



Victimisation or Survival?: Disaster Vulnerability and Adaptation among Sri Lankan Urban Women

Dinushika Madhushani Yapa Abeywardhana

Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya, Sri Lanka
E-mail: dinushikay@arts.pdn.ac.lk

Abstract: Flooding is a crucial disaster in the Sri Lankan urban context. The victimisation of communities by flooding is higher due to lower disaster preparedness and the generalisation of the disaster that they are experiencing consecutively every year. In this context, the present study was conducted with the objective of ‘identifying the role of women in post-disaster management in terms of understanding the importance of their contribution to overcome the severe impacts of the disaster’. The study field was a division of Colombo, Sri Lanka, and the study sample consisted of 25 respondents who were selected through the purposive sampling method. Sri Lankan culture has been influenced by cultural ideologies about women, yet those definitions are questionable given the prominent roles played by Sri Lankan women in the post-disaster context. Women’s special capacity for adapting to situations and their high resilience and ability to manage situations lead them to fulfil a greater role in a disaster context. The cultural role of women can be effectively used in providing psychosocial support in a post-disaster context. The capacity of women has not been underestimated; those should be identified in terms of empowering women, without considering them as victims but as survivors.

Keywords: Climate Change, Environment, Gender, Resilience, Women Empowerment

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Introduction

Disasters are destructive events that influence society in various ways. It is not just a mere environmental problem but also a social problem that creates several problems within society. Disasters can be understood in various forms such as cyclones, floods, landslides, tsunamis, volcano eruptions, terrorism, and so on (Christenson *et al.*

2014). Their origin is not only limited to natural phenomena, though often caused naturally. Since disasters have human origins, some of the above-mentioned events are not naturally occurred. Hence, disasters are occurring due to human activities based on political economy as well (Abeywardhana 2020). Among those disasters, flooding can occur naturally as well as due to man-made causes. Despite the origin of the said disaster, it has become a crucial event all over the world. According to the Natural Disaster Statistics-The US and the World (2021), flooding is the most common disaster worldwide. Among the regions of the world, the South Asian region experiences a vast range of disasters, and it makes people vulnerable to most of them due to lower resilience towards them. Flooding is also no exception. According to the World Bank's regional overview of disasters, flooding is the most frequently occurring disaster in the South Asian Region, causing half of the total damages for more than 40 years (Bronkhorst 2012). This influences the rising in displacement in these countries. Disasters particularly influence the poor and enhance their vulnerability. Furthermore, women, children, the elderly, disabled persons, and minorities, are often more vulnerable during, and in the aftermath of disasters, due to a combination of factors including those that are of social, economic, and institutional nature (PDNA Report 2017). However, women and children account for a high percentage of disaster-induced displaced communities. Hence, aspects like gender mainstreaming, disabled first, child protection and focusing on vulnerable communities have become significant areas in disaster risk management mechanisms. Focusing on such powerless communities would enhance their protection as well as social well-being in times of adverse weather effects.

Sri Lanka is a developing nation experiencing disasters due to its geographic location related to extreme weather events as well as numerous man-made factors contributing to disasters. Among the disasters which are experienced by Sri Lankans, flooding is the second most critical disaster according to the existing statistics and drought is in the first place (Liyanarachchi 2017). While drought brings long-term impacts on society, flooding can be a destructive fatalistic event that occurs within a short period. Colombo, as the major economic landmark of Sri Lanka, has a significant population, and experiences flooding during heavy rains. According to Abeywardhana (2020), Sri Lankan urban people's culture of vulnerability manipulates their social behaviour and increases the risk to their social lives as well as their physical well-being. The author further emphasizes that the culture of vulnerability among urban people has influenced their disaster perception as well.

