Disaster and Gender:
The Indian Ocean Tsunami and Sri Lankan Women

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There is no occasion
for women to consider themselves
subordinate or inferior to men....

If nonviolence is the law of our being,
the future is with women...

- Mahatma Gandhi

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Structure of thesis

This thesis will be presented in a multimedia format. The motivation for employing a non-traditional approach rests upon key aspects of the visual communication theory which emphasizes that:

> Words and images… should have equal status within all media of communication. When this happens, the cultural cues that define a society will not only be more efficiently passed from one generation to the next, but within this generation, here and now, diverse cultures will be able to understand each other a little better (Elliott and Lester, 2002:11).

In this way, since this thesis deals with culturally sensitive notions of gender equality and power relations, the visual presentation of ideas will allow for more of a window into the lives of Sri Lankan women, in hopes of cultivating a deeper understanding of the present conditions which they face on a daily basis.

It is often argued that a picture is worth a thousand words. While this contention holds some weight, it neglects the fact that it is the picture's *meaning* that can inspire thousands of words, and most importantly, this *meaning* is contingent upon an interpretation of the image. The understanding of a photograph is, therefore, dependent on preconceived ideas shaped by the viewer's past experiences as well as cultural constructions, or, as John Berger argues, "the perception or appreciation of an image largely depends upon individual ways of seeing" (1972). In many cases, photographs are misunderstood when the context to the image is missing, resulting in the perpetuation of negative stereotypes, particularly in the realm of cross-cultural discourse. In order to remedy this discrepancy, this thesis will expand upon the philosopher Susan Sontag's assertion that "only that which narrates can make us understand" (1978:23). Similarly,

the following contention by John Berger has likewise influenced the choice of medium for this thesis:

> In the relation between a photograph and words, the photograph begs for an interpretation and the words usually supply it. The photograph, irrefutable as evidence but weak in meaning, is given meaning by the words. And the words, which by themselves remain at the level of generalization, are given specific authenticity by the irrefutability of the photograph. Together the two then become very powerful (1972:109).

Thus, this multidimensional form of storytelling will enable the viewer to determine their own course of knowledge by selecting the different themes, which will pave the route of this multifaceted narrative.

Thesis Research

➔ **Background to the research problem**

This thesis explores the concept of gendered vulnerability and related theories that provide a contextual background to the Indian Ocean tsunami. Although theories of vulnerability have existed for the past three decades, the mainstream response to a natural hazard continues to be, by and large, a technocratic one. Thus, in the wake of the devastating tsunami, much attention was directed towards technocratic solutions such as an early warning system, while turning a blind eye to the socio-cultural environment that constructs a gendered vulnerability for the women in Sri Lanka. This vulnerability is rooted in the patriarchal lens through which society sees women, whereby the social construction of gender relegates them to a subordinate status in social, economic and political spheres.

➔ Thesis statement and significance

The starting point for this thesis includes the real experiences of women before, during and after the tsunami. It will adopt a theoretical approach that focuses on the question of how the Indian Ocean tsunami exposed deeply entrenched socio-cultural practices that perpetuate gender inequalities in Sri Lanka, making women more vulnerable to natural disasters. Through a feminist theory framework, it will argue that the social production of gender in Sri Lanka contributes to an increased vulnerability to natural hazards among women.

In order to do so, this research will first identify and analyze literature on disaster and vulnerability theories and practices in the context of feminist critiques. Secondly, it will examine the research literature relating to Sri Lanka's historical evolution in its social, cultural and religious systems which underpin the current practices that situate women as inferior to men. Finally, it will evaluate primary sources of data collected during field visits in Sri Lanka throughout a volunteer experience from July 2006 to June 2007. The data collected is in the form of semi-structured interviews, field notes (journal and online blog), images and video. The personal accounts from these women will allow for a deeper understanding of the present-day situation for low-income, coastal women in southern Sri Lanka.

