically analysing the impact of policies on their life situation and want to be more educated on matters of policy analysis point to what immense difference proactive policies can bring about in their lives.

**2.2 NGOs gender mainstreaming strategies and shifting spaces for women**

Most NGOs strategies as highlighted in this paper are to create or expand spaces for women could be mentioned under the flowing categories:

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<sup>7</sup> GO No.57-4-2-2005

1. Gender sensitive infrastructure
2. A focus on institutional changes

### **2.2.10 Gender sensitive Infrastructure**

#### **2.2.1.1 Increase in Women Staff, Training and awareness**

The strategic and conscious decision of almost all the organizations who participated in the study to recruit women from the affected communities has enhanced their mobility and thus expanded their physical, economic, political and mental spaces. Resisting traditional control on their mobility in order to exercise their choices has certainly increased the self esteem of these women. The esteem also came from their families since the daring step of ignoring traditional control enabled them to address family's economic needs and ensure sustenance in time of scarcity and hardship. Young women now carry hand bags<sup>8</sup> and travel alone. The community resistance has also lowered; the hand bag now is identified with work rather than a matter of gossip about the girl's character. This is no small change. Many girls have known the joy of being independent and are aware of their own capacities. It certainly has facilitated the generation of "Power within" There is also a growing awareness on the importance of their and their mothers' contribution to the family both in terms of cash and non-cash activities. The prospects of working with a NGO on the issues closer to their hearts have released mental spaces for young women, enhancing their spirit of resistance to the practices which they consider as unjust and confining the universe of their choices.

There is growing awareness among women, including young women, of their political disempowerment and how their voices are silenced through the imposition of fine and threat of social exclusion within the communities by the traditional Panchayats( all men informal but de-facto institution of local governance).

***Post Tsunami, Vijaya, aged 17, in Nagai, not interested in marriage and wanting to continue her studies, got married under pressure due to the rumour that Rs.50,000/-would be given by the collector's office for meeting the expenses of the marriage. She resisted and did not go to her husband's house. The traditional panchayat decided that either the girl should go to her husband's house or pay Rs.30.000/- as fine. Vijaya decided to pay the fine rather than succumb to the pressure from the community. Vijaya is now employed in one of the NGOs working in the area and along with work is continuing her studies through distance education. Young women, particularly, has also started questioning the government responses which encourage such marriages.***

#### **2.2.1.2 Presence of Gender coordinator**

Another NGO created a post of gender coordinator whose responsibility is to ensure that gender concerns are integrated across programmes. The result is a conscious analysis of the implications of its interventions on the daily lives of women. Put together, the programmes of livelihoods, housing and childcare centres are based on an understanding of the inter-linkages of women's various needs including the need for mobility.

#### **2.2.1.3 Gender mainstreaming in recruitment: Innovative Practices**

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<sup>8</sup> Many women staff from the fishing community take special pride in carrying the hand bags and coming out to work. They have been able to break through the prejudice of the community against young and unmarried women who carry bags and go out alone. Young women with hand bags traditionally are not considered "Good women" (Discussion with the staff of EKTA, FAPI and PRAXIS in Cuddalore, and Kanniyakumari Districts respectively).

SNEHA adapted a selection criterion on the equity basis. The life- experience of women is taken into account even if she does not have work experience. In the same way, women with a +2 (12 years of formal education) qualification have the same opportunities as men with a graduation degree. The only criteria are sharp personal gender and social perspectives terms of capacity to analyze a specific context from a gender perspective. This is done through a test which requires a gendered analysis of the material. The organization also helps girls, who are not able to continue their education, by way of bearing 50 percent cost of their higher education. There are men who are graduates and working with formally less qualified women in leadership positions. SNEHA has also taken a conscious decision to keep the ratio of men and women staff as 60:45. This has encouraged many talented women who do not have formal degree to realise their potentials, be economically independent and use this independence to make their choices and motivate others to make choices to expand the boundaries of their existing spaces.

PURA, an organisation based in Nagapattinam has hired an activist Muslim woman staff from STEP, another activist organization which works for the rights of Muslim women, instead of employing its own staff for working with Muslim women. This has helped PURA to organize Muslim women, who had hitherto remained within the confines of their houses, in self help groups as well as building gender awareness among the Muslim grassroots women. For the first time, Muslim women (in pillaitopu, Kanniyakumari district) reported to have come together for meetings to discuss issues of common concerns, which affect their lives. That Muslim women have started travelling outside their village with their husbands' permission is a positive change in their lives. Coming out of the boundaries of their houses has been reported as a liberating experience made possible by the confidence that PURA's staff has won among the community women and men (based on focus group discussion with Muslim women in Pillaitopu, Kanniyakumari).