The influence of any disaster can be based on several factors such as the ferocity of the disaster, the capacity of the subjected community, the nature of resilience,

adaptability, etc. Despite the differential impact of disasters, disparities in both vulnerabilities and capacities are decisive factors to build back after disasters. Flooding also brings such consequences and it affects communities with lower economic and social capabilities. Therefore, the gender dimension can be elaborated as a major aspect of flooding in the Sri Lankan urban context. When the devastating tsunami hit Sri Lanka, the majority of the dead and missing were females. The main reason behind this was that it was easier for men to survive because it is generally assumed that they had better knowledge of how to swim and climb trees—skills mainly taught to boys this social prejudice means that girls and women in Sri Lanka have lower possibilities of surviving future disasters (IPS 2018). However, the boost of emerging disaster-related policies in Sri Lanka was visible only after Tsunami, in 2004. The National Policy on Disaster Management (2013) stresses equality, diversity and inclusion of disaster management, and states that disaster management should ensure gender equality and in particular the empowerment of girls and women.

“Gender”, refers to the socio-cultural roles, norms, and values associated with being a man or a woman and roles, norms, and values determine how women and men prepare for, react to, and recover from disasters, and they often cause unequal distribution of power, economic opportunities, and sense of agency (Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery/ GFDRR 2018). Gender roles and statuses are socially constructed values based on the cultural aspects of the countries and it technically detaches two biological creatures: men and women. Despite the general effects of flooding, lack of health care, and reproductive and sexual health problems made women vulnerable in a disaster context. Women’s vulnerability is further increased by the loss of men and livelihoods, especially when a male head of household has died, and the women must provide for their families (World Health Organization 2018). Under these backdrops, women are portrayed as victims of a disaster, and their central role in response to disaster is often overlooked (Gokhale 2008). It is no exception in Sri Lanka, and it believes that women are more severely affected by disasters than men. Sri Lanka has fallen in the medium gender equality category and the country has the second-highest Gender Development Indicator in South Asia (UNDP 2020). Yet this has been questioned in many places due to the high disparity between men and women in terms of economic and social privileges.

Women and men are differently affected by hazards and disasters and often involved in different ways in local or governmental initiatives to reduce the risk of disaster at the individual, household, neighbourhood and community level (Ariyabandu 2007 q.f. De Silva and Jayathilaka 2014). The general overview of the role of women in the country is culturally defined. Hence in many places, the

representation of women is highly determined by the said cultural factors and it nourishes traditional gender-related discourse in the country. This has influenced the lower participation of women in policymaking, underestimating women's contribution in disaster periods and keeping them aside from disaster-related discussions without considering their capacities, and so on. This further delayed identifying women as strong actors in managing disaster contexts in various ways. Yet, the so-called gender-related discussion and prejudices can be questioned in terms of their role and contribution in the pre-disaster, disaster context as well as post-disaster management stages. Against this backdrop, the current study was conducted with the objective of 'identifying the role of women in post-disaster management in terms of understanding the importance of their contribution to overcome severe impacts of a disaster. The problem statement of the present study is, 'how far is the socio-cultural adaptation of women in determining the effective resilience in responding to flooding?' The current study has a few main sub-objectives: (1) To identify socio-cultural factors encompassing women's adaptability and vulnerability in a disaster context, (2) To understand women's role in flooding disaster management, and (3) To evaluate the women's role in build-back better in the post-disaster period.

Literature Review

Floods have been the main disaster that has affected the highest number of families in Sri Lanka within the past four decades (De Silva and Jayathilaka 2014). Within the period of 1970 to 2016, 2007 reported the highest level of affected people, and that level and its uneven fluctuation further warn about future flood risk (Abeywardhana 2020). The World Bank (2012) highlights the disaster profile of Sri Lanka, and it shows that the country's highest experience of flooding has an upward trend. Based on the report, percentages of distribution of reported disasters in Sri Lanka within the period of 1970 to 2009 can be shown as follows:

Table 1: Percentages of Distribution of Disasters in Sri Lanka

<i>Type of Disaster</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Landslides	5%
Droughts	13%
Tsunami	1%
Floods	74%
Cyclones	6%

Source: The World Bank, 2012

Against this background, the need of managing flood risk in terms of ensuring the safeguarding of the people has emerged in Sri Lanka. A number of policies were amended, and good practices were initiated to ensure social well-being in disaster management. The actions that are needed to be taken in mitigating flood risk can be effective planning with the experts in the said fields. Gender dimensions should be significantly considered in better pragmatic planning.