One underlying argument put forth by vulnerability theorists on disaster literature is that in the disaster context, gender is typically rendered an unimportant component of the many stages leading up to, during, and in the aftermath of the natural disaster (Bankoff et al., 2004; Blaikei et al., 2004; Bolin et al., 1998; Enarson & Morrow, 1998). This contention is most clearly illustrated by the international media, which covered

nearly every aspect of the tsunami, from the tremendous global reach in the form of financial aid and relief and reconstruction operations; the disaster's effect on the economy particularly on the tourist and fishing industry; the environment, and even its implications on wildlife was documented. However, the tsunami's effects on women, one of the most vulnerable population groups, received little or no public attention, (Abirafeh and Tychostup, 2005). With that said, this thesis aims to contribute to the dialogue on the urgency of incorporating women's voices in disaster mitigation and management. It is often argued by vulnerability theorists that with the tragedy and devastation following a disaster, a window of opportunity for introducing new values is opened (Fothergill, 1998). Therefore, by incorporating an explicit gender component to all stages of disaster relief and rehabilitation operations, gender roles and relations that perpetuate the vulnerability of women can be addressed.

Operating from a feminist perspective, this thesis shares the point of view put forth by vulnerability theorists that disaster mitigation needs to address the roots of vulnerability rather than looking for technical solutions. Therefore, unequal power structures need to be challenged within a culturally sensitive framework in order to avoid the negative repercussions that have resulted time and time again, where gender inequalities have not only been sustained, but as the Indian Ocean tsunami exposed, they have also been exacerbated.

➔ **Objectives and Goals**

The overall goal of this thesis is to bring attention to the multifaceted nature of gender inequalities that are intensified when a natural disaster strikes. In this way, this thesis

aspires to contribute to the dialogue and action on gender issues in the disaster framework. The multimedia format of this thesis was chosen, in part, so that it could reach a larger audience and thus spread awareness to the mainstream public as well as academics and professionals working in this field.

As the Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan once said: "The medium is the message" (Elliott and Lester, 2002:9). In other words, too often we focus on the obvious problems, overlooking the structural changes that occur over long periods of time. The case of the Indian Ocean tsunami exemplifies this assertion, as the prevailing attention was attributed to technological solutions, such as an early warning system, completely disregarding the underlying structural roots of vulnerability. The unprecedented international response to the tsunami surpassed any previous humanitarian disaster in terms of financial aid and relief operations (de Mel, 2007). While this global response was, for the most part, attributed to good intentions and commendable efforts, a report by the International Federation of the Red Cross stated that "scores of international donor agencies rushed in without adequate strategic planning, competed with each other, refused to share information and neglected to consult local people" (IFRC, 2005:103). It is difficult to assess the long-term ramifications attributed to this potentially gender-blind and culturally-insensitive response, though it is safe to conclude that it is imperative that women's voices be heard, as they have, by and large, suffered the greatest burden in the post-disaster environment (Rees et al, 2005).

➔ **Scope, limitations & assumptions**

This thesis explores the nature and reality of gendered vulnerability of Sri Lankan women in respect to the tsunami. It should be noted that since the time of data collection, the thesis has taken a different trajectory. When the interviews were conducted with women in southern Sri Lanka, they were organized around the objective of examining the implications of microfinance loans for women affected by the tsunami. Despite the fact that the thesis now deals with a separate issue, much of the data collected remains applicable as the interview questions were quite broad in scope. Furthermore, this thesis also utilizes pre-existing research, including reports from the Government of Sri Lanka, the United Nations, the World Bank and other international institutions in addition to publications by a number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local women's organizations.

There were various limitations to the methodology employed in this research. First and foremost, at the time of research collection, as was previously mentioned, the interview questions were framed around an entirely different thesis topic, and thus only a portion of the primary data is relevant and applicable. Moreover, much of the thesis relies on the analysis of pre-existing literature, be it scholarly or non-academic, paving the way for undoubted biases, particularly in the case of reports published by global institutions, NGOs, and governments.