## **2.2.2 Focus on Institutional changes through programme initiatives**

### **2.2.2.1 Institutional changes through relief distribution:**

Relief distribution which normally resists gender sensitivity on the grounds of exigency can really become a context for creating spaces for women in different areas: social, political and mental. What are needed are political will and a willing mind to institutionalise gender concerns in this immediate phase of disaster response.

***When NGOs interventions had made a shift from distributing relief through traditional Panchayats with exclusive membership for men to distributing it through women's collectives, it became a strategic intervention in that it had given (at least an organized group of) women a space to reflect on their position in the political structure of the community and circumvent it with the twin strategies of resistance and collaboration. The resistance was to claim substantial decision making power on part of the women which was unheard of pre-disaster and the collaboration was to give only that much recognition to the traditional panchayat which would not result in a violent rejection of women's initiative backed by NGOs support.***

For example SNEHA was firm that relief would be channelled through its federation and extended its support when the Sangams (women's groups) were negotiating the resistance from the traditional *Panchayats*. This also became a strategic opportunity for institutionalizing women's groups in disaster preparedness. SNEHA's federation had done a quick survey to make a gender disaggregated data- base to verify the list prepared by the traditional *panchayats*. In the process, the federations were quickly able to spot out the excluded women and men. The gender

disaggregated survey made it possible to procure age and gender appropriate clothing and other sanitary items for each household in the community. The entire process went through several stages in a quick and coordinated manner. Distribution was according to the family size, thus setting a precedent to prove that it is possible to make emergency response equitable and gender sensitive.

#### ***Steps of Relief Distribution***

- Needs analysis through federations
- Beneficiary list prepared by federations
- Quotation obtained by federations
- Selecting the quotations with competitive price and best quality
- Purchase at whole sale price—large quantity
- Packing by federation members on paid basis—daily wages
- Each village prepared the list of families
  - Traditional Panchayat asks the right to distribute
  - Resistance from the Federation
  - Traditional Panchayat agrees that the federation can distribute
- federation arranges Load vehicles
- Traditional Panchayat leaders invited by Federation
- Tokens issued to rights holders
- Distribution of the relief items
- Rechecking if any body is excluded
- Single women with children got drier ration relative to those who were not living with children.
- List prepared of the children in terms of sex and age and clothes given on equity basis to the households

**The efficient logistics, handled by women themselves also went beyond the extension of women's domestic role to community services such as cleaning the surroundings or distributing relief to women alone.**

#### ***Examples of channelling relief through alternative and women friendly channels***

When some NGOs, for example PEDDA, BLESS, and SASY, took the bold step of distributing the relief directly, or women's SHGs, bypassing the powerful traditional Panchayats, it had a direct impact on the consciousness of women. For the first time women had realised that they have equal rights to have access to the relief and can voice their demand for relief items that is specific to their sex – and gender-specific needs. Though relief is normally considered as apolitical emergency measure to help people survive, the political decision to distribute it directly or through SHGs had enhanced the consciousness of women. Some women who have taken up leadership positions in the process have started thinking beyond the immediate context to the long terms impact of having decision making power, on them and their children's lives.

From our focus group discussions with both women and men, it has emerged that when relief is mediated through women's groups it is more inclusive of the needs of both women and men and less amenable to corruption charges. It also remains more empathetic to the needs especially of destitute and deserted women and women with disabled spouses. In SASY's case the women's group in Kodimarhatheru, had guided the organization for direct distribution of relief not only to the dalit communities but also to Muslims, and those belonging to other casts so as to preserve the pre-tsunami harmony among different castes, occupational and religious groups.

### **2.2.2.2 Ability to Bring Gender aware change in rules, norms and resource allocation of Household, Community, Markets and State**

#### **2.2.2.3. Challenging gender division in tasks in labour and service markets and strengthening livelihoods of women**

The study has shown that wherever attempts are made to impart non-traditional productive skills to women, they have both direct and indirect effects in the gender power relationship in the labour and service market. One of the organizations – HOPE - is able to meet the strategic interests of women, by equipping them with non-traditional skills.

HOPE (in Tranquebar) has provided masonry training to 60 women from the fishing as well as non-fishing communities. Seventy five percent of them are engaged as masons in construction work, some for the housing project of an NGO which hires women masons trained by HOPE. Women who were previously head-loading at the construction sites are now working as masons with daily wages which are double (Rs. 150/- per day), than what they used to receive as head loaders. Though there is still a difference between the wages of women and men masons by Rs.50/-, the gains cannot be denied. Men now defend the gender-gap in the daily wages by questioning the women's experience or their capacity to lay the roofs. In the process of masonry-training women are empowered with functional literacy and the basic calculations, necessary for masonry.

Women masons are proud that they are now measuring the walls, laying the bricks and plastering them. Handling a mason's tool has become a symbol of empowerment for these women.