According to Enarson (2002), far from unmediated “natural” events arising from human settlements in an inherently uncertain environment, natural disasters are social processes precipitated by environmental events but grounded in historical development patterns and social relations, of which gender relations are a core component. The report further discusses how disaster resilience is strengthened by gender equality and highlighted the gender-based stereotypical ideas and their influence in disaster management-related unequal consideration of both women and men. It shows how women’s work in the informal sector is less considered in the livelihood recovering process after a disaster and at the same time, men’s need for emotional support in the post-disaster context is highly neglected because of the gender-based stereotypical ideas. Hence, what can be clearly understood is that gender dimensions are not clearly defined in terms of disaster management in many countries. This influences poor addressing of social needs which are based on gender distinction among disaster victims.

After May 2017, due to floods and landslides in Sri Lanka, the Rapid Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) was done by the Ministry of National Policies and Economic Affairs and the Ministry of Disaster Management. A number of concerns were identified in the aftermath of the 2017s floods and landslides, such as lack of gender-disaggregated data, safety (women’s and children’s) implicated/gender insensitive special arrangement of temporary shelters, inadequate psycho-social support to be free from post-disaster trauma, overall poor engagement of women in delivering the early warning, preparedness for response both at the community level and at the local officials’ level, livelihood displacement, etc. The assessment further shows the need for consideration of issues of immediate nature in the aftermath of the disaster along with long-term gender-sensitive and socially inclusive outcomes. Deliberate and sustained actions should be taken to ensure gender sensitivity and social inclusion of recovery needs to build back successfully. It encompasses the securing and privacy of women, enabling them with essential psychological, social, and economic support to repair the damages that they have encountered and disclosing attainable risk information to be prepared at the pre-disaster stage (PDNA 2017). This shows that the disaster-related discourse in

Sri Lanka has a shortage of gender-integrated backgrounds and this PDNA has positively contributed to the agglomeration of that knowledge.

Gokhale (2008) in her study of 'Role of Women in Disaster Management: An Analytical Study with Reference to Indian Society', shows that women are the highest vulnerable group in the disaster context due to the gender inequalities prevailing in Indian society. The study further shows that factors like traditional routine, gratuitous gender-biased oppression, and fewer resources in their own right and under their own control tend them to be more vulnerable to disasters. The study highlights, that though women play a considerable role as far as the use of resources is concerned, social and cultural values subordinate them without effectively considering their capabilities. Culturally certain beliefs and customs set aside women's active participation in disaster contexts without accounting for their capacities at the social level: notably, the disintegration of social patterns, less motivation, and disabling decision-making process keep them in the private sphere. Therefore, the author argues that the increased vulnerability of women, though primarily due to biological reasons, is also associated with factors that are socially and culturally deeply rooted in the community. She further categorized socio-cultural consequences that women are enduring in the disaster context, namely physical, emotional, and socio-economic impacts. Hence the above study of Gokhale (2008) provides certain important phenomenological background to the current empirical study as well.

De Silva and Jayathilaka (2014) in their project-based study in Sri Lanka, shows that women were more vulnerable to floods compared to men, due to various kinds of differences. Those are the differences in employment status, income, gendered social roles, social norms, and restrictions governing behaviour. As they showed, gender was neutral in the pre-planning of the subject project and the results have a positive improvement in the community. Yet the researchers emphasize the importance of considering gender to achieve inclusive outcomes that could be benefited both women and men through the said project. Gender sensitivity makes sustainable outcomes of any development project despite its basic nature or objectives. The study revealed that floods had a more direct impact on the livelihood activities of women than men. Yet they were not provided with any economic/financial support to build back better. Thus, the economic vulnerability of women has been totally neglected. The use of gender perspective could have reduced gender imbalances and gender gaps in the planning of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and the researchers elaborate on the future applicability and necessity of including gender perspective that most of the prior DRR projects lack.

Gender equality is one of the main endeavors for the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations (UN) organization and DRR is also no exception. The goals to be achieved by 2030 are being delayed by certain gender-based exclusions and discriminations that prevailed in the society. Disasters are destructive in nature and women are generally considered as a vulnerable group compared to men. Hence most of the studies have emphasized the need of protecting women in terms of ensuring the safeguarding of vulnerable groups as a basic ethic. Yet women are an empowered group and their cultural capabilities and adaptability going along with their 'femininity' can be positively used in disaster management stages, particularly in the post-disaster management stage. Therefore, the present study inquires the gap in the literature while understanding the capabilities and inabilities of women from a sociological perspective in disaster. The study further amalgamated gender-related mainstreaming discussion with the gender-empowering approach that needs an effective disaster management mechanism.