Given the non-traditional approach of this thesis, in addition to its focus on the multifaceted problem of gendered vulnerability, it is simply not feasible to go into great depth on all the contributing factors. Undoubtedly, the nature of gendered vulnerability and subordination is shaped by specific historical, political, economic and socio-cultural

conditions as well as patriarchal power relations. Since this thesis seeks to shed light on the deeply entrenched socio-cultural practices that situate women as inferior to men, rather than simply examining the surface-level manifestations of women's vulnerability to the tsunami, a historical overview is pivotal. Nevertheless, it is not feasible given the time, length and scope of this thesis to go into detail on all significant issues, so it will instead, focus on the most relevant topics.

➔ **Methodology**

A. Study Area and Methodology

As part of my co-operative component of my International Development Studies undergraduate program at the University of Toronto at Scarborough, I was placed by the Canadian NGO World University Service of Canada (WUSC) with Ruhunu Rural Women's Organization (RRWO) in Weeraketiya, Sri Lanka. Weeraketiya, President Rajapakse's home village, is located approximately 14 kilometers from the nearest town, Tangalle, in the southern coast of the island, some 200 kilometers from the capital city, Colombo. RRWO is a partner organization of the Uniterra volunteer program of WUSC, and my mandate was to help strengthen the internal capacity and sustainability of RRWO and to increase the effectiveness of its services to its members (approximately 3,500). My main responsibilities included networking with new donors, training the staff in project planning and management, particularly in proposal writing, as well as helping them improve their English and computer skills.

B. Research Participants and Data Analysis

The participants of this research study were selected from two coastal tsunami-affected villages near Tangalle, and were all members of RRWO community-based organizations (CBOs). In this way, I was able to conduct my research under RRWO's umbrella. As was previously mentioned, at the time of research collection, the interviews were organized to collect information relevant to RRWO's microfinance program, in particular to examine the implications of loans to women who were married to fishermen who are from the *goyigama,* or cultivator caste in Sri Lanka. Prior to selecting participants, I presented my research objectives to the two CBOs. After outlining the ethical code of conduct to the women, from those willing to participate, 14 were chosen.

Interview questions were organized around the themes of gender roles, household composition, landownership, marriage, domestic violence, education, income-generating activities, monthly income and expenditure, and participation with RRWO. Individual interviews were held with women who shared the same ethnic (Sinhalese), religious (Buddhist) and socio-economic status. The women ranged in age from 28 to 63 years. All of the women were married, with 45% of the marriages having been arranged marriages. Although 20% of them had become widows, none of them had re-married. All of the women were mothers, with two to four children. All the women's husbands were involved in the fishing industry, either as fishermen (75%), or as labourers at the harbour (25%). When asked whether they had ever been on a boat, or had learned to swim, only a couple (15%) had ever been on a boat and swam, though in both scenarios, it was a one-time ordeal. The other women reported being too shy or worried about village gossip to partake in these activities.

In terms of landownership, most of the women (85%) lived on property that was neither under their name nor their husband's name, but rather under their husband's parents or brother's name. None of the homes were affected by the tsunami, as they were located atop a hill where the water ceased to reach. The women all contributed to the household income, with the majority of them (80%) being engaged in the coir industry (coconut rope making), or in their own businesses (20%) – selling lunch packets and as a tailor. Through their RRWO membership, all of the women had received loans, ranging from Rs 1000 to Rs 15,000[1]. Only one woman (7%) used the loan for her own business, while the other women (93%) gave the loan to their husbands for new fishing nets or in one case, to repair his bicycle. In this way, the burden of the loan repayment remained in the women's hands, despite the fact that they had no control over earning the income to repay the loan. A minority of the women had worked abroad as domestic workers in Middle Eastern countries, ranging from two to four years, in order to save money to build their home. A few women dreamed of working abroad, but their husband's did not allow them to. In one case, after much persuasion, a woman – Nilu[2], had persuaded her husband into allowing her to work abroad, but during her time away, he started drinking heavily, and consequently their prior harmonious marriage has now become one of verbal and physical abuse. A few other women, (30%) had confessed verbal and physical abuse, ranging from being hit to marital rape, and in most cases, they associated the abuse with alcohol or financial stress.