#### ***She Wields a Mason's Tool***

Pushpa, aged 35, is engaged in a housing project of an NGO in Tranquebar, Nagai. She is a trained mason from HOPE and refining her skills with the help of a master mason. For her it is a powerful experience. She says she never imagined she will be recognized as a mason and be paid Rs. 150 every day, double the amount of what she used to get previously as a construction/agricultural worker. Her debt level has gone down. Together with her husband's contribution to the home, she is able to pay off her debts. She is confident that she can now have four persons working under her. She also feels that men take her seriously and are generally supportive, though she gets Rs.50/- less because she is not able to lay the roof. However, she is not convinced that women masons cannot lay roofs. She says it is possible with practice.

*She also laughs away the difference between men and women masons as merely men's strategy of keeping themselves a bit above women.* However, she counts her gains more pragmatically. She is more confident at home now and feels that handling a mason's tools has given her respect in the eyes of her husband and children.

Through its intervention, BLESS made it possible for women to venture into non traditional income-generating activities. The women SHG in Cuddalore Old Town took up the challenge to run a Courier Service. Embarking on such a non-traditional income generation activity required extraordinary leadership qualities, resourcefulness, support from men, and a good business plan,

development of new skills such as riding cycles and bikes and organized group effort. Women could build an enabling business environment to run this service successfully by obtaining a certificate of recognition from the District Collector, establishing good links with the clientele institutions such as banks and government offices and mobilizing a favourable public opinion.

Men/husbands remained supportive and taught the group to cycle and ride on the bikes. Men also accepted the enhanced mobility of women and their coming home (sometimes) late in the evening. Apart from the strong sense of solidarity that emerged among the women engaged in the courier service, the relationship between husbands and wives improved in some cases in terms of mutual respect and recognition of each other's worth. All the 20 women of this SHG have been travelling everywhere in Cuddalore District and have made a mark in the public space.

BLESS has also equipped women with the skill of repairing hand pumps, this was to meet their practical gender needs in a transformatory manner; frequent repairs of the hand pumps and depending on the male mechanic had caused women inconvenience to manage the household chores and their time. Women no longer depend on the men now and do not have to pay money for repairing the hand pumps. Additionally, it has given them enhanced self-esteem. Handling the tools to repair the hand pumps has altered the occupational stereotypes on gender lines. It has even changed the perception of men and women in the community and the children at home on what women can do.

#### **2.2.2.4 Challenging gendered valuation of work towards equal wages**

In most parts of Tamil Nadu women draw lesser wages than men for work of equal value. This is often justified by the gender division of tasks, and false claims that tasks that men do are more difficult than the tasks that women do.

Post-tsunami all organizations (that were studied as part of this research) but one has institutionalized norm of equal wages for women and men in their housing construction as well as cash for work programmes. However, once construction work for permanent housing is over, the practice needs to be sustained by powerful advocacy and lobbying with private sector.

#### **2.2.2.5 Challenging gender norms on ownership of houses**

Most houses in Tamil Nadu are traditionally owned by men, single women heading households being exceptions to this rule. The participating NGOs who have taken up housing construction have given joint ownership to women and men. It is a process of empowering women through meeting their strategic gender need of having ownership and of joint control over housing.

SNEHA's strategy of rebuilding in-situ houses through community participation had its positive impact on both women and men. Cash was transferred in the name of women on an instalment basis with a close monitoring to ensure that money is spent strictly on house construction. It emerged from focus group discussions with women and men that men have reduced drinking to channel money into building their houses. It is the first time that women have their own bank accounts.

The housing design and construction was carried out entirely by the community excepting for calling masons from outside, as the community now does not have trained men and women masons.

#### **Emerging Aspirations**

The unintended positive impact of the intervention strategy is that there is an emerging need for masonry training in the community. Both women and men have realized the importance of having skilled masons for cost effectiveness and better employment opportunities with higher wages in the construction sector.

#### **2.2.2.6 Challenging patriarchal norms: Focus on single women and their girl children**

An analysis of the field situation from a gender perspective pointed to the high chances of girl children of single women likely to be the first ones to drop out from school. On the one hand, EKTA implemented a well thought out strategy to retain the girl children in schools by providing them with educational accessories, and on the other, to reduce the economic burden on women of single women.

Distribution of educational accessories has kept many girl children from dropping out of school. The strategy EKTA has adopted is to continue it on a sustained basis for a period of three years. It was a conscious and difficult process for the organization, as they had to leave out the boy children in the process. Nevertheless, where a choice had to be made, EKTA took affirmative action in favour of the girl children of single women and remains focused on them.

#### **Affirmative Actions**

- Resisting the pressures from the community to give the aid to every one
- Using strategic opportunity to advance the rights of the girl children
- Converting it as an opportunity to focus on the single women
- Combining concerns of single women and their girl children

EKTA has not taken the programme in isolation. Underpinning the programme is the philosophy of the holistic development of the girl children, reproductive health care being a critical area of concern in a woman's life. The strategy is to make the educational accessories conditional on regular health check-ups by a woman doctor, who is paid by EKTA. It maintains a health card for each child who records the status of the health of the target children as well as the follow up taken on the doctor's advice.

