

Empowerment Revisited: Will it Address Marginalised Positions of Women in Post Disasters?

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Abstract

World is faced with frequent natural disasters and the magnitude of impact that they cause lead to major concerns in many fields. The need to focus on community engagement and enhancement of society's capacity to withstand disasters in order to reduce damage to both human and material resources has been highly emphasised. Recent studies have reflected the need for gender consideration in disaster management, and emphasised its importance in building disaster resilient communities. Within the post disaster stage, the impact of natural disasters and the consequent partial reconstruction efforts have presented many challenges to women. Hence, there is a need to enhance women's position within post disaster context. Further, many studies have acknowledged that although women are disproportionately affected by these disasters, their role in preventing and mitigating the effects of natural disasters is not well explored. Within this context, the main research investigates into empowerment of women during post disaster reconstruction in Sri Lanka.

Since disasters affect women and men differently and in practice a larger share of benefits of disaster management goes to men, women continue to remain marginalised. Post disaster reconstruction which is, the reconstruction process after a disaster, can provide windows of opportunity for development not only to reconstruct the impacted areas, but also to improve these conditions of the affected population. Although earlier studies have recognised the importance of the concept of empowerment in marginalised conditions literature related to post disaster barely identifies the linkage between the concept and its suitability. Hence this paper seeks to explore these marginalised positions of women in post disasters, examines the concept of empowerment and explores its suitability to address the difficulties of women by bringing forward the evidences from other fields of study. This study has been based on a theoretical as well as practical ideas obtained through a comprehensive literature review and interviews carried out among experts within the practice in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Empowerment, Marginalised positions, Disasters, Post disaster, Women

1. Introduction

The increase in the occurrence of disasters has urged the policy makers and researchers to focus on enhancement of society's capacity to withstand disasters in order to reduce damage to both human and material resources. Post disaster recovery and reconstruction can provide windows of opportunity for physical, social, political and environmental development not only to reconstruct the impacted areas, but also to improve the socio-economic and physical conditions of the impacted population in the long term. However, in practice, too often disaster responses have not contributed to long-term development but they actually subvert or undermine it which results in lengthy post disaster reconstruction activities and the development opportunities are lost.

The lack of involvement of both men and women in disaster management has exposed them to more potential dangers. Recent studies have reflected the need for gender considerations in disaster management, and emphasised its importance in building disaster resilient communities. Most importantly, studies (Ariyabandu and Wickramasinghe, 2003; Goonesekere, 2006) have recognised that disasters affect women and men differently due to the different roles and responsibilities undertaken by them and, the differences in their capacities, needs and vulnerabilities. In most of the instances, although disaster management efforts are designed to benefit both men and women, in practice a larger share of benefits and resources goes to men while women continue to remain marginalised. In many instances after the occurrence of disasters, women's economic dependence on men increases which ultimately reduces their security.

In addition to poverty, environmental degradation and the different needs of men and women, the marginalised role of women within many organisations and their absence from the decision-making structures contributes to women's vulnerability in post disaster situations. Many studies have recognised the importance of the concept of empowerment in overcoming these problems. However the literature related to post disaster barely identifies the linkage between the concept empowerment and its suitability to address the marginalised positions of women in post disaster. Hence the study based on which this paper is written, seeks to identify whether the concept of empowerment can address the marginalised positions of women in a post disaster. In order to achieve its aim the study examines the concept of empowerment, marginalised positions of women in post disaster and finally discusses whether the concept of empowerment can address the difficulties of women in post disaster by bringing forward the evidences from other fields of study. This study has been based on a theoretical as well as practical ideas obtained through comprehensive literature review.