Methodology

The study employed an exploratory research design. Social science exploration is a broad-ranging, purposive, systematic, prearranged undertaking, designed to maximize the discovery of generalizations leading to the description and understanding of an area of social or psychological life (Vogt, 1999 q.f. Stebbins 2001). The exploratory research design is one which has the purpose of formulating a problem for more accurate investigation (Akhtar, 2016). A qualitative approach was adopted as it will help to adequately understand subject matter of women's role in disaster management. The researcher has used some of the main perceptions in qualitative research which are semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews and empirical observations.

The study area is *Mahabuthgamuwa-B* Grama Niladhari¹ (GN) Division located in *Kolonnawa Divisional Secretariat* (DS) of Colombo, Sri Lanka. The main reason for selecting the said field is that the sub-divisions of Kolonnawa DS are yearly experiencing flooding as urban areas are located nearby the *Kelani* River, one of the main rivers in Sri Lanka. Urban flooding disasters can be clearly visible in the said field. Through purposive sampling, a sample of 25 respondents was selected to conduct interviews and this sample consisted of 20 female respondents and key informants including 4 males and 1 female. The reasoning for using the purposive sampling method is to identify women's behaviour and engagement in times of flooding and to distinguish female leaders from mainstream society. Most of the

lower-middle class and lower-class people are living in the respective area and the class factor was also considered when selecting female respondents. Key informants were basically recruited from administrative authorities of the said division, two major religious organizations and from a community-based organization established in the area. The female key informant represented the said community-based organization. Administrative authorities are legally bound to community-related matters and 'religious leaders are playing a vital role in post-disaster management in Sri Lanka' (Samarakoon and Abeykoon 2017). Community-based organizations are grass-root power groups that are bound to the commoners in a particular area. These reasons influenced the selection of the key informants from the said sectors.

Result & Discussion

Socio-cultural Factors Determining Women's Adaptability and Vulnerability

The social, cultural, and economic vulnerabilities of women in terms of pre-disaster stage, disaster context, and post-disaster context were analyzed by using sociological concepts and theories. It was visible that the socio-cultural factors are dominating women's disaster adaptability and vulnerability. Even though economic vulnerability was considered a broad aspect of the vulnerability of women; it also depends on the socio-cultural factors of the particular field. As a result, it was found that women's livelihood activities were not found in outbound sectors, but in home-based small-scale businesses. Most of the respondents were housewives and they were engaged in self-employment activities such as sewing, small-scale gardening, shopkeeping, short-scale animal husbandry, etc. They are engaging in certain livelihoods to strengthen the household's economic capacity. Most of the husbands of the families are engaged in various income-earning activities within the area as well as in the central city of Colombo. Even though flooding has impacted many women's economies devastatingly, males' livelihoods were rather secure. Therefore, women were rather vulnerable in an economic sense compared to men. According to Birkman (2009), vulnerability in the disaster context can be dependent on physical conditions (i.e: primary and status of occupation) and social conditions (reproductive role of women, social norms, and restriction on mobility). Accordingly, due to the instability of livelihood protection, women are subjected to economic insecurities. It is further nourished by the socially constructed misconceptions which believe that women should stay away from earning livelihoods. This proves the following quote of the respondent of the field:

“I have studied up to grade 8 and married when I was 18. My friend offered me a job at a factory in my area. But my husband and my mother-in-law don't allow me to work as they believe that women should not work outside at home. So I have started a flower nursery with the financial support of the DS office. It was good enough to fulfill personal needs. But I had to stop my business due to flooding. Everything has been destroyed. Now I'm only merging in my household activities” (Filed Research, 2017).