A visit to the doctor orients mothers on the health status of girl child/children. A conditional health check up is a success in that mothers are now taking their girl children for regular health check ups, i.e., twice a year, and do the necessary follow up. Focus group discussion with the mothers and girl children

#### **2.2.2.7 Focus on adolescent girls**

Post-tsunami SNEHA has formed groups of adolescent girls after collecting and analyzing field data, which showed high level of depression, suicidal feelings, feelings of loneliness, a need for sharing and being guided, and a low awareness of reproductive health issues. The group is oriented on issues like alcoholism, children's rights, and hazards of early marriages as well as reproductive health concerns. Prior to the formation of this group, speaking of the reproductive health issues was taboo; but no longer now.

#### **Experience of Empowerment**

The adolescent group of SNEHA's project in Seruthur, Nagai, has successfully extended pressure on parents and stopped the early marriage of group members. Similarly they have stopped eating last and least. Though mothers still eat last, girls from this group reported that after attending sessions on the reproductive health, they have started eating when they feel hungry without waiting for the men members to finish their meal. Other family members have now accepted it too. The group meetings are an opportunity to share their concerns with the staff of SNEHA and learning the skill of managing their anxieties and emotions.

#### **2.2.2.8 Challenging gender norms on ownership of productive assets through collective ownership**

The simple logic of the status quo approach creates a vicious circle: women generally do not possess high-impact assets; hence women do not lose and get assets in the event of a disaster. SNEHA and BLESS have broken out of the status quo approach for reconstruction.

### **2.2.2.9 Challenging the norms of ownership of high-impact assets and popular perception of Micro-credit**

SNEHA combined the grant money (Rs.3000/-) for individual fisherwomen with an auto carrier given to the fisherwomen federation for relieving the burden of head loading and increasing their mobility. It is now easier for women to resume their livelihoods though challenges lie in generating enough income by way of fish-vending in the scenario of dwindling catch. Not only has the burden of the head loading been reduced, but it also saves time for women who used to walk 10 kms per day or would face harassment in buses and have frequent arguments with the conductors. The auto carrier has restored their dignity and increased the sense of security for them. Going collectively is an enhancing experience for all the women, though they eventually get off at different places. Asset ownership has also strengthened the institutional capacities of federation. The federation is now ready to buy another auto in view of the increased demand for it as well as the sustainability of income it ensures to the federation.

SNEHA's seed money to women fish workers did give an initial impetus when they needed it most, as there was nothing with them to start the business with. While men had received the boats and the government orders were issued promptly for rehabilitating the livelihoods of fishermen, women across occupations had remained losers. With their pre-tsunami loan burdens, women had needed the initial seed capital in the form of grant. Some had started their vending with it; some others bought the assets and tools of their trade, which they lost in tsunami. Auto carriers, especially, had brought about a significant change in the lives of the fisher-vending women and other community members.

The strategy PEDDA adopted was to facilitate the collective ownership of boats to women's SHGs. It is especially significant in the context of such rehabilitation policies which took a stance of boat for boat. Women never had ownership of the boats, hence did not lose boats in Tsunami. They lost relatively low value productive assets such as vessels, knives, raw materials etc., which became invisible in the rehabilitation process which was based on the false assumption that fishing means only catching fish in the deep sea.

To transform the social institutions of ownership of highly valued productive assets, PEDDA successfully implemented its strategy of handing over 20 boats to 6 women's SHGs. The strategy had an element of caution and was centred in the collaboration between spouses or widowed mothers and son. Though a group of four women each jointly owns boats, they are rented out to the husbands' or sons' of the group members. The special feature of this strategy is that widows who did not want the ownership of boats, were instead given Rs. 20,000/- cash in cash. Around 8 widows are now owners of the boats; reportedly this has enhanced their position within homes as well as in the community. Though the sharing system is tilted more in men's favour, it still remains a monumental gain for the women. It has enhanced their esteem both in the eyes of the community as well as the traditional panchayat.

The strategy needed a tough stance and a political will both from PEDDA and Women's SHGs. PEDDA made it explicitly clear that the boats will be available on condition that they would be under the joint-ownership of women. The *traditional panchayat* was hesitant about this, on the premise that this would set a precedent contrary to the customary practice in the fishing communities. The dominant Tarangambadi traditional Panchayat tried to bring pressure on its counterpart in Pudupettai. There were fears of gender-based violence as women often go to Tarangambadi for shopping and accessing health care facilities. But women stood their ground and said that if their joint-ownership of boats was not acceptable, they would return the boats to

the donor. In turn, the traditional panchayat also reflected and accepted.. That their husbands make use of the boats facilitated the collective ownership of the wives as SHG members.