The women all shared a similar day-to-day routine, which started between 4am and 5:30am when they would wake up in order to make tea for their husbands and family.

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[1] Rs 1000 = 9.4 $Cdn http://www.x-rates.com/calculator.html
[2] Names of research participants have been changed to protect confidentiality

This would be followed by cooking breakfast, and in many cases the lunch as well, so that they make a packet to give to their husband's who worked too far from the home to return for lunch. In the case of younger children, the mothers would prepare them for school, and often help with their homework in the afternoon. The rest of the afternoon would be spent on household chores (cleaning, fetching water from a nearby well, washing clothes at the nearby pond, etc) and livelihood activities (rope-making in groups of three). In the evening, they would cook dinner and watch TV with their husbands and children. Every participant except for one had a TV, even though they often struggled on a daily basis to make ends meet. It is interesting to note that the first major non-essential purchase by low-income villagers is typically a TV set, and in some cases when they would have insufficient funds, their jewelry would be pawned in order to finance this purchase.

C. Interview Process

The location for interviews was selected by the RRWO CBO leader, as she had a greater understanding of the most convenient location for the women. In both villages, the interviews were held at the CBO president's home, and information about the time and location was disseminated by word of mouth. This casual broadcasting of information led to some confusion; hence fewer women than anticipated were interviewed. The interviews were conducted in Sinhala by my translator, a Sinhalese woman who shared ethnic and religious status, though she was from a slightly higher caste than participants. The interviews were semi-structured, and most questions were open-ended. All interviews took place during a two week period in April, 2007.

My aim was to pose critical questions that would allow for an insight into the daily lives of the women, and what the implications were from their participation with RRWO's microfinance program. This study took into account ethical guidelines, and therefore oral consent was obtained from all the participants. Additionally, all participant's names and identities have been concealed to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

Roughly 70 questions were asked (see Appendix A), though in many cases, not all questions were relevant to the participant, and thus they were left unanswered. Women could refrain from answering any questions, though none did this. The interviews lasted around one to one and a half hours in length, and were conducted in the Sinhala language. During the initial interviews, my translator would translate back and forth between the participant and myself, but I quickly decided that it was too time-consuming, so I resorted to video-taping the remaining interviews. Once all the interviews had been conducted, my translator and I watched the footage together and the interviews were translated and transcribed, though most of the translation was paraphrased due to time constraints and practicality. For the most part, the women shared their life stories willingly and openly, though in the initial interviews, much of the data pertaining to their expenditures and incomes appeared to be inconsistent. When I inquired about this inconsistency to my translator, she explained that it was a common characteristic, in the post-tsunami context, that when locals are approached by foreigners, they assume it will have an economic benefit, so in this case, the women may have skewed their expenditures and incomes in attempts to demonstrate their need for financial aid. Universally, the issue of money conjures up feelings of uneasiness and discomfort; poverty is likewise an extremely

sensitive issue, hence it is understandable that the women may have felt awkward when answering this intrusive question.

D. Positioning the Researcher

My role as a foreign young woman was certainly subjected to local perceptions that presumably, were most recently shaped by their experience with the myriad of international organizations that had flocked to the island in the post-tsunami context. During my 11 month stay in Sri Lanka, not a day flew by when the word "tsunami" was not articulated – a word that prior to the December 2004 calamity, had been completely unheard of in the local tongue. This word, for the most part, became loosely associated with foreign donations, and consequently many of my first-hand interactions with the locals related to assumptions that I too worked for an INGO and thus had a reserve of money readily available to donate towards anyone and everyone affected by the tsunami. For this reason, I selected participants who were all RRWO members and had been informed by an RRWO field officer that participation in my research would not result in any monetary exchange. Moreover, during all of the interviews, I was accompanied not only by my translator, but also by the RRWO field officer in charge of the specific CBO in the village. With that said, it should be noted that the