Society is a complex structure, and it has no universal definition. According to Habermas (1962), a second-generation theorist of the Frankfurt School, society consists of two spheres, namely the public sphere and the private sphere (Habermas 1962 q.f. Garnham 2007). The public sphere is the mass society in that we are working, networking, expressing views, engaging in welfare activities, etc. The private sphere is the place where we are spending our personal life. Most of the time women are limited to the private sphere while men freely engage in public sphere-related activities. The above quote of a respondent shows the limitations that women are enduring. However, two main factors should be noted. One is that this limited women's role cannot be generalized to all Sri Lankan women. There is a considerable percentage of women in Sri Lanka who are educated and working in various sectors and contributing to the economy of the country at a higher rate. Some of the traditional ideologies are limiting women to their private sphere and it is depending on factors such as educational level, cultural background, gender-based stereotypical ideas etc. The second is that this outside work limitation does not necessarily mean that these women are less socially exposed. It means despite their joblessness, their contribution to disaster-related contexts management is extraordinary. Hence, this less economic empowerment of women makes them vulnerable in an economic sense, but not in the sense of social networking.

The second part of Birkman's definition shows the social conditions which are enforcing women's vulnerability. Biological factors are creating social constraints over women's activities and representation in destructive disaster events. As UNFPA Sri Lanka (2018) shows, Sri Lanka faced disasters that have left thousands of women and girls vulnerable, during and after emergency situations. They further state that in the wake of these disasters, families are left homeless, affecting their security, privacy, and hygiene. The report highlights important shreds of evidence that prove this vulnerability of women in crisis situations: One in five women of childbearing age is likely to be pregnant. Without access to reproductive health services, these women face an increased risk of life-threatening complications. In 2016, it is estimated that 63,750 women and girls of reproductive age and 3200 estimated pregnant women were affected by floods and landslides. These estimated

numbers have risen in 2017 to 179400 women and girls of reproductive age and 9400 estimated pregnant women. This proves that biological factors could influence the vulnerability of women, compared to men. These data were further proved by the research conducted in the field for the current study:

“When the flood came, my sister was pregnant and it was two weeks after I came home from the hospital with my newborn child. Even though we have experienced floods, managing my newborn baby was quite hard. My husband helped me a lot. But it was hard to manage post-partum care as it was hard to access supplies for my baby and sanitation facilities were not much there. I feared how my sister will endure those circumstances if she had to deliver her baby in those days” (Field Research, 2017).

This proves the hardships that women must endure due to their biological yet essential needs in an emergency. Those who are vulnerable must be prioritized in disaster management mechanisms, and necessities must be provided to them. However, few other respondents pointed out some issues they had in the disaster context. It is obvious that sanitary facilities for women are essential to be provided. However, some respondents stated that relevant authorities had provided the aforementioned facilities to one party but not the other (Filed Research 2017). This shows the need for proper monitoring of the equal distribution of said facilities. Otherwise, the essential biological needs will not be fulfilled, and they will be further vulnerable because of those unequal disaster relief facilitations.

This was further augmented because the researcher witnessed some cases pertaining to the point mentioned above. Even though the study is thoroughly based on the 2016 floods, the researcher was in the process of data collection when the 2017 flood came. Hence, the researcher conducted active observation in the field at that time to gain firsthand experience. Sanitary napkins are essential for women and girls and some external non-governmental organizations were there in the research field to facilitate women and girls by providing these sanitary needs. While some elderly women willingly took up those free sanitary goods, girls seemed reluctant to collect those goods publicly. Menstruation is a culturally taboo topic in certain Asian countries (Jalan et. al 2020). As far as concerned, Sri Lanka is no exception. This leads to menstrual poverty and further creates exclusion within society. The cultural taboos have bounded menstruation and also sanitary needs with social embarrassment. This socially created idea which is coming along with the women’s biological needs keeps them away from the places where these topics are taken into discussion. Therefore, the reason behind the reluctance of most of the girls in collecting those free sanitary goods even if they may need those goods in that critical emergency situation is that culturally defined ideology. Even in a disaster

situation, it may be challenging to alter. So the cultures rooted in the societies are affecting the vulnerability of women/ girls as well.