**We consider this as Empowerment( Women’s group in Pudupettai, Nagapattinam)**

Women now go to the net mending shed exclusively meant for men, and to that degree, have made their presence felt in the public domain. Women have also taken up the work of getting the nets ready for fishing and men at times help them. The work burden on women, though, has increased; but so is the satisfaction as they feel more empowered with their new found mobility and increased dialogue with the traditional panchayat on community matters. They also look for the income, which would be their own and would go into their accounts. The traditional panchayat, reportedly, has started taking the groups seriously.

**2.2.2.10 Challenging rules of the market interventions: strengthening collective agency of women and negotiating power**

In tandem with their effort to restore and strengthen the existing means of livelihoods for fisherwomen, SNEHA is in the process of facilitating group activities that will strengthen their primary livelihood options. In order to increase their negotiating powers and to make their presence felt in the domestic market, they are federated under the Tamil Nadu Women Fish Workers Forum (TNWFF). SNEHA also works with women in the trade union to raise an awareness of their rights. For SNEHA fish workers are not just fisherwomen engaged in fish vending and fish processing but also others including dalit women who are engaged in allied activities such as net mending and net making and women working in fish processing companies in the fisheries sector.

SNEHA is in the process of organizing women, engaged in fisheries sector in a cooperative mode to strengthen their negotiating position in the market. Its focus is to leverage the domestic fish market, 35 percent of which is being handled by fisher women, to bring about strategic changes in women’s position in the markets. The awareness of their contribution to the market has brought a high sense of self esteem in the fisher women; a new need has arisen for them to strengthen the negotiating power and have physically better market place which is sensitive to their sex and gender specific needs. The analysis of needs which looks beyond the “adaptive needs” has become a newly learnt strength for women in leadership positions in SHGs and federations, initiating the process of questioning the existing invisibilities of their needs and contribution to the household as well as markets.

**2.2.2.11 Challenging caste and gender based access to markets:**

Dalit men and women have, largely, been excluded from fish markets. SASY, one of the participating NGOs, has sought to challenge this exclusion. Post-tsunami a group from the dalit community around Parangipettai, Cuddalore District, made history by gaining a place in the market to run their own fish trade. Before tsunami the Dalit men worked only as wage labourers. But after tsunami, a group of enterprising Dalits, with necessary support from SASY in the form of initial capital and training, hired a facility in the rebuilt market infrastructure near Parangipettai to begin their business operation.

A year ago, this was something unimaginable even to the dalits themselves as the market earlier was controlled and dominated entirely by non-dalits and more affluent men. The person who manages the account is an efficient dalit woman. Management of finance in the wholesale fish trade market is a strategic task that was hitherto handled by men alone.

The external factor that facilitated a woman’s presence in a men-dominated space is the motivation that came from SASY. Besides, tsunami not only destroyed the market facilities entirely but also disrupted the traditional control and dominance of powerful caste and class

interests. When the market infrastructure was rebuilt it opened up an opportunity for the dalits to gain an entry to manage their own business which otherwise might not have been possible in pre-tsunami times. The openness of the dalit group to include a woman, and that too in a strategic position in the management of the fish trade is an important shift in the gender roles. Accepting a woman in that role is also reciprocating the help the group received from SASY. Although the qualification and capacity of the woman were crucial, that she was given due recognition points to the possibility that more women may find a place in different positions in the market in the future.

#### **2.2.2.12 Challenging gender norms on sex -segregated**

Gender-sensitive interventions by some organisations have opened new avenues for women/girls and men/boys to come together on common platforms, rather than the traditional norm of keeping separate spaces for men/boys and women/girls.

In Cuddalore District, BLESS helped form a farmers' group involving the villages around Samiarpettai. Both women and men, of different castes and class are members of this group. The members admitted that it was only after the formation of this group that women and men began to come together to discuss matters such as irrigation, choice of crops and improved methods of farming that were normally considered as male domain. The research team witnessed women disputing men's standpoint or arguing their case on men's preference to bring the land under cash cropping. When it concerned the NGO interventions, both women and men representing small landholders were vocal in criticizing the projects that, in their perception, favoured the big landholders. These opportunities for women, who are agricultural producers and managers of land but excluded in the decision-making, give visibility to women farmers and their perceptions on problems as well as solutions.

When the creation of collaborative space, mediated for instance by skills training and non-formal/vocational education, involves young women and men, a new 'culture' of gender relationships emerges; this facilitates a more equal and free interaction among young women and men.

CARE Trust in Kanniyakumari initiated a computer training centre where young women and men interact with each other in an atmosphere that is less inhibiting. Both women and men share views on mutual expectations, alcoholism and domestic violence, dowry, future livelihood options, migration of men and its impact and other such issues that are markedly different from the commonly perceived, or taken for granted notions and positions of the mainstream.