2. Women in post disaster context

Disasters are profoundly discriminatory, even those that are natural rather than man-made (MacDonald, 2005). He further states that the factors which were present before a disaster such as poor social conditions contribute to the difference in the effects of disaster on different groups. Especially people who are living in poverty are much more vulnerable to the effects of natural disasters. In addition, the level of education of population, health care and skills; the customs and beliefs within the community; limitations to the access to land, credit and information; disparities in the remuneration for their activities make certain group of people much more vulnerable than the other during post disaster situations. The magnitude of disasters is documented by reference to the degree of vulnerability of the affected population (Ariyabandu and Wickramasinghe, 2003; Delaney and Shrader, 2000). After the occurrence of a natural disaster, in economic downturns women lose their jobs more quickly and in greater numbers than men (International Labour Organisation, 2003). In addition, their small businesses tend to be hard-hit and their household entitlements decline. In the report by International Labour Organisation (2003) it was found that, after natural disasters, women hold fewer land titles and their small farming plots may be forced off the land. Moreover, since land and employment arrangements are often negotiated through men, women may lose access to both without men's representation (International Labour Organisation, 2003). These reflect that women are deprived after disasters and bespeak the need for enhancing women's positions during post disasters.

Domeisen (1997) views disasters as a magnifying glass for society as it "magnifies" the strong and the weak points in society. In a disaster, women's workloads increase due to damaged infrastructure, housing and workplaces; the need to compensate for declining family income and social services; and the responsibility of caring for orphaned children, the elderly and the disabled. This in turn restricts women's mobility and time for income-generating work. In certain instances, especially social and political transitions, declining political participation and resurgent patriarchal attitudes jeopardise opportunities for women (International Labour Organisation, 2003). These disaster-related adversities compound several existing challenges for women. Although natural disasters severely affect women they often provide them with a unique opportunity to challenge and change their gendered status in society (International Labour Organisation, 2003). Women have proven that they are indispensable in responding to disasters. Following the hurricane Mitch in 1998, women in Guatemala and Honduras were seen building houses, digging wells and ditches, hauling water and building shelters (Delaney and Shrader, 2000). Often against men's wishes, women have been willing and able to take an active role in what are traditionally considered male tasks. This can have the effect of changing society's conceptions of women's capabilities. Women are effective at mobilising the community to respond to disasters since they form groups and networks of social actors who work to meet the most pressing needs of the community (Delaney and Shrader, 2000).

In the case of Tsunami in 2006, due to death of male heads of households, there has been an increase in the number of female headed households. In female headed households, women take on the role of primary income earners and primary care-givers of young and elderly. However,

female headed households face discrimination in terms of their civil status, family and community support, property ownership and access to resources. For example, because land titles and ownership are allocated through the head of household who is generally registered as male, there is a concern that women's names have not been included on titles for new homes built for tsunami-affected households. This marginalises women by excluding them from direct access to property (ADB et al. 2005 cited Goonesekere, 2006). Further, the same study concluded that the destruction of wider family and community life in the post tsunami context may leave female headed households with less support and more vulnerable to social discrimination (Goonesekere, 2006). It is important to take note of the number of households that define themselves as female headed, as it is a significant construct in relation to government programmes, policy and legislation. During the aftermath of the Tsunami disaster, while Sri Lankan law does not explicitly state that the male is the head of household, the patriarchal framework tends to locate women in secondary position within the family-based household. Government payments and interventions in the post tsunami context target the family based household as the unit that receives payments and relations, but it is the head of household that is eligible to receive benefits. A woman is usually recognised as a head of household in situations where her spouse is deceased or is unable to provide for the family (Goonesekere, 2006). This bespeaks the need to enhance woman's position within the post disaster context.

In addition to this, it is stated that gender based violence increases after disaster happens and since women mostly depend on men they are subject to more vulnerability. It has been widely accepted that women and girls have been mostly affected by the tsunami and the study conducted by National committee on women too supported this statement from their survey (Goonesekere, 2006). Following the Latur earthquake in Maharashtra, India, in 1993 reconstruction was initially managed by men who failed to plan for water storage, grain storage, cooking and keeping of cattle. During reconstruction, men preferred to demolish old stone houses and rebuild in costly reinforced concrete. However, a development organisation facilitated local women to construct low cost and safer structures using traditional bricks or stone (Pelling, 2003).

