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# Women's Empowerment in Disaster Reconstruction: Critical Perspectives on Policies and Frameworks

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## Abstract

There has been an increase in the occurrence of natural disasters and their impact has aroused the interest of many stakeholders to incorporate different strategies on disaster management. Although, disaster ceased many opportunities and lives, the lives of survivors do not cease in the disaster affected areas. This bespeaks the need to develop communities to cope up with challenges during post disaster situations and to improve their disaster resilience. 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. There are many factors which influence women's empowerment such as their contribution to household, access to resources, participation in household decision making, perception on gender awareness, etc. Among factors that influence women's empowerment, existing policies and frameworks is one of the important factors that can play a major role within post disaster reconstruction. Further, although there are legislations and policies to provide assistance to women, the lack of implementation of these remains a problem. Hence, in order to gain an understanding on the existing framework on women's empowerment, this study firstly examines the way the concept of empowerment has been viewed within development studies and later analyses the national and international policies and frameworks that exist within post disaster context in Sri Lanka. 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:** disaster, empowerment, frameworks, Sri Lanka, women

# 1. Introduction

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

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

The lack of involvement of both men and women in disaster management has exposed them to more potential dangers (Childs, 2006). A core and often neglected aspect of post disaster reconstruction phase has been the lack of inclusion of women and other vulnerable groups into rebuilding and community development. Many studies have contemplated the need for gender consideration in disaster management and emphasised its importance in building disaster resilient communities (Ariyabandu and Wickramasinghe, 2003; Delaney and Shrader, 2000). Ariyabandu and Wickramasinghe (2003) state that disasters affect women and men differently due to 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 (Delaney and Shrader, 2000).

Among the factors that influence women's empowerment, existing policies and frameworks is one of the important factors that can contribute to better allocation and distribution of resources within post disaster reconstruction. Hence, it is important to understand the existing frameworks on women's empowerment in post disaster reconstruction in order to shape the gender balance in post disaster setting. Within this context, this study firstly examines the way the concept of empowerment has been viewed within development studies and secondly analyses the national and international policies and

frameworks that exist within post disaster context in Sri Lanka. The research also investigates the issues on policies and frameworks. 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.

## **2. Empowerment: in developmental settings**

The concept of women's empowerment is a fuzzy concept as used by many organisations and researchers. Historical textual analysis and interviews with researchers and officials in development organisations disclose its flexibility and capacity to carry multiple meanings. While explaining the reason behind the concept of empowerment, Humphires (1996) states that it used to avoid social exclusion, polarisation, marginalisation and it is not used towards inclusion. In the efforts to utilise the concept for a broader social change agenda, policy makers and other officials juggle these different meanings in order to keep that agenda alive. However, the concept needs to be defined properly in order to achieve its primary objectives without manipulations. Hence, in order to gain an understanding on the ways the concept has been viewed and the measures considered for its implementation within many countries, the following sections review the concept within developed and developing countries.

### **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.

## **2.2 Empowerment: measures and factors**

Within a study in USA, empowerment of local community was achieved through community participation where it emphasised the need to consider community's perceptions about indicators and indicators' context specificity as it may delay the impacts (Moser and Moser, 2003). A study on empowering Russian adults at individual and household level concluded that perceptions of power and welfare are significant but seemly weak in association between them in level and over time. It used Cantil ladder (9 steps for power and welfare) to rank respondents' power by themselves (Lokshin and Ravallion, 2004).

The report on poverty elimination and empowerment of women in the UK identifies the factors that influence empowerment of women: acquiring knowledge and understanding of gender relations and the ways in which these relations may be changed; developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one's life; gaining the ability to generate choices and exercise bargaining power; developing the ability to organise and influence the direction of social change to create a more justice in social and economic order. In this context empowerment of women was aimed to address lack of commitment to improve opportunities for women, lack of income, limited access to services and opportunities for human development, lack of voice in political life and decision making and social subordination and exclusion (Department for International Development 2000). The report highlighted aspects that need to be considered for the support for gender equality and women's empowerment: economic and social policy; women's economic empowerment; education; women in public life; trade and globalisation; reproductive and sexual health; rights of the child; violence against women; basic services and infrastructure.

