

ARAVANIS: The *Voiceless* Victims of Tsunami¹Chaman Pincha² and N Harikrishna³

They have always been ignored, discriminated and denied their human rights by the mainstream institutions. They were not discriminated by Tsunami though. They were out there along with countless men and women in the aftermath of Tsunami. Government, NGOs and society at large have some thing to offer to men and women to recover from the shocks of the disaster...Aravanis, betrayed by the winds of transformation, continue to remain unreached, unprotected and 'NO WHERE' people.⁴

This article is an extract from the research study on Gender Mainstreaming Strategies in Tsunami Response, supported by Oxfam and carried out by a team of independent researchers for Anawim Trust. The study analyses gender differential impact of Tsunami and documents gender mainstreaming approaches in Tsunami response by select NGOs in the three worst affected districts in Tamil Nadu⁵. **The article specifically highlights the plight of Aravanis with a hope to get the attention of the government and humanitarian agencies to pay specific attention to this most marginalized and discriminated population, in their attempts to build back better.**

Gender –just and rights- based humanitarian response, in principle and practice alike should not discriminate between majority and minority population. However, the history of disaster responses world wide – particularly in the aftermath of Tsunami-- have shown us that if a certain section of population is lesser in number, there is a high risk that their conditions and needs may be ignored in the emergency situations unless there is a conscious effort to take their existence, vulnerabilities and differing needs into account. Aravanis, scattered in the tsunami affected coastal areas, emerged as one such minority population. The Aruvani are among those groups which, according to the study, remained invisible in all phases of disaster response, the other groups being scattered poor and Dalit Azhi collectors.

Gender equality and Aravanis

Gender equality posits equality between and among men and women. This leaves out Aravanis whose gender category cannot be explained using a two gender frame work (Kay and Barbara, 1975). Aravanis may be born inter sex or apparently males, dress in feminine clothes and generally see themselves as neither women nor men, they are not men trying to be women (Singh, 2001; also focus group discussion with Aravanis, Veppanchery in Nagai and Kodimunai in Kanniyakumari)⁶. However, Aravanis remain most disadvantaged by gender identity discrimination. Though in 2005, Indian Passport applications were updated with three options: M/F/E (The telegraph, 2005), the policies, laws and institutions discriminate and exclude them on the basis of both their sexual and gender identity⁷. The explicit absence of their existence in the definitions of gender and gender mainstreaming make this group invisible and most deprived, excepting in the HIV/AIDS discourse.

Though Aravanis had died in Tsunami, there are no official records on the death of 5 Aravanis—the fact which emerged in a focus group discussion with Aravanis in Veppanchery in Nagai district. The support groups of these 5 Aravanis— many more Aravanis may have died —have not received any ex-gratia ,(Ex gratia is a lump sum cash amount ,given by the government on its discretion, to the injured or to the next of kin of those lost life in a calamity : natural or human made. It is neither a conditional cash amount nor an interest free loan. It's a no- liability- and- no- strings -attached money'. The ex-gratia is given on the head counts of dead in a family).

¹ There are around 200,000 million Aravanis in Tamilnadu, India. The term third gender has been consciously avoided by the authors as the term raises the question of which is first and which is the second gender. There are around 200,000 million Aravanis in Tamilnadu, India.

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⁴ The expression, so appropriate to the lives of Aravanis we met, NO WHERE people is adapted from *The No Where People, Books for Change, India..*

⁵ For referring the report in full, please visit the resource section/reports at www.thinkbeyondboundaries.org

⁶ “I am not a man trying to be a woman. It is your society’s problem that you recognize only two sexes and gender” (Hijra Mona Ahmed to author Dayanita Singh).

⁷ M/F/E stand for male, female and Eunuch respectively. It should be kept in mind while reading these categories that in most institutions in India, the documents confuse sexual and gender identities. For example, there are instances when in the procedural forms, against gender M/F are indicated which are biological categories rather than gender identities i.e., men/women.

Did She Deserve it?

Kalyani, an Aravani aged 40, and married, was well accepted in her spouse' family, particularly by her mother- in- law who never taunted her. Her name was included in the ration card. Kalayani's spouse and mother in law died in tsunami. The Ex gratia amount due to Kalayani on her spouse' death was taken by her father- in- law after kicking her out of the home. Kalayani had no where to go and against her wishes had to migrate to Bombay to make a living (Related by Aravanis in focus group in Cuddalore district).

Tsunami induced grievous injuries to their legs while running for safety had made a few incapable of continuing their socially imposed occupation of begging and dancing. Though they were treated for their injuries in government hospitals, they neither knew of nor were provided with the compensation for these injuries.

Similarly, the loss of Aravanis did not figure in the damage assessments of the government and NGOs. Aravanis had lost their costumes for dancing, small savings in cash, make up kits, jewels, tool of the trade (Plumbing) etc. None figured in the list of affected people and hence did not receive the immediate relief assistance of food, clothes and bedding. Some of them in Veppanchery, Nagai, now live outside the temple shed on the charity of the temple priest but are not sure when they will be chased off.

The exclusion of Aravanis from access to temporary shelters, housing and livelihood opportunities points to the gender blind approach of even the agencies that are genuinely committed to gender equality and human rights. These organizations missed an opportunity to reach out the most marginalized group for reducing their vulnerabilities and initiating their inclusion in the gender mainstreaming process. Resigning to the fact they will never be accepted by the majority of the human society, Aravanis say that they do not need separate houses but a few common shelters with basic amenities where they can live together in security.