In some countries, a pre-existing pervasive culture of acceptance or denial concerning violence against women, including no existing criminal legislation on domestic violence (Bartolomei et al. 2005), presents compounded problems for organisations attempting to support women in the wake of the tsunami. The denial or trivialising of violence against women by authorities only adds to the problem. In responding to disaster, interventions need to be developed around the existing skills and knowledge of women, who are the time-honoured custodians of community knowledge, social networks and community development (Bartolomei et al. 2005). While in certain instances cultural barriers may prevent women from taking an active role in reconstruction, on the whole, women contribute to such activities as relief distribution, clearing up after disasters, preparation of land, wage labour in reconstruction, etc. (Ariyabandu and Wickramasinghe, 2003). In this context, there is a need to look into the ways of enhancing women's position within post disaster reconstruction. Although, earlier studies have stated that the concept of empowerment is important for women's betterment they barely identify the

linkage between the concept and its suitability within the reconstruction context. Hence, firstly the following section describes the concept of empowerment prior to examining the suitability of the concept within post disaster reconstruction.

2.1 Empowerment: The construct

The concept of empowerment has been defined in numerous ways within the literature. Within the organisational management it is been used to empower the employees, while in developmental studies it is been used to empower marginalised or vulnerable people. Within the developmental contexts, Wang and Burris (1994) state that empowerment is about increasing power-to, especially for marginalised people and groups who are farthest down the ladder in the power-over hierarchy and who have least access to knowledge, decisions, networks, and resources. A study on empowering Russian adults at individual and household level, empowerment is viewed as taking actions that selectively empower those with little power to redress power inequality (Lokshin and Ravallion, 2004). This project was aimed to address inequality of personal power and inequality of economic welfare. According to a study in USA, empowerment is viewed as expanding assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives (Moser and Moser, 2003).

As per the report on poverty elimination and empowerment of women in the UK, empowerment has been defined as individuals acquiring the power to think and act freely, exercise choice, and to fulfil their potential as full and equal members of society. The study emphasised the need to have equality of opportunity and equity of outcomes for women's empowerment (Department for International Development 2000). In another study within the UK, women's empowerment has been viewed as a process by which women redefine and extend what is possible for them to be and do in situations where they have been restricted, compared to men, from being and doing (Mosedale, 2005). It identified the problems that can be addressed through empowerment such as women's gendered identities that disempowered them in public roles, need for change that expands options not only for themselves but for also for women in general both now and future.

Within the developing countries, Roy and Tisdell (2002) refer women's empowerment as a process by which women can gain power to diminish the forces of institutional deterrents considerably to their development within rural India. In Nepal, government and non-governmental organisations funded projects are running to develop communities which include educational development, child welfare, women empowerment and health services. A study on empowering women through community development approach views empowerment as a multidimensional and interlinked process of change in power relations to expand individual choices and capacities for self-reliance (Mayoux, 2003 cited Acharya *et al.*, 2005). According to a study on rural women in Bangladesh, Parveen and Leonhäuser (2004) describe empowerment as an essential precondition for the elimination of poverty and upholding of human rights, in particular at the individual level it helps building a base for social change.

3. The notion of empowerment

3.1 The concept

The origin of empowerment as a form of theory was traced back to the Brazilian humanitarian and educator, Paulo Freire (1973 cited Hur, 2006) when he proposed a plan for liberating the oppressed people through education. Although Paulo did not use the term empowerment, his emphasis on education as a means of inspiring individual and group challenges to social inequality provided an important background for social activists who were concerned about empowering marginalised people (Parpart, et al. 2003). The concept is conceived as the idea of power since it is closely related to changing power by gaining, expending, diminishing, and losing (Page and Czuba, 1999). While explaining about the origin of the concept, Shackleton (1995) says that there is no single cause or origin of the empowerment movement, rather, it emerges from the increasing specialisation of some work, the changing shape of organisations and a shift towards placing greater value on the human being at work. While describing empowerment, Nesan and Holt (1999) state that, empowerment is more a philosophy than a set of tools or management principles to be readily applied to business organisations. Though the term empowerment has been used frequently in management literature, it is been defined in several ways by organisations and scholars. Accordingly, empowerment is a diverse concept which is open to a number of different interpretations. Within this context, following sections of the paper consists discussions on how the concept of empowerment has been viewed in many other fields.