The present study is not limited to women's vulnerability-related socio-cultural factors. Socio-cultural factors are influencing the improvement of their adaptability in the disaster context. According to Douglas and Wildavsky (1982), vulnerability is defined on the basis of cultural structures which are created under people's interpretations (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982 q.f. Abeywardhana, 2020). Hence the definition of vulnerability by these scholars shows the interrelationship between culture and vulnerability. Abeywardhana (2020) in her study uses the above conceptualization of Douglas and Wildavsky and argues that people have neglected their risk towards flooding disasters because of their generalization over that disaster within their culture. In other words, the culture of vulnerability that they are enduring makes them adapt to that disaster. In the research field also this was visible, particularly among women. Living with the risk of disaster has adapted them to it, and their everyday living conditions have been modified to accommodate the risk.

"The people in this area are living with floods. When it especially talks about women, they are preparing like flooding will come soon when the rainy seasons are nearby. Most women groups are informally formed, and they are way better and way faster than us in managing flooding situations. While men are engaged in physically hard activities, women are planning and preparing how to spend those few days in the floods. I believe that they are used to those floods" (Field Research, 2017).

Based on the above statement of one of the key informants the adaptability of women towards flooding can be understood. It is a true point that they are at risk and generalizations about flooding may put them at a higher risk. But still, their disaster perception seems to be bounded by their culture of vulnerability. Some respondents highlight a point related to this argument. They always keep emergency essential documents set, covered in a plastic bag in a high place from the ground despite no confirmed flood occurrences. Another respondent stated that they have an emergency bag with clothes and medicine if they'll need it in a flood or any other emergency. But these practices are not common among them, and they have their own practices altered from others. In Japan, the emergency bag concept has been conveyed even to the children to effectively respond in a disaster. An emergency bag is a bag that contains the minimum essentials needed for the time being after evacuation in a disaster event (Ogata 2016). Risk culture is developed in that country, and everyone knows how to react to a disaster. Sri Lanka's case is different as there is no uniform responsive, preparedness, or resilience mechanism to deal

with the disasters. However, the individual preparedness practice is also minimally worth enough to reduce the negative impacts of disasters, at least to a certain extent. This adaptability and kind of preparedness are led by women due to their sense of precaution before the disaster occurs.

Women's Role in the Stages of Disaster Management

According to Ariyabandu and Wickramasinghe (2003), exploring specific capacities and vulnerabilities of men and women in disaster situations, and taking account of them, will improve the chance of success in development projects. According to Reid (2013), in America, a poor approach to the physical and economic sources and gender mainstreaming-related limitations are keeping their vulnerable status in disasters. Considering these backgrounds, it can be said that gender has been neglected in many instances and chronologically identified the need for gender-inclusive planning in disaster management. This further nourishes the strategic role that women can play in disaster situations. This can be understood in terms of disaster management stages. Disaster management consists of three main stages namely, pre-disaster, during the disaster, and post-disaster (Khan 2008). Women's gendered role strengths are highly important in dealing with all these stages. It means before disaster strikes women can contribute to disaster preparedness which directly influences disaster mitigation. When disaster strikes, she can join in the disaster response mechanisms by intervening in facilitating disaster relief and many more. The post-disaster context is the stage where rehabilitation and reconstruction activate, and women can actively contribute through the capacities that they inherited biologically and socially.

"Since I have experienced flooding every year so far, we know that we have to pass a hard time every year. That's why I've made up my mind to pass that period somehow. Even if it is not raining heavily, I'm trying to convince my husband and son to transfer valuable goods and other stuff to the part completed upstairs" (Field Research, 2017)

"When the flood strikes my mother, and all our elders are trying to protect us while our brothers engage hand in hand to help others affected by floods. I, my friends, and my relative female groups don't need to just witness flooding. We believe that we also can do something for our community. Every year we gather at the temple and cook food for the people collectively. Chief-incumbent leads and provides us with many essentials to do this service. We even distribute food packets by ourselves by taking a boat of our brothers" (Field Research, 2017).