The Security needs of Aravanis are no less important than those of women. Taking a bath and attending to nature's call in the open invite gender- based violence. Some of them have even changed clothes standing in temple pond for lack of privacy. The pre tsunami gender- based vulnerabilities of Aravanis have worsened their situation in the aftermath of Tsunami in the absence of temporary shelters allotted to them.

She lives in terror

Hasina, aged 22, *Kodimunai, Kanniyakumari* District, a qualified plumber from ITI, remains without a job and shelter. She was thrown out of her non-Aruvani friend's house in the temporary shelter though pre tsunami she used to live with him. Living in the open is a terror for this young Aravani who needs a job badly and does not like to beg any more--she begged only to support her study in Bangalore.

During living in the open, she has been raped several times over; sometimes gang raped too. She feels a common shelter for Aravanis with basic amenities would give them a sense of security and prevent the type of trauma she is going through, to some extent.

It is a well known fact that Aravanis are not covered by any of the social safety network. Surprisingly, the review of literature shows that hardly any research in the context of tsunami has focused on the vulnerabilities of Aravanis. None of the Aravanis, who the team met, had ration cards as the process of applying for ration card itself puts them through the worst sort of humiliation..

A typical set of questions that Aravanis face when they apply for a ration card-as shared by Rajam, Nagappatinam

- Are you a man or a woman?
- Man
- You do not look like one
- I am Aruvani
- But you need to fill this column which asks of sex
- M/F
- Then , put me in the category of woman
- Well, can you give birth to a child?
- No
- Then get away, you are not eligible for something which is meant for either a man or a woman.



Where Are We?

Consequently, they face hunger in the context of any disaster as their livelihood activities are equally affected, i.e., begging by clapping their hands and dancing. Hunger, starvation, shelter-less conditions and institutional rejection push them into prostitution as much as they do poor women. Elderly Aravanis are not covered by any pension scheme and have to continue begging in spite of their deteriorating health conditions.

“None had come before to talk about food security, housing and basic necessities of life. People come to us to talk about HIV/AIDS. Some of you think we are obsessed with sex and pollute the society. We had eaten the left over thrown by the people living in the temporary shelters during tsunami. Not that we like it ...but we know none would raise their voice for us” (Focus group in Nagai and Cuddalore).

There is an urgent need for mainstreaming Aravanis within the definition of gender and gender mainstreaming for effectively addressing their issues. The paper contends that the tyranny of numbers so often violates the human rights of those who are lesser in numbers. Coupled with their minority status, the socio-cultural stigma that Aravanis carry with them makes this population extremely vulnerable in both development and disaster contexts. A gender just disaster management will mean that Aravanis, the victims of gender discrimination, are reached out by the stakeholders, in equitable manner, in all phases of disaster response. Sex and gender disaggregated data should take into account their existence, differing needs, capacities and aspirations.

The articulated needs of Aravanis for safe housing, access to citizenship document, secure livelihoods including access to credit with training for alternative livelihoods, their inclusion in the job markets and recognition of their capacities and of Jamat as a legitimate body (The community network of Aravanis) is some of the areas where interventions can be directed on a priority basis. A gender sensitive needs assessment for Aravanis emerged as the urgent need in order to integrate their concerns and capacities in the ongoing reconstruction programmes. It will require a process of reflection and negotiating with our own entrenched biases or gender blinded perceptions, constant interaction with Aravanis and a deliberate effort for deconstruction of damaging myths through which they are perceived by the mainstream institutions. Participatory capacity building workshops on how to integrate their differing needs in the ongoing programmes could be made an integral part of the disaster preparedness agenda.

On a sustained basis, to mainstream the gender concerns of Aravanis, a strong advocacy and lobbying with policy makers should be taken up for facilitating access to their entitlements, encompassing both their practical

and strategic gender needs. In this context, the government order⁸ to safeguard the interest of Aravanis needs to be widely disseminated both to the stakeholders and Aravanis themselves. Its implementation will remain a challenging task for the stakeholders. The same order should be read in the context of Tsunami as well to ensure that they are considered rights holders and that their loss are compensated in retrospect.

An Analysis of the G.O. should be taken up from a gender perspective which should uncover the implication of clubbing those with women who neither identify themselves with women nor with men but want to be recognized as separate gender category. The behavioral disorder⁹ mentioned in the G.O. should be further analyzed in terms of its possible negative implications on the interventions for improving their position in society. Further, “Aravanis leave home”...needs to be critically analysed to critically look into the “why” of their preferring to leave homes.

There is equally a need for the donor agencies to channel the funds for the empowerment of Aravanis through specific programmes which ensures them a life of dignity-- an existence free of violence, discrimination and stigma.

Do they need to wish so?

When we pray, we always say: “Let us be the last Aravanis on earth.”

(Names withheld, focus group with Aravanis in Nagai District of Tamilnadu, India)

Disclaimer: The views presented in this article are those of researchers' and not necessarily of Oxfam.

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⁸ G.O. (ms) No.199, Dated 21.12.2006.

⁹ The above G.O. describes “Aravanis are biologically born male who define themselves as a "Women trapped in a man's body". This behavioral disorder makes them behave like girls. Most of the aravanis left their Homes because of this...”