In a study within rural India Roy and Tisdell (2002) state that the right to land is an important factor for women's empowerment as it is a more permanent source of income and it indicates that the person has a long-term interest in preserving the fertility of the land and therefore will be interested in investing in land. Furthermore, when income is higher this will increase the person's capacity to

spend on consumption of food, housing, education, health and other necessities. It was found that when women work on someone else's land as paid labour or on her family land as an unpaid labour they do not have an opportunity to invest and cannot have a significant voice in family's expenditure plan.

In order to address females submission, silence, sacrifice, inferiority and obedience, problems in female illiteracy, lesser mobility of women on employment in Nepal the project considers the concept of empowerment of women through facilitating self-help group activities which are truly self-reliant, literacy programmes, group savings and credit programmes (Mayoux, 2003 cited Acharya *et al.*, 2005). According to a study on rural women in Bangladesh, Parveen and Leonhäuser (2004) This study found 6 indicators to measure cumulative empowerment index such as contribution to household income, access to resources, ownership of assets, participation in household decision-making, perception on gender awareness, coping capacity to household shocks. The study addresses women's problems 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, heavy domestic workload, etc.

In Sri Lanka, the concept of empowerment is gathering the momentum in addressing women's difficulties especially to those who are more vulnerable in disaster situations. Many non-governmental organisations are working on women's empowerment in order to address women's safety and health related issues and, to enhance their status with regard to their assets, income and employment. In addition, difficulties of women who work in factories also need to be explored further since violence against them in Sri Lankan society does indeed appear to be a major problem. Factory women who participated in a research (Hancock, 2006) rated violence against women as a major way in which to measure women's empowerment is a reflection of the problem itself at the societal level and provides new and constructive ways in which to conceptualise and measure women's empowerment. Although, government's one of the ministry has interest on women's empowerment they do not have any legislations specifically on women's empowerment. However, compared to earlier days enhancement of women's position within the society has been recognised and actions have been taken to reduce the gender based violence which act as a major barrier to women's empowerment.

In order to overcome rural women's difficulties with regard to their lesser access to human, capital and information resources and, women's very limited role outside the confines of their homestead improvement of women's participation was proposed as a solution in Kashmir within Pakistan (Weinberger, 2001). The study states that participation means enabling poor people to take part in a process that strengthens their own abilities and possibilities which is often regarded as a human right, allowing for equity and empowerment. In this study participation is viewed as a function of bargaining power. Further, incomplete information, cultural, ethnic and economic restrictions often influence the decision-making process of women and hence it has a bearing on women's empowerment. In addition, social networks play a major role in women's empowerment. It further states that in order to improve the participation of women two categories of participation approaches can be used: group centred participation where that costs and benefits of participation are connected to the uncertainty that surrounds the behaviour of fellow individuals and, decision to participate is based on an individual analysis of cost and benefit.

A study on microfinance-based intervention on women's empowerment in South Africa (Kim *et al.*, 2007), violence against women is an explicit manifestation of gender inequality and increasingly being recognised as an important risk factor for a range of poor health and economic development outcomes. Violence perpetrated by a spouse or intimate partner is the most common form of gender-based violence among intimate partner violence. This causes direct injury or loss of life and it increases vulnerability to a range of health problems. The study found that reductions in violence resulted from different ways like enabling women to challenge the acceptability of such violence such as expect and receive better treatment from partners, leave violent relationships, give material and moral support to those experiencing abuse, mobilise new and existing community groups, and raise public awareness about the need to address both gender-based violence and about infections.

In order to reap the benefits of the concept of empowerment it is important to have a mechanism that can facilitate the process of empowerment. The existing policies and frameworks take an important role in shaping these mechanisms in the real practice. Within this context, the following sections look into the existing policies and frameworks on women's empowerment and gender balance.

### **3. Women's empowerment: policies and frameworks**

This section of paper focuses on the national and international policies and frameworks on the treatment of gender inequality, which have been adopted by or enforced within Sri Lanka. Similar to the importance of fairness in laws within international area, the gender fairness has gained its importance within many fields. The fairness of an international law, as of any other legal systems, will be judged, first by the degree to which the rules satisfy the participants' expectations of justifiable distribution of costs and benefits, and secondly by the extent to which the rules are made and applied in accordance with what the participants perceive as right process (Frank, 2007). There are two reasons behind international law being fair. Frank (2002) identifies two aspects of fairness, the substantive (distributive justice) and the procedural (right process). While one has a primarily procedural and the other has a primarily moral perspective. In order to have effective system, its decisions must be arrived at discursively in accordance with what is accepted by the parties as right process. The law promotes distributive justice not merely to secure greater compliance, but primarily because most people think it is right to act justly. Discussions on fairness tend to be productive when the allocation of rights and duties occurs in circumstances which make allocation both necessary and possible.