3.2 The process of empowerment

Empowerment is multidimensional and occurs within sociological, psychological, economic, political and other dimensions. Empowerment state that empowerment can occur at individual level or collective level (Hur, 2006; Boehm and Staples, 2004), and can be illustrated as a social process since it occurs in relation to others and as an outcome that can be enhanced and evaluated against expected accomplishments (Parpart et al., 2003). According to Hur (2006), the process of empowerment can be synthesised into five progressive stages as illustrated in Figure 1: an existing social disturbance, consciousness, mobilising, maximising, and creating a new order.

According Hur (2006) and Nilsen (2007) the components of Individual Empowerment could be listed as follows: Meaningfulness: This is related to how the employees find the work relevant to their own values and ideas. It is also about internal commitment; Competence: It is a belief that one possesses the skills and abilities necessary to perform a job or task well; Self-determination: Is about autonomy in personal working tasks. It concerns having the ability and authority to try one's own solutions; Impact: Impact is the perception of the degree to which an individual can influence strategic, administrative or operating outcomes at work. Furthermore Fetterson, (2002) and Hur (2006) describe the components of Collective Empowerment:

Collective belonging: Taking part in community activities or events that may lead to effecting change in power structure in communities; Involvement in the community: Taking part in community activities or events that may lead to effecting change in /affecting the power structure in communities; Control over organisation in the community: Component of gaining forces to influence representative groups, plus efficacy of those organisations like group support and advocacy; Community building: Creating a sense of community among residents that will increase its ability to work together, solve problem, and make group decisions for social change.

According to Hur (2006) Empowerment has two aspects: personal empowerment and collective empowerment and each of these aspects has its own components. A set of four components including meaning, competence, self-determination and impact are related to in personal empowerment. Four components, including collective belonging, involvement in the community, control over organisation in the community and community building, are explored in collective empowerment. The goal of individual empowerment is to achieve a state of liberation strong enough to impact one's power in life, community and society, whereas the goal of collective empowerment is to establish community building, so that members of a given community can feel a sense of freedom, belonging, and power that can lead to constructive social change.

4. The concept of Empowerment in other disciplines

During the last decade the term empowerment has become a widely used word in many disciplines including community psychology, management, political theory, social work, education, women studies, and sociology (Lincoln et al. 2002). According to these applications, the concept of empowerment can be viewed by examining within two different contexts: development of organisations and development of communities. Since the concept has a widespread use, the definitions of the term are many and with different objectives. Therefore, in order to gain an understanding on how the concept is viewed in different disciplines, the following sections summarises the relevant literature findings into two main contexts.

4.1 Development of organisations

Empowerment is an emerging construct to address issues such as organisational effectiveness, powerlessness, motivation, etc. by management and social science theorists. Even though the meaning of the terms delegation and empowerment may look similar they are different to each other. Shackleton (1995) states that in delegation, a leader or manager decides to pass on a task or a specific part of his or her job to another individual for a specific reason. However, empowerment is a philosophy of management which widens the responsibility associated with the current task or role without necessarily changing the task or role itself. Handy (1993) explains empowerment as encouraging people to make decisions and initiate actions with less control and direction from their manager. In a study by Loretta and Polsky (1991), for

management, empowerment is giving up of some control and the sharing of additional knowledge of company goals and achievements. In addition, from an employee's point of view, it is the acceptance of risk by taking more responsibility. Avrick and colleagues (1992) state empowerment as giving authority commensurate with their responsibilities to initiate positive change in their organisation. This demands total commitment, involvement, support and trust from management. While explaining about empowerment, Rubinstein (1993) states that every individual is responsible for acceptance or rejection of the quality of prior work; self inspection and control of current work; and acceptance or rejection of finished work. In the above studies the authors have explained the term from a similar perspective within the management of organisations.