The above-mentioned first quote is from a respondent in the field and she was a married woman for 34 years old. She and her husband were originally from the

same area that they are living in the present. Hence, they have witnessed flooding events for years. This has created a kind of disaster perception within them with regard to the flooding. It has influenced some generalizations of the risk, yet they themselves have understood and prepared for the disaster prior to any sort of pre-disaster awareness mechanism. The importance of this risk perception is that it was led by a female member of the house. Women rendered a significant contribution to the management of household responsibilities; including child development, health care and well-being, diet and nutrition, cleanliness, maintenance and so forth (Kapur 2019). Accordingly, women have these capabilities, and it positively influences even disaster management. These management skills would be helpful to prepare before disaster strikes. The first quote also further shows their adaptability and preparation in the pre-disaster stage. It was discussed in the first part of the analysis that women are being vulnerable to disasters due to certain biological factors. However, the above second quote of a respondent of the field questions that limitation itself. The researcher understood that age and cultural identity are bound by their representation in the disaster context. According to the available reports of the administrative officers, most of the married women in the field are unemployed, and they are limited to the household and some family-based boundaries. However, women below age 30 were not limited to their houses and they were engaged in disaster management-related activities despite their marital status. Apart from that, cultural identity has influenced their representation in disaster management-related activities.

The area comprises of multi-cultural community, namely Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Catholics. According to the viewpoint of a key informant of the community-based organization, most Catholic and Sinhalese girls/ women are actively engaging in disaster context-related activities compared to women from other cultural groups (Field Data 2017). This does not necessarily mean that certain cultural identities set them aside from moving with other ethnic communities in the public sphere. Yet it shows some less presentation of women from the said cultural communities in disaster management-related activities. Adams (2015) in his study based on Bangladesh society shows that there is considerable variability within and between religious communities regarding the social position of women. It can be applied in the Sri Lankan context as well. But it should be further clarified that the lower representation of females in disaster management is also associated with being minority groups in the area. Most of the minority groups are focusing on ethnic security in emergency situations particularly for creating safe social spheres for females. Hence, those factors are determining women's participation in terms

of their cultural identity in the disaster context. The influence of culture on disaster management can be generally discussed because of the tendency of doing those activities with the basis of a religious organization. The above second quote shows women's engagement in collective voluntary social services and they have used the temple of the village as the centre of organizing and planning those activities. For Buddhists, these activities are forms of merit-making according to their religion. The temple's chief incumbent supports them with the essentials and guidance showing the relationships between society and culture in the disaster context like in all other emergencies. However, this is not only limited to a gender group, and it always enforces culture-society relationships via religion.

The same quote of the respondent further shows the nature of the collectivity of the female groups in disaster management-related activities. They used to distribute those food packets by themselves without limiting themselves to the disaster risk. It is important to recognize that women are not just victims of disasters and there is significant evidence which demonstrates that women are powerful agents of change during and after disasters (GFDRR 2018). The current study clearly proves that point, as this group of women is not limited to the household but is actively working as agents of social change in this emergency situation while challenging mainstreaming gender-based impediments. In the post-disaster context, there are initiatives taken in response to a disaster with the purpose to achieve early recovery and rehabilitation of affected communities (Khan et. al. 2008). Apparently, it is prioritizing immediate reactions after the disaster strikes. Women's traditional role can be effectively used in the post-disaster period in terms of rebuilding and recovering from the losses of the disaster. In Turkey, the role of women in rehabilitation was clearly observed when a large number of communities were uninhabitable after the Gölcük earthquake (Işık et. al 2015). The same study further shows that women incurres towards disaster risk. Women were non-permitted (because of their gender) to participate in creating plans and scenarios, and their usefulness as resources in disaster management has been neglected in Turkey. That status can be seen in Sri Lanka as well. The majority of the experts in the planning sectors of many organizations are men and women contributing to decision-making can be rarely seen in the Sri Lankan disaster management mechanism. Their inherent capacity of contributing to managing post-disaster context was recently identified thus it was not much valued yet. The present study also reveals the capacity of women in terms of post-disaster management in the times of the 2016 floods.

'Temporary shelter management was quite hard due to the hardships people have endured. We have provided displaced people with essentials. Yet it was not easy to

manage them as they complained about the subsidies, their losses, and shortcomings in the shelters. However, after two days in the camp, people seemed calm and what we heard was that women intervened in camping management-related activities more than men' (Field Research, 2016).