The push towards equal opportunities policies gathered momentum in both the UK and the USA in the 1970s and 1980s, to the point where employers and educational institutions are ashamed not to declare themselves publically (Humphires, 1996). There are many international frameworks under developmental aspects. However, the popular international framework to address inequalities against women is Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). CEDAW has been often referred as an international bill of rights for women and it was the first detailed statement on women's rights at the international level. This was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979. However, it came into force on 3rd of September 1981. The convention identifies

what constitutes under 'discrimination against women' and establishes an agenda for countries to stop any such discrimination. The convention defines 'discrimination against women' as

*“Any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field”*  
(CEDAW, 1979)

Under this convention, the accepting member countries need to commit themselves to undertake a series of measures to end discrimination against women. One of the concern on CEDAW is it does not have any specific clauses on violence. However, the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW) filled this gap. In addition, the power of the CEDAW committee has substantial jurisprudence that informs domestic courts and member states. CEDAW can require the governments to abolish any laws and practices that discriminate against women and establish adequate legal protection for women. Sri Lanka has ratified both CEDAW and DEVAW along with the Convention on Torture, the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights. Further, under the Ministry of Child Development and Women's Empowerment there are two women's statutory institutions which focus solely on women's affairs and development. They are, Women's Bureau of Sri Lanka and National Committee on Women.

The State of Sri Lanka passed a Domestic Violence Act in August 2005. This act aims to provide immediate relief to victims of violence and has been resorted to by many women to obtain protection orders against their abusers. Under this act, the definition for domestic violence does not include any economic abuse. The Women's Charter of Sri Lanka was adopted by the government on the 3rd of March 1993. This is the main policy statement of the country regarding the rights of women. The Charter aims at eradicating sex based discrimination and achieving gender equality. The Charter establishes standards to be observed under seven broad areas: Political and civil rights; Rights within the family; Rights to education and training; Rights to economic activity and benefits; Rights to healthcare and nutrition; Rights to protection from social discrimination and Rights to protection from gender based violence. Although the Charter imposes obligations on the state to tackle violence against women procedurally it is not a legally binding document and can not be reinforced in a court (People's report, 2007).

In addition to above, the Population and Reproductive Health Policy formulated in 1998 contains several provisions related to violence against women such as review and change laws and practices that are prejudicial to the reproductive health of women and deny their rights and to strengthen laws and enforce procedures to eliminate violence ad sexual exploitation against women. Further, under the collaboration of the International Labour Organisation with the Employer's Federation of Ceylon a gender equity policy document was produced and applied to private sector companies. This includes gender sensitive recruitment, promotion and sexual harassment in the work place. A code of Sexual Harassment has also been developed.

The government of Sri Lanka formed the Task Force for Rebuilding the Nation (TAFREN), later replaced by the Reconstruction and Development agency (RADA) to coordinate the reconstruction process. Later, the RADA Livelihood Division formulated a Divisional Livelihood Development Planning. Although RADA aims on community participation, it does not mention specifically on women's issues. After the Tsunami, the state passed three laws related to reconstruction stage. They are: Tsunami (Special provisions) Act; The Registration of Deaths Act and Disaster Management Act. A Tsunami Housing Policy was formulated by RADA in April, 2006 to establish a framework for the distribution of state land and cash allocations to the Tsunami affected people. This policy facilitates the process of distribution to vulnerable groups, single women and multi-child households. Within disaster situations, the plans developed by the National Centre for Disaster Management do not have any reference to gender issues up to now.

#### **4. Findings: policies and frameworks**

One of the main, sustainable means to overcome the marginal condition of disaster victims is through an adjustment process, allowing them to fulfil their basic human development needs (Jeyantha and Gunsekara, 2006). Literature on disaster management recognises that, when designing protection programmes and rebuilding the affected communities it is essential for planners to broaden the concept of women's status from the narrow conceptualisation as daughter or mother or wife (ITDG, 2001; Enarson and Morrow, 1998). This can enable post disaster reconstruction to provide physical, social, political and environmental development opportunities for women. This paper is based on the research from the first phase of data collection which is part of the main study 'empowering women in post disaster reconstruction'. The first phase gathered experts' opinions on current state of women's empowerment, factors affecting or enabling empowerment, current frameworks and policies, etc. However, this paper focuses on the current frameworks and policies within post disaster settings in Sri Lanka.