Ripley and Ripley (1992) explain empowerment from four dimensions: as a concept; as a philosophy; as a set of organisational behavioural practices and as an organisational programme. They identify the possible means of including empowerment into the organisation. Accordingly, it provides a guide to practitioners and scholars to investigate the roles and implications of the concept within the management. In a study within the construction industry, Nesan and Holt (1999) collectively define empowerment as the process of giving employees the authority to take decisions, relating to their work processes and functions, and within the limits provided by management, but requiring them to assume full responsibility and risk for their actions. Further they state that, empowerment is not an act or incident that can visibly or physically happen, but it is employees' perception or realisation that they believe in, and control what happens to their work processes; and that they are capable of controlling those processes efficiently. Even though Eylon and Bamberger (2000) view empowerment from two different perspectives: a cognition (psychological approach) or social act (sociological approach), in their gender related study, they accept that empowerment cannot be neatly conceptualised as either a cognition or social act.

The concern of employee empowerment is connected with many of the key issues related to employment practices mainly in gaining competitive advantage through improved service quality (Lashley, 1999). Many studies have been conducted on empowering employees within the organisations (Honold, 1997; and Jarar and Zairi, 2002; Klidas et al., 2006). Some studies (e.g. Faulkner and Laschinger, 2008) examine empowerment under two major aspects within in organisations: structural empowerment and psychological empowerment. Within a study on multi disciplinary teams on work related empowerment in a health care transitional organisation, empowerment has been recognised as an important factor for employees as they may have direct an effect on the work environment and may pave a way for dissatisfaction, burnout and absenteeism among health care workers (Kuokkanen et al., 2007). Within a context of work place environment, Spreitzer (1995) views intrapersonal empowerment as a component of psychological empowerment that deals with cognitive elements. In this study a self-assessment using 7 point likert response format for 4 dimensions was carried. The four dimensions are beliefs and attitudes, competence, self- determination and, efficacy. Ultimately, empowerment was calculated by averaging them into a single measure of Intrapersonal empowerment. Further, it was found that intrapersonal empowerment mediates the relationship between workplace social structure and innovation, but not effectiveness.

Within a study on managerial training in education, Glasman (1997) looks into empowerment as shifting responsibility for learning to the learners themselves. Under this study two cases were established in order to acquire knowledge and skills in managerial training programmes with the focus on the establishment of the most suitable and enhancing learning environments possible. The study explained on how empowering trainees to take responsibility for part of their learning within environments which trainers establish for them develops the process of producing associations (Glasman, 1997). The results for this empowerment is the learning of skills of exercising power by actually carrying out it and the attainment of knowledge about exercising power by observing and talking to experienced practitioners. The study found that establishing empowering environments for managerial training could constitute both a reflection of a philosophy and a set of teaching techniques. Therefore, the main objective of forming empowering environments should be to facilitate learning (Glasman, 1997).

4.2 Development of communities

In order to address the vulnerabilities and restructure the imbalance of power relations in relation to social relations, empowerment plays a major role within the communities such as oppressed communities, disable and elderly people, children, ethnic minorities and women. According to a study by Parveen and Leonhäuser (2004), empowerment has been viewed as an essential precondition for the elimination of poverty and upholding of human rights, in particular it helps in building a base for social change at the individual level. Furthermore, the study by Carya and colleagues (2005) views the enhancement of rural women's position through community development approach where the approach is looked as a multidimensional and interlinked process of change in power relations to expand individual choices and capacities for self-reliance. Another study on improvement of local community through participation looks at empowerment as expanding assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives (Moser, 2003).

