Women in Times of Disaster: Gender Dimension of Disaster Management in Sri Lanka

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Owing to climate change, natural disasters have become an almost commonplace occurrence in the world. Developing countries, especially island nations like Sri Lanka, are particularly prone to such disasters, due to two reasons: their geographical location, which is vulnerable to the rising sea levels and their limited capacity to adapt, due to a lack of access to financial resources and technologies.

Unfortunately, disasters have a gender aspect, where women are often affected more severely than men. A woman’s pre-disaster familial responsibilities are magnified and expanded by a disaster, often with significantly less support and resources. This does not mean that men are not affected at all, but given that women are in a disadvantaged position in many contexts, the promotion of gender equality implies that attention needs to be paid to female empowerment in disaster management (DM).

Despite some progress in the recent past, there are gaps in addressing gender issues, especially at the operational level in Sri Lanka.

A major issue in this regard is the low participation of women in the pre- and post-disaster decision-making process at all levels. This leads to gender blindness in DM projects.

For example, the NCDM, the supreme body for DM in Sri Lanka, consists of the president, prime minister, chief ministers, five members from the opposition and several ministers. But there is no representation from the Women’s Affairs Ministry.

Further, there is an overall poor understanding of gender when it comes to the delivery of early warnings and the preparedness for response, both at community and official levels.

Therefore, it is important to enhance women’s participation in the decision-making process at all levels. It has been observed that women’s representation is minimal at national level as well as at community level and there is a limited space for their voice.

A compulsory number or a quota for female representation can be introduced for committees at all levels as an initial step in addressing this issue and measures need to be taken to ensure female representation.

The lack of sex-disaggregated data in Sri Lanka is another challenge. General and disaster-related sex-disaggregated data is of utmost importance to understand and analyse the gender aspects of disasters. The unavailability of such data hampers informed planning, decision-making and the provision of appropriate support in pre- and post-disaster situations.

According to the Sri Lanka Disaster Management Act No. 13 of 2005, the National Council for Disaster Management (NCDM) is the supreme body for disaster management in Sri Lanka. In the recent past, there have been several initiatives in mainstreaming gender issues into the DM policies in Sri Lanka. However, the level of gender consideration varies among those documents (Table 1).

Table 1

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<tr>
<th>Key DM Policy Documents in Sri Lanka and Gender Focus</th>
<th>Gender Focus</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka National Policy on Disaster Management (SLNPM) 2010</td>
<td>Stresses on equality, equity and inclusion of disaster management. States that DM should ensure gender equality and particularly the empowerment of girls and women.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka Comprehensive Disaster Management Programmes (SLCP) 2016-2018</td>
<td>Identifies an enabling environment for gender mainstreaming as a cross-cutting area.</td>
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<td>Sri Lanka Gender-related Disaster Management Policy (SLGDM) 2018-2023</td>
<td>Recognises the differences prevalent among men, women, and children.</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Adaptation Plan (NAP) for Climate Change and Disaster Impact in Sri Lanka 2014-2028</td>
<td>A specific gender focus or a component addressing gender-related matters could not be identified.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) 2016 and 2017</td>
<td>Participation of groups such as gender, youth, vulnerable communities is recognized and providing opportunities for groups to engage.</td>
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In the meantime, the number of people affected by disasters in Sri Lanka is increasing at a worrying rate. There is an acute need for policies that can help plug the gaps and ensure that impacts are not doubled in future. It is essential that all policy measures are gender sensitive, and women have a voice in disaster management, especially at local levels.

In conclusion, the lack of sex-disaggregated data should be considered a priority, and the data would facilitate more effective and sustainable humanitarian responses and indicate the direction for future policy needs.

National Council for Disaster Management (NCDM)
President (Chairman)
Prime Minister (Vice Chair)

Category of Disaster Management:
Chief Minister (Minister of Interior)

Ministers in-charge of following subjects:
National Water Supply and Reconstruction Housing, Science and Technology, Health, Education, Environment, Disaster Management, Industries

Source: Ministry of Disaster Management

"It was five months prior to the floods. I had come to Sri Lanka to visit my friend’s house. I had prepared myself for the flooding. The floods came, and I was lucky to get my friend’s house unscathed."

—Sri Lanka,” a personal narrative in the LPS blog "Talking Economics - http://www.lps.lk/ talkingeconomics"