Girls are coming out of their shyness, and parents' resistance at such collaborative spaces is lowering. The strategy has potential of replication in various contexts to create platforms where women and men can engage in a dialogue on an equal basis for negotiating on issues.

#### **2.2.2.13 Redefining community roles of women and men**

Post-tsunami, due to reduced catch, fisher families were going through periodic food crises. They no longer remain credit worthy with grocery shops, from where they used to access rice on credit pre-tsunami. PEDDA evolved a community based food security mechanism. It has provided rice worth Rs.64000/- to the self help groups of women to run an outlet to make the rice available on credit for 15 days' requirement of a family. Why women SHGs are involved in this public activity is, because of the general trust that the community has placed in the integrity of women and the fairness of distribution as well as their capacity to maintain meticulous accounts. Though women do not get cash benefits, there are non-cash benefits, in the sense that there is more collaboration between the traditional *Panchayats* and SHGs which offers a strategic opportunity to usher in a transformation in the position of women in the community affairs. If some one defaults on repayment intentionally due to wasteful expenses (mainly alcohol) the traditional *Panchayats* intervenes. Till now the system is running smoothly. Once every 15 days, members of SHGs manage the outlet for two hours on a rotation basis.

What Sangams are looking forward to is to evolve mechanism to resolve conflict with the persons who default in payment rather than allowing the intervention of the traditional panchayat for the same. Sangam members have asked the research team of successful examples from elsewhere of similar instances. Again, the ability to critically analyse and the urge to have wider exposure are value in themselves and points to the enormous possibilities of NGOs interventions and state response alike to support them for enhancing their political spaces in the local governance: both formal and informal.

Men who would not take up brooms and sweep the houses, or by extension streets, have been motivated post-tsunami by the health committee (comprising women's SHGs representatives) to sweep the streets clean. In Sivanarpuram, Cuddalore district, the general situation of joblessness and men being around most of the time had women see the anomaly of the situation. The SHGs, already known for their heightened awareness and backed by the trainings on the close links between health and sanitation have earned respect within the community. Using this opportunity to break the gender stereotypes in community work, women assertively persuaded men to share the work of cleaning the streets and segregating the garbage into bio- and non- biodegradable piles. Though not along with women, men however, have started to clean up the streets and water points and segregate the waste once in a week. It is a considerable gain in a community where men had seldom done such things either in private or public spaces.

#### **2.2.2.14 challenging the norms surrounding stereotype Image of Man**

Alcoholism among men and alcoholism as a coping strategy is more or less a socially accepted norm. The escalating rate of alcoholism post-tsunami has been much talked about and field based studies (TNTRC and CDOT, 2006) including the present one have confirmed it. However, there are a few interventions which have addressed this issue:

Among the participating organizations, the gender mainstreaming strategy of PRAXIS and PURA has institutionalized this concern, which though affects the entire households including the health of men, has special repercussions on spouses due to violence of different dimensions in their marital lives.

PRAXIS adopts twin strategies to tackle the issue. On the one hand, it supports women in organizing campaigns at the community level, and on the other, it works with men's Sangams which were formed post-tsunami.

One effective strategy that PRAXIS uses is making de-addiction and eschewing violence against women mandatory among the norms that men's *sangams* are facilitated to evolve. Access to benefits such as micro credit, housing or boats has been made conditional on de-addiction, which is to be verified by the wives. The group takes disciplinary steps against any member who fails to abide by these group norms. . The interventions of PRAXIS through micro-credit projects have offered a strategic opportunity to address this problem as it is contingent on stricter compliance of the norm of de-addiction and its verification by women.

There has been a noticeable change among members of the two men's Sangams. Most members have reduced their alcohol consumption and a few have given it up altogether. Incidentally, those who had given up alcohol are older widowers and are the sole providers for their children. The approach engages both men and women to tackle the issue. The sensitization of men and influencing them through coercive tactics did yield results

Out of the 20 members of a men's Sangam, in Aaruthnganvilai, KK district, 12 have reduced it drastically or given up the drinking altogether. Alcohol reduction, they admitted, has reduced their aggression towards their children and wives. They also feel healthier and are able to work without getting tired. The money they save is used for household purpose. Indebtedness has come down, which motivates them to give up alcohol completely. (Focused group discussion with members of Men's Sangam)

PURA's sensitization of men's groups and at the same time making women's SHGs assertive and articulate on the issues of domestic violence, has a visible impact on the communities. Post-tsunami, arrack-vending in the neighbourhood of Pillaihopu and Muttom has been completely stopped. The unavailability of alcohol in the vicinity has reduced the frequency of alcohol consumption.