Further, a study on women's empowerment have identified that women's marginalised positions such as limited role in household decision making, limited access and control over household resources, low level of individual resources, restricted mobility, inadequate skills and knowledge leading to vulnerability and, heavy domestic workload can be addressed through empowerment (Parveen and Leonhäuser, 2004). According Carya and colleagues (2005) females' submission, silence, sacrifice, inferiority and obedience, female illiteracy and lesser mobility of women on employment were the problems which were identified to address through the community development approach. Moser (2003) considered community's perceptions about indicators of empowerment were considered as important. Further, indicators which are context specific were considered as factors that can delay the impacts of empowerment.

In order to measure the empowerment, Parveen and Leonhäuser (2004) used Cumulative Empowerment Index (CEI) considering six indicators: contribution to household income, access to resources, ownership of assets, participation in household decision making,

perception on gender awareness and coping capacity to household shocks. Their study recommended actions on education and training, gender awareness through media, self-help group, community initiatives (intention strategies involving community and religious groups), donors (apart from supporting, need to monitor and evaluate the gender impact on project interventions for the enhancement of women within the rural farming families). In a study by Carya and colleagues (2005) making self-help group activities truly self-reliant, conducting literacy programmes and encouraging group savings and credit programmes were identified as ways of improving women's position in the rural context.

A study by Moghadam and Senftova (2005) within an international context defines empowerment as a multi-dimensional process of achieving basic capabilities, legal rights, and participation in key social, economic, political and cultural domains. In this study authors have identified 44 indicators for measurement of women's participation and right in civil, socio-economic, and cultural domains. These indicators were categorised under seven categories: socio-demographic indicators, bodily integrity and health, literacy and educational attainment, economic participation and rights, political participation and rights, cultural participation and rights and ratification. This study refers to an earlier study by Giele's (1977) on six fold framework of dimensions of women's of status to assess and compare the legal status and social positions which are, political expression; work and mobility; family: formation, duration and size; education; health and sexual control and cultural expression.

Acharya and colleagues (2005) describes empowerment as a multidimensional and interlinked process of change in power relations to expand individual choices and capacities for self-reliance. Within this study, authors have stated participation as a function of bargaining power. Further, incomplete information, cultural, ethnic and economic restrictions often influence the decision making process of women and hence have a bearing on empowerment. Social networks are one of the factors that influence empowerment. Within this context they addressed difficulties such as less access to human, capital and information resources women traditionally only have a very limited role to play outside the confines of their homestead. However, they emphasised the need to consider the context specificity for strategies for empowerment. In order to gain an understanding on the contextual conditions and the linkage of the concept within the undertaken study the following section highlights the suitability of the concept for women's empowerment in post disaster reconstruction.

5. Discussion

Disaster reconstruction is a rebuilding measure that involves building the confidence, self-respect, self-esteem, self-dependency, mutual support and trust and, the rebuilding of communities. In order to have a successful completion of disaster reconstruction it is important to include the participation of social actors of the community. During post disaster reconstruction, in addition to men, women are also engines of recovery who possess qualities vital for disaster response and who can help to keep the fabric of society in tact. Since crises present an opportunity to break-down gender barriers and as disaster coping prompts men and

women to step out of their traditional places, unequal pre-disaster gender roles can be changed and other pre-conditions of disaster can be improved to uplift community's socio economic status during post disaster situations.

