



Conference Report: Sept. 2006

Self-Organized Workshop Report: Women Affected by Natural Disasters

7th National Conference of Autonomous Women's Movement.

Co-ordinated by Tamil Nadu Women's Forum & Tamil Nadu Dalit Women's Movement

On the second day, i.e. on the 10th September in the parallel sessions the TNDWM and TNWF jointly organized a workshop on Women Affected by Natural Disasters. The workshop aimed to broad base the plight of women who were affected by Natural Disasters.

Context of the workshop

The tsunami that hit the coast of Tamil Nadu on December 26, 2004 took away lives and properties of thousands of fisher folks and non-fisher folks. The workshop provided a space to bring out the patriarchal values and dominance that discriminated women even during natural calamities and disasters. The workshop aimed to make the government understand its roles and responsibilities to treat everyone equally without bias and discrimination. It is a responsibility of the State to ensure equality irrespective of caste, class and gender.

The highlights

150 participants from various movements from all over India participated in the workshop. **Ms. Burnad Fatima** chaired the workshop. In the plenary there were speakers from the States of Gujarat, Kerala and Tamil Nadu that had either directly suffered or had witnessed the natural disasters of tsunami and earthquake.

In her presidential address Ms. Burnad Fatima, indicated that the secretary of UN Koffi Anan declares that everyone was affected equally during the tsunami disasters. In the tsunami the most affected were the women and children as revealed by the studies done Asian Women. But, the governments failed to take note of the gender component of the aftermath of the disaster. The most sufferers were the women who were totally ignored and left out from the relief and rehabilitation schemes. They were treated very badly in camps. In those camps there were no toilet facilities, sufficient lights and proper shelter in addition to the non-supply of enough food. The feeding mothers had no milk for the babies. The women had no change of clothes to keep

themselves clean and no lady doctor or Gynecologists was available to attend them. This was the initial struggle of women. However, their plight continued after they return to their places. The government failed to accept their loss and hence they did not receive any support from the government to rehabilitate them. The government refused to give the ration cards to those who lost the cards in tsunami that is very important for availing any government support. With the motivation of enabling the participants to arrive at a common consensus on the strategy to highlight the plight of women and to seek the state intervention to women issues during natural disasters, the plenary was requested to share.

Ms. Sabithapan from Tagorekoli village of Rajkot District in Gujarat shared that she is a landless agricultural worker. She has a small hut near a dam. When the earthquake in Gujarat occurred the hut immersed in the water from the dam. The government failed to consider her loss of residence; she had to starve for three days without food, shelter and clothing. An NGO from Gujarat helped her to rebuild her life. Her suffering due to

the governments in attitude was solely because of her being a woman.

Ms. Maglin from Kerala shared that the women were dumped together without sufficient space in primary schools that had very less accommodation and they were not provided with clothes. The children had no protection and delivery took place amidst the people in the same classrooms. The relatives were not allowed to meet their dead ones and to pay homage to the deceased. The survivors were sheltered in temporary sheds five to six families together. There was no proper toilet. Unhygienic conditions prevailed causing contagious diseases. In the relief camps women were not allowed. Houses constructed were in the name of men only. The women and children continue to stay away even now during high tides. In Kerala, the per capita income is calculated on the basis of men's income. The Coastal Regulation Zone norms are not followed and tourism promotional activities are being encouraged on the coastal areas leading to man made disasters. The government has failed to take in to account of the labour of women and has not compensated the women sufferers of tsunami and even the fish merchants that make use of the labour of women have not helped them to rebuild their lives. The sand quarrying operation further deprives their livelihood resources and caused more disasters.

Ms. Shanthi from Thiruvallur district of Tamil Nadu indicated that the women could not escape the tsunami disaster in Thiruvallur district since they are surrounded by water on every side. The government did not support the women and children. 30 families lost their belongings and livelihood sources. They live in a situation without any basic amenities of shelter, drinking water, clothing, toilet facilities, food, drainage, path way and electricity.