Post tsunami women are clearly able to link alcohol ( the expenses and necessity of which were taken for granted by both women and men) to secondary poverty<sup>9</sup> (Sarah Bradshaw,2004). majority of women are living in. Many in the focus group discussions had articulated the need for state intervention in closing down the state run wine shops. Again women every where wanted to get exposure to other successful strategies which had worked elsewhere in combating alcoholism. Though the interventions of NGOs as well as Government response in Tsunami has not take up the issue in their disaster response agenda, affected women and children, especially girls have started analysing their experience of deteriorating household economy.

#### **2.2.2.15 Gender- Sensitive Advocacy and Lobbying**

Post-tsunami advocacy and lobbying on women's issues in Tsunami were largely upscaled by the participating women headed organizations; this is not to deny that male headed organizations did take up entitlements issues for women in the context of tsunami through taking legal action. For women headed organizations, at the heart of advocacy and lobbying was a gendered analysis of gender based disadvantages in the context of disaster and its root cause being unequal distribution of power and responsibilities. Among the participating organizations EKTA, SNEHA and PURA had participated in the state level workshops to discuss the gamut of disadvantages women faced; the latter two had lobbied with the government to bring about changes in their relief and rehabilitation policies. Most debates on equity vs. equality ( Equality as same treatment even for different people or families) and sex and gender specific needs were brought to the fore by the advocacy and lobbying efforts of gender sensitive organizations on both regional, national and international fora. A gender lens also was applied to the government policies as an integral part of the advocacy and lobbying in which Beijing Platform for Action and other human rights instruments such as CEDAW were used as tools of advocacy.

#### **.2.2.2.16 Livelihood options for families and vulnerable women**

##### ***Interest free Credit: A mixed blessing for mainstreaming Gender Concerns***

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<sup>9</sup> The concept of secondary poverty refers to the fact that men do not generally spend the entire income to meet the livelihoods needs of the household, including savings. Secondary poverty is as significant as poverty per se for women. Sometimes poverty itself is a result of secondary poverty as houses become poor when men spend part of their income on alcohol, gambling etc. This is not to deny that secondary poverty also is caused by expenses incurred, for example, on dowry and other social functions such as ceremonies performed when girls attain menarche.

Post tsunami some organisations had disbursed revolving funds though the amount and method varied. The amount was a lump sum which could kick-start a small business such as street vending, expanding the shop premises, and increasing the stocks for their respective businesses. For example SASY and PRAXIS had consciously focused on the most vulnerable widows, elderly working women, the destitute, and women living with their spouses under difficult circumstances. However, while SASY had left it to women's choice whether to use money on her own or to hand it over to the male member of the families to start the livelihood activities. PRAXIS has evolved a structured system of monitoring the usage of the revolving funds by men and women. PRAXIS' revolving funds have ensured steady income; many of them have repaid it to take another loan without interest.

#### **Unintended Positive Impacts: Men taking on non –traditional roles**

Though the venture of Health Food, a PRAXIS-supported project, does not have ready market linkages yet, the non cash benefits of it have already spilled inside the households of a few group members. The preparation for health food involves cleaning and roasting large quantity of grains. Spouses of a few members help in cleaning and roasting the grains as well as doing the errands for them in the market.

When grains need to be cleaned and roasted, instead of gambling or chatting and drinking with their friends, men in the night get busy with their wives in roasting. It has strengthened their relationships. Men have started cooperating with them in other areas too, such as taking care of the children when they are out for the meetings, and sometimes even cooking.

Revolving funds had some unintended positive impacts. In one case, it made possible women's coming together and initiating collective venture and in the other it started a process of reshaping gender relationship, though to a limited extent within the households.

#### **Expanding Choices and Collective Strength**

Six women got together and invested Rs.60, 000/- for sending the boxes of processed crabs via commission agents to export company. With self evolved efficient division of work which involves cleaning, de shelling, boiling, and packaging crabs., among six women and hiring a man to do the errands as well as helping them to transport the boxes on a daily basis these women make a profit of Rs165 /- each, after paying a sizeable amount of money to the agent, Rs. 2000/- for each consignment of four boxes. This collective agency of women is a value in itself and at the same time points to the directions revolving finance can be put to use in various ventures.

Muslim women, who used to work as housemaids at a very low pay, has started cloth vending from door to door and earn much more than what they used to. The self employment they say has made them regain their self respect as "now they need not mop the floors of other houses."

The above instances of institutional changes reflect a process of recognising the strategic interest of women relative to men and initiating changes to shift the boundaries to expand spaces for women, most importantly mental spaces which may become a condition to political empowerment of women at the community and household levels.