During this phase of data collection, data was collected through semi-structured interviews and document reviews. The interviews were chosen as a method of data collection for this phase due to their appropriateness and flexibility. Kvale (2009) state that interviews are more suitable method of data collection for capturing experiences and meanings of the subjects in the real world. While explaining about interviews Flick (2009) state that,

*'The research interviews is an inter-view where knowledge is constructed in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee'* Kvale (2009)

Further, interviews allow participants to convey their own situation in their own words from their own perspective to the researcher. In this phase, semi-structured interviews were used as they can allow for the collection of both structured information and also participants' views and opinions. Further, interviews can facilitate the researcher to ask for spontaneous questions as the first phase seeks to collect rich and wider area of field information, and can provide a comfortable environment to the interviewee. The analysis of the interviewees' responses was processed through a procedure outlined by Hall and Hall (1996). This process involved three activities: data reduction, data display, and

conclusion drawing. The interviews were firstly recorded and later transcribed. Finally they were analysed using content analysis. This section of the paper presents the findings on the current state of policies and frameworks related women's empowerment and other gender related policies within post disaster settings. In addition, it identifies the issues within planning and implementation of those policies or frameworks.

#### **4.1 State of policies and frameworks**

According to the study, it was found that, in addition to the provisions in human rights constitutions, Domestic violence act is cited as an important legislation for handling gender based issues in Sri Lanka. Further, the amendments that were brought to penal courts in order to reduce gender related issues also contributed towards gender balance. Within the study, a director of the women's empowerment unit in a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) which is heavily involved in women's development (not only within post Tsunami settings but also within general day to day life) said that, although Domestic Violence Act which was implemented in 2005 by bringing together the NGOs and political parties, the knowledge on the legal provisions within the act has not been disseminated to the rural women. Further, it was found that the knowledge of the acts tends to remain within the capital of the country than to the other parts of the country. However, after identifying this issue, this particular organisation took the initiative to translate the important provisions within the act to a simpler and understandable language to the community by issuing those in smaller booklets. This study found that gender awareness has risen after Tsunami. Warning systems were introduced soon after the Tsunami and it was noted that women were too were included in awareness programmes. This highlights the positive development towards gender balanced approaches.

Women's charter which was developed in 1993 provides guidance on activities related to gender balanced development. Although it serves as a policy document, it is not a legal document. This study highlighted that although Women's bureau of Sri Lanka and National committee on women were created under the ministry, the expected results have not been reaped from those. Most importantly, the experts emphasised that although a bill on women's development was developed, it has not been passed in the parliament yet. Even though it was agreed by both the ruling and opposite political parties at that time, it has not been passed. The study highlighted that the attitudes of the people who are involved in the process of approving the bills towards women's development and the bureaucratic nature of the organisation were some of the reasons behind the delay.

The study identified that although Universal franchise was introduced in 1933 women's representation within the political arena and at administrative levels such as provisional level, divisional level is very minimal. In Sri Lanka, less than 5% women are in the parliament. Further, less than 3% of women are selected in provisional sector while less than 1.7 % of women are in local government level. This indicates that women are not in the power to make any influence. One of the participants, who has experience on women's empowerment and also contributes towards policy development, stated that, *whatever done outside won't matter unless there is some influence*.

The organisations that were working on post Tsunami reconstruction identified certain issues through community consultations. One of the main issues was that women were marginalised while distributing land and properties. This led to modifications to the property rights to allow both men and women to jointly own the properties which were given from the state or private sector. This shows the need for community participation, especially the marginalised people and the need for adjustments of procedures, and most importantly the interest and the dedication on gender sensitive activities within the administrative divisions.

Soon after Tsunami, a doll was given to the affected families. However, there were incidents where mostly men spent those on drinking and left the families at desperate situations. Later this was identified and the doll was given jointly to men and women. Although legally there is no gender biasness with regard to land rights, due to cultural beliefs and customs, women were mostly given movable assets like cash while men were given land and immovable properties. Within Sri Lanka, the Roman Dutch law is gender neutral and which is not biased towards to men or women. However, when it comes to the disposal of properties, in certain regions, parents give their movable properties to daughters and immovable properties like paddy fields to sons. Under Islam law, properties are given to girls. Within the eastern provision, the Mukkuwa law which is applied to a certain community of people has considered the rights and conditions of women and have given more power to women in terms of properties. Due to this provision, women who owned land before Tsunami received their legal entitlements even after Tsunami. However, due to inconvenience in going and collecting their rights from the Kachcheri many women allowed men to handle this and few have lost their rights due to mishandling. The study highlighted that in the southern side of the country, mishandling of property rights have happened due to women's immobility or ignorance.