The 2016 floods did not influence everyone in the same way. While middle-income range people with permanent settlements lived in their own houses (upper floors), lower-class people who had temporary or unstable houses had to be displaced by the disaster (Abeywardhana 2020). The above qualitative data was gathered from a male key informant of administrative sectors. Deconstructing this data paved the way to understanding women's productive role in post-disaster management. As previously mentioned, women can be vulnerable due to the destructive nature of the disaster, the economic loss, or the fearful experiences associated with the flooding. However, the way women have socialized in Sri Lanka with capacities such as inculcating femininity-related values, caring roles, and psychological supportiveness is very much important to psychologically adapt to the situation as well as helping their family members to endure inconveniences they had to face in the new environment in the temporary shelters. This of course is a relief to the temporarily displaced community to be free from insecurities rising with sudden displacement. According to Gokhale (2008), it is supposed that men are stronger both physically and emotionally, but it is evident that women are better capable of handling emotionally charged issues, physical pain, and stress. The current study further describes that the psychological strength and adaptability of women including situational management capacity are highly important in post-disaster management. This was further confirmed through the interviews administered with the respondents. Most of the women who are displaced temporarily mentioned that they were engaged in camping management as well as supporting men to build up their psychological fitness.

This is further confirmed by the chief incumbents of the selected religious places of the area who have been taken into consideration as key informants. Both of them have highlighted women's appropriate behavior in the flooding context needs to be valued and admired. They further appreciated their management capacities to deal with shortages of goods in the shelters as well as in the houses. However, it is important to be aware that 'attempts at promoting women's empowerment may face a backlash, as resistance to change norms can entrench those norms' even further (GFDRR 2018). Despite women's active and productive role they have played in the disaster context, the general norm of society will always try to keep them aside from being empowered in the normalcy after the destruction. Norms and values which are the driving forces of a culture may remain gender-resistant due to the

deep-rooted gender biases in Sri Lankan society. However, the success of post-disaster management lies in the addressing needs and issues of everyone despite their gender. In other words, the recovery of both men and women can transform societal gender-biased misconceptions as it opens opportunities for both. It further challenges mainstream gender-based discrimination and cut-offs of gender-based opportunities. Apparently, it could address gender-based vulnerabilities and empower women to engage in emergency situations without being unsecured due to the gender differentiations prevailing in society. A disaster could be destructive or highly risky, yet it does not discriminate against people based on any social or cultural factor. In the same way, women and men also should not be differentiated in disaster-induced situations and anyone should be valued despite their gender identity. However, the culture of respective societies can still slow down this progress by using so-called prejudices over men and women.

Conclusion

Overall, the study has explored the role of women in disaster management in terms of cultural and social impediments and strengths. The role of Sri Lankan women has been highly defined by the culture driven by Victorian ideologies. Women are vulnerable in a disaster context due to socio-cultural factors as well as biological factors. The mainstream gender discourse has considerably mis-conceptualized women's capabilities and weaknesses and somehow generalized most of those ideologies to all the women in the country. This can be highly questionable because of the active role that women play in many sectors of the country. Particularly in a disaster context, women's role cannot be underestimated as she is contributing to the well-managed disaster response. Disaster resilience and successful responsive mechanism cannot be fully initiated without the support of women. Male counterparts cannot achieve better results in disaster management without including women in responding the emergencies. According to the literature on this topic, it is acceptable that the physical capabilities of men are higher than women in some instances. But despite being vulnerable due to those physical capabilities, women are strong enough to deal with emergency situations without anxiety. Currently, Sri Lanka is in a good position in considering gender equality compared to the past. This gives some insights as well as credence towards enabling women's contribution in every field of development. This might positively influence gender-inclusive planning in every sector despite gender biases or gender-based discrimination. The need of valuing women's role in every sector shows how equity matters in

the socio-cultural backgrounds for the well-being of people. The experiences of Sri Lankan urban women in a flooding disaster context show that women cannot be subordinated in terms of gender. The proper inclusion of women in decision-making mechanisms, considering their experiences in disaster management, and empowering them by identifying their service in managing post-disaster context in terms of providing psychological relief as well as better care would effectively integrate women in the disaster context. Hence, the study indicates that gender-inclusive disaster management would enhance the perpetuation of the people by enabling everyone to contribute to society.

Note

1. A *Grama Niladhari* division (GN) is the primary administrative division of Sri Lanka. Public official is managing activities in the said divisions.

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