During post disaster situations there is an increase in gender based violence for women especially with regard to health and verbal assault. It was highlighted from the initial study of this research that women's dependence on others increases this adverse condition. Further, due to loss of income from others and from their own activities women have a need to apply for financial support which requires for collaterals. However, since in some countries women are in marginalised positions with regard to property and other assets rights (Roy and Tisdell, 2002), this influence the acceptance for financial support for women from institutions. In addition, there is a strong necessity for inclusion of women's needs and demands within post disaster reconstruction. Furthermore, there is also a call for improvement in women's ability to effectively express their needs and problems due to patriarchal systems that exists within the community. All these problems of women in post disaster context bespeak the need to enhance women's position within the community. Reconstruction is a long-term process and it focuses more on human and material resource development, coordinated effort towards independence and sustainability. Therefore, in order to achieve the above goals the concept of empowerment can be used as a management philosophy within post disaster reconstruction. In reconstruction the most vulnerable and marginalised sections like women, children, the poorest section of society, etc. are the primary stakeholders who need to be considered as partners in the empowering process (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1999). However, defining the term is an important step before planning any activities during post disaster reconstruction.

The construct of empowering women begins from the understanding that women's empowerment is about the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices can acquire such an ability (Kabeer, 1999). According to Magar (2003) women's empowerment is an outcome of a process whereby individual attitudes and capabilities, combined with collaborative actions, and reciprocally influenced by resources results in a transformation to the desired achievements. However, the undertaken study believes that empowering women is a process which facilitates women to acquire the ability to make strategic life choices not only within post disaster reconstruction but also during their future decision making with regard to their life with self-reliance.

According to the Recovery and Reconstruction Department from the International Labour Organisation (Department for International Development, 2000), unequal gender roles often change after crisis as women and men can step out of their socially ascribed roles in their coping strategies. It was found that, engaging in construction, mechanical and other male dominated employment; creating small enterprises; contributing to reconstruction discussions; acquiring more education while externally displaced; and having no traditional 'male' and 'female' roles in the absence of men, empowers women in terms of economic independence, ability as family providers, decision-making and social position (International Labour Organisation, 2003). The International Labour Organisation emphasised the need for sufficient and truly empowering recovery assistance for women.

According to report by UN-HABITAT (2007), when women are empowered they have the capacity and the inner will to improve their situation and gain control over their own lives. Further it states that, this can lead to an equal share in economic and political decision-making, and control of economic resources. The report by Department of Economic and Social Affairs (1999) states that, in addition to poverty, environmental degradation and differing needs of men and women, the marginalised role of women within many organisations and their absence from decision-making structures contribute to their vulnerability in post disaster situations. Kumar-Range (1999 cited Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1999) points out that though women tend to be active in communities and households they are marginalised by agencies and organisations responding to the disasters. Therefore, these organisations should not underestimate the capacity of women to mobilise people and manage change. Rather than feeling that their voices can not be safely heard, opportunities for women to engage in management and decision making related to all levels of disaster response and reconstruction should be offered.

6. Conclusions

Disaster response needs a partnership between all the actors in society including the marginalised groups and individuals at all levels, most importantly at community level, where women normally operate. When disasters strike, associations for women and youths can be mobilised and play key roles in relief and recovery. During the post disaster reconstruction phase some activities can be resuscitated. It is wise to search for the hidden resilience displayed by communities affected by disasters and then to build upon it. This would entail a conscious strengthening of local knowledge and wisdom, applying appropriate solutions to crises. One goal should be to increase economic possibilities that promote political, social and economic empowerment of communities wherever possible, without introducing externally generated institutions for the long run.

One of the main sustainable means for disaster victims to overcome their marginal condition is through an adjustment process of empowerment, allowing them to fulfil their basic human development needs. When designing protection and assistance programmes for women during and following emergencies it is essential for planners to broaden the concept of women's status from the narrow conceptualisation as daughter or mother or wife. The capacity of women to mobilise people and manage change should not be underestimated. Instead of feeling that their voices cannot be safely heard, opportunities for women to engage in management and decision making related to all levels of disaster response and reconstruction should be offered. This can enable disasters to provide physical, social, political and environmental development opportunities that can be used during the post disaster reconstruction. This would lead to not only reconstruct the affected areas, but also to improve the socio-economic and physical conditions of the impacted population in the long run. This study emphasised the need for addressing women difficulties and the necessity for women empowerment within post disaster reconstruction by bring forward the examples in other.

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