### **2.3 Institutional changes through Community Based Disaster Preparedness**

Though most examples are taken from the fields of tsunami affected areas, some of the changes that community based disaster preparedness has brought about in the west Bengal state are worth mentioning. These changes have contributed to a repositioning of women in the public domain and to some extent at the household level. For example, through community Based Preparedness Programme across villages in West Bengal women are encouraged to participate in the political process at the panchayat level; they are trained in non traditional skills such as rescuing skills, they can make emergency rescue boats( Shalti) and temporary shelters. Young girls can row the boats; Women take active interest in encouraging their girl children to be good swimmers and rowers. The intention is not to depend on the male members to rescue them. This has brought about a change in the popular perception of considering women as vulnerable. Muslim women as a result have given up wearing Burkas in some of the villages and the mobility of the women has on the whole increased. The enormous political participation of women at the **Gram Sansad** level ( Reportedly 80% of the participants in the political meetings are women now, which was an offshoot of the CBDP in West Bengal) with some visible gains in terms of securing basic amenities such as improved approach roads, more number of tube-wells, improved facilities in the ICDS etc.

That women who never ventured out of their house are able to see the link between their collective political participation and such gains as high level of confidence, possibility of improved quality of life points to the tremendous possibility of how disaster response by integrating gender concerns can become a tool for furthering gender equity through women empowerment; though sensitisation of men in their role shift remain an unaddressed but necessary challenge in the process of recovery and preparedness in both the states.

#### **Broader Institutional Changes through Disaster response at a Glance**

- Training in non traditional life and occupational skills and breaking the stereotypes of assets, occupation and gender roles have brought about broader institutional changes. They challenge entrenched norms which keep women subordinate by denying them high –value skills which enhances their esteem in the household, market and communities ensures personal self esteem, self awareness and high economic returns Training in non traditional skills changes the rules of labour markets and the relationship between men and women.
- Similarly, Collaborative spaces where men and women, girls and boys sit together for discussion of issues of concerns, or learn and work together have challenged the customs which requires separate seating for girls and boys and men and women. These spaces have changed the socio-cultural norms of the community as well as homes which now allow their girls and women to sit with boys and men for learning skills and working together.
- Institutionalizing equal wages has changed the entrenched norms of the labour markets. It is the first time that women and men are getting equal wages for equal work. If sustained it meets the strategic gender needs of women to bring about balance in the power relationship between women and men.
- Focus on Single women by reaching out to their girl children in the rehabilitation and reconstruction process has challenged the patriarchal norms of preferential treatment for male child and assigning a marginal space to single women
- Using Beijing Platform for action and CEDAW as tools of lobbying and advocacy.

### **3. Conclusions:**

The paper has underscored that none of the issues in disaster is gender neutral. Processes of relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction, if not consciously directed, for equitable recovery of the affected reflect and perpetuate the pre-disaster social vulnerabilities and social exclusions rooted in the unequal power relationships which inhere in Gender, caste, religion and ethnicity. Gender especially is a cross cutting issue as within any subgroup men and women exist and operate in a less than equal power relationships shaped by the way members of the two sexes are perceived, evaluated and expected to behave in a given Society. Thus gender becomes an important dimension within response to disasters, and expanding spaces for women by mainstreaming gender a necessary process to reach gender equality. Engendering disaster management foregrounds the need for interventions such that challenges the status quo for bringing about a shift in spaces by empowering women and sensitizing men.

This process has started, as shown above, in a small but very important way; the gains may be economic or non-economic (collective economic activity and enhanced awareness and assertiveness respectively), and confined to a particular context (as in the men sweeping the streets clean) or more generalized (as the joint entitlement of housing deed in most cases, women getting trained to becoming rescuers and learning skills to save themselves). What is important is the process itself; however the challenge lies in the way it is sustained and replicated in both disaster response and development process<sup>10</sup>.

Significantly, gender mainstreaming, sometimes, may start from the grassroots women themselves. When women come together on a common platform (facilitated by NGOs, especially in the area of livelihood) the enhanced mobility and space for sharing the experiential realities of their lives in it becomes a driving force for taking up initiatives. These initiatives may be to demand their entitlements or to challenge the entrenched patriarchal institutions to make disaster response more inclusive and gender sensitive.

Highlighting the transformatory aspects of disaster response through field based examples, the authors hope, would trigger a process, both in the mindsets of policy makers as well as humanitarian agencies, that integrating gender concerns should cut across all phases of disaster response, rather than remaining an isolated component which is often misunderstood as addressing those needs of women which emanate from their socially assigned gender roles. Though it is important to address them, it could be dovetailed to further their strategic interests and enhancing capacities the lack of which render them vulnerable.

By always considering women as vulnerable, we are reinforcing the stereotype image of a woman as some one naturally vulnerable, as though the vulnerability is given and not socially constructed. The fact is that vulnerability is a function of lack of capacity, space, choices and opportunities. For example, a man who does not know swimming is vulnerable relative to a woman who knows it. Yes, women face gender-based disadvantages for making choices, building capacities and claiming spaces. It will help immensely, if instead of joining the chorus of "Women are vulnerable", we concentrate on building and strengthening their capacities.

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<sup>10</sup> For Recommendations in this direction, please refer to the full report.

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