Ms. Christa, from Kerala shared that the ill legal sand quarrying and the tourism promotional operations on the coastal areas is the main factor for the women to suffer more during the high tides and other natural disasters. This leads to unemployment and migration for women. They need to be protected.

Ms. Magimai from Tamil Nadu shared that the tsunami disaster hit 13 districts of Tamil Nadu causing physical injuries to women, abortions

and trauma. The most affected were the Dalit and Irula women. The government failed to provide them any food and proper shelter. The mothers who lost their children suffered without the help of women doctors and without privacy. Since the shelter homes were constructed far away from their livelihood resource places the women and children had to suffer. The government compelled the women to undergo surgery. The Dalits and fisher folk women were separated and discriminated. The Dalits and Irulas did not get any support from the government.

Ms. Shanthi from Vellore District shared the outcome of the study in which she was a part of it. A study was organized in five districts in which Kanyakumari district was one of them. During the study the Dalit women shared that they were excluded by the government from the relief and rehabilitation since the government was of the opinion that fisher folk were the only affected victims of tsunami. The Dalit women who were engulfed by the tsunami water did not internalize the sand getting to their private parts. The harm was visible only during later days. There was clear gender discrimination in the relief and rehabilitation process of the government and the voluntary organizations.

Ms. Komala from Kancheepuram District expressed that the men were swift when the tsunami waves hit the coast. The women and children were slow to react and hence suffered more. The government failed to support the Dalit and Irula women that were involved in direct fishing or in fishing related allied works. Those who lost their livelihood resources indirectly by inundation of sea water did not get any support from the government even though the government announced relief for them.

Ms. Valarmathi from Nagai District who lost her husband and 10 other relatives to tsunami shared that the government was very slow in rescue operations. She condemned the mass burial indicating that it was an inhuman attitude. The women were given scant respect. The men who lost their wives got married again where as the women that lost their husband were discriminated. Many got remarried just because of the promise by the government that they would get a house. The children are totally ignored by such

parents and they lead a very miserable life in which the agony of the girl children is more.

Ms. Vanaja from Nagai District in Tamil Nadu revealed that the children got food only from the third day onwards. The women were not provided with inner garments and cleaning clothes. The health camps did not have women doctors and gynecologist adding misery to the suffering women. The re-surgery was done hectically without safety. Men were provided with relief and rehabilitation. There was clear gender discrimination that the government failed to look in to.

After the plenary the participants raised questions and basing on that they collectively evolved demands to be put forward to the governments to be adopted during the natural disasters.

Demands:

- We the members of 7th national conference of women's movements met on the 10th December at Kolkata in the workshop on women affected by natural disasters. We condemn the patriarchal attitude and the fundamentalist values thrust on women during natural as well man made disasters and draw the attention of the government to respond to the gender discriminatory issues during such calamities.
- We together urge the government to take into account of all the victim women that suffer any loss in the disaster irrespective of caste and creed.
- We demand the government to form a separate board for fishing communities with the representation from the fish working community.
- We demand the government to build strong and safe house in the name of the Dalit, Irula and fish folk women that are safe and protective during the disasters.
- We insist that fish-vending women be recognized as workers and included in the rehabilitation schemes of the government.
- We urge the government to waive the loan issued to the Dalit, Irula and fish worker women considering their current status of inability to reimburse.
- We demand the government that it should not compel any women to undergo re-family planning operation or any other surgery against her wish and without proper counseling.
- We urge the government to expedite the construction houses for all Dalit and Irula women that lost their huts to cyclonic rain and other disasters and the same should be constructed in the same area.
- We urge the government not to displace the Dalit, Irula and fisher folk women in the schemes of modernization, tourism promotion and housing. They need to be rehabilitated in their own living areas as they are depended on the livelihood resources.
- We demand the government to provide sufficient medical attendants including the gynecologist
- We urge the government to withdraw the mechanization and globalization process that take away the livelihood resources of the Dalit, Irula and fisher folk women.

For further inquiry, please contact to the secretariat of Tamil Nadu Women's Forum

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