After Tsunami, a cabinet paper was drafted on gender mainstreaming in Tsunami activities. This consists of opportunities to equal participation, equal allocation and distribution of resources, provision of joint ownership for land and housing, initiations on actions to prevent gender based violence. Further, it was highlighted that it is important to maintain the practice of these initiatives. Apart from the policies on women's development in disaster management, the introduction of Breast feeding policy, which gives a year of paid leave and another year of unpaid facilities women to continue their career.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is one of the major requirements on women's issues. It was emphasised that CEDAW is a very effective regulation. Although women's representation in decision making level is lesser, their participation is very high at grassroots. In addition to the national and international policies, many Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) workings on disaster management in Sri Lanka have their own company policies related to gender. An executive director of a company, who is working within the field of disaster reconstruction, said that their company has three fold gender based policies. They are policies related to gender balanced within members of staff, policies related to projects and activities carried out by the company and the statutory requirements such as international frameworks and national regulations. The director emphasised that the compliance to these policies add value to the company's reputation. This indicates the worth of introducing gender based policies to both participants and beneficiaries of the built environment in disaster reconstruction.

## 4.2 Perspectives on planning and implementation

Many NGOs and government organisations conduct workshops and seminars to identify women's issues and needs. However, it was found that women tend to be silent in general community based meetings. One of the experts from this study highlighted an incident where women were sitting in the back row benches in a community based meeting while men were sitting in the front row chairs. In addition, it was noted that women did not express their views within the meeting. However, when the organiser spoke to those women about their silence, women mentioned that they have already conveyed their issues and requirements to the top people who were mostly men, before the meeting. It was highlighted that this incident indicates that the barriers against women haven't been broken yet. Further, it was mentioned that women are not given equal opportunities in developmental activities. In addition, the expert herself has experienced situations where men tend to ignore or not accept the ideas when she makes her presentation. She emphasised that even some women also tend to support this old school of thoughts. A research participant who has wider experience in these areas stated that,

*'I as a person who has worked in these areas still feel that women are not treated equally although women do office work, house work and many other responsibilities.'*

During the planning phase, policy developers consider the issues from the community from studies by developmental organisations and consultations with those organisations. Many studies are done by NGOs and community based organisations as it affects them more and the results are presented to policy developers. This study found that community based organisations indeed facilitate women and allow them to actively take part in the developmental activities. However, in certain communities it was not successful due to lack of consideration of cultural values, beliefs and customs. Further, mainly due to stereotypes and the way they were socialised, specially the way the mother's have brought up their children contribute to these attitudes and gender insensitivity.

A retired government officer who worked in a ministry states that though lot of money come into the village for development purposes, in many occasions, both women and men do not know the availability of those funds. The remaining unutilised funds ultimately get back to the main pool of funds. Hence, it is important to make them awakened and empower them to properly utilise and develop the community. It was found from this study that women need to be empowered if they are to address the gender based violence. The experts felt that if women are empowered, then they could get together and find a coping mechanism for their local condition especially in certain communities where women are afraid of men or refrain from participating in developmental activities due to cultural beliefs.

Within the implementation stage, women can be beneficiaries, participants in the development activities or managers. In terms of developmental activities on women's development, women are the beneficiaries. It was brought to the attention of NGOs that women take the role of a participant depending on their power towards land or properties or any other assets especially within the rural communities. For example, women who had paddy fields took the responsibilities of their land and participated in development of their properties. In terms of women in managerial positions, the experts viewed that it was not complacent. Within this study, it was highlighted that in certain

communities women do not speak their mind in front of men and this indicated that women tend to be less forward in certain communities due to their cultural aspects. The experts emphasised the need for further modifications in the regulations to support these societal differences.

When the interviewees were asked about the success of the implementation of these policies, it was noted that although many initiatives are taken, these policies do not continue to remain in practice. Even though community is sensitive, the insensitive nature of institutions and mostly the people who work on it towards these concepts were the reasons behind the failure. However, due to the importance given by the NGOs and other private organisations, the implementation of gender related policies and activities tend to more successful. It was also noted within the study that some people who are in the politics believe that these feminist concepts will not work in Sri Lanka. Experts on the field of women's development believe that the success of the implementation of any legislation or policy on women's affairs is comparatively slow in Sri Lanka. However, it was stated within the study that International policies get implemented quickly. Although the policies on education and health also get implemented quickly as they are common policies, policies on employment, decision making get longer time period of time and mostly it is harder to get the approval to balance the gender inequalities.

The study found that some people believe that, 'compared to those days women have got enough and what else do they want'. Further, it was noted that some people do say that many girls have entered the universities and many women are employed in many organisations especially within financial institutions. In reference to this statement the expert feels,

*'Women's work is taken for granted. Although how much the work has been done, if the sensitivity is not there among the policy makers then it will not make any difference.'*

## **5. Discussion**

Although Sri Lanka is better than other south Asian countries in terms of education, maternal morality, health, it does not have enough women's participation at political level. The study found that even though polices are gender neutral, they are not gender sensitive. While investigating on whether post disaster reconstruction provides opportunities to women it was noted that it is a good opportunity for livelihood activities as it offers many opportunities for women. Although women were not generally involved in the reconstruction activities within the built environment, there were instances where women were not consulted and they have resulted in constructing services and facilities in an inconvenient manner. This either has resulted in abandoning the place or not fully utilising the given properties and facilities. Although overall there was an issue of lack of women's participation within the built environment during reconstruction, many NGOS and other organisations took the initiatives to include women's involvement in post disaster reconstruction and also they adopted gender sensitive approaches.

Although women bring in high income generation to the country their level of skills is at low level. Therefore, it does not make any challenge to the present situation. Further it was stated that unlike those days women can not enter middle level of management with ordinary level qualifications. Therefore this leads to more risk for women. Further, it was highlighted within the study that the way the children were brought up attributes to the occurrences of gender inequalities. This reflects the need to consider training and development within the educational system and also the educational system has to change to adopt gender sensitive approaches.

Within this study, many tend to disagree with quotas basis for increasing women's representation as some call it as a baseless. However, at political level, the participants tend to agree on having a quota basis for women's representation as it will be useful to bring women into power within the people who still believe on old schools of thought. While mentioning about women's representation in politics one expert says that, *'Unless you have quotas it is hard to bring in women, because they don't nominate women.'* The success of quota basis in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh were cited as some of the countries who are successful in this attempt. However, it was states that bringing in quota basis will not be a good solution for education and skills instead it will be useful to provide training to develop their capacities.

Although international policies do not make much of a difference on women's representation in decision making level the study found that at very local level women have more participation through developmental organisations. The study noted that in order to enhance women empowerment women should be made known to their human rights; the required skills need to given to them; provide mentoring for women. This can lead to lessen the gender imbalance within the post disaster contexts.

## 6. Conclusions

The rising importance of gender sensitive approaches to post disaster reconstruction brings in the need for setting the policies and frameworks on women's development. In Sri Lanka, although there are no specific national legislations on women's empowerment it does have a ministry on women's empowerment. In addition, Sri Lanka has certain legal provisions within other legislations, polices and committees which can contribute to women's empowerment such as, Domestic violence act, human rights constitutions, Women's charter, National committee women, Women's bureau, Tsunami act, etc. However, the study found that even though polices are gender neutral, they are not gender sensitive enough. In addition, the international bill on women's rights Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) serves as an important guiding document for gender sensitive approaches.

While examining the way of empowerment in post disaster situations it was emphasised that women should be empowered to talk about their rights, properties, livelihood, access to resources, etc. If they are not expressing their needs and views, then NGOs and government organisations will not succeed in developing them. Therefore, the first thing that they should develop is the voices of affected women especially those who are from the rural community. This can provide them more exposure and opportunities for capacity building. However, they should be given a back up to build up. Therefore,

while formulating the frameworks to support women's empowerment, the developers should consider the local realities like cultural values, beliefs and customs and work closely at the grassroots level. It is important to note that having a single policy or framework for the whole country will not be a success. Therefore, the frameworks should have room for adapting the frameworks to the local situation.

As a future work on this research, the next phase of data collection will gather data from the affected community as they are the beneficiaries to whom the framework and policies are made for. This phase will cover both women and men, as the men's support is an important part of the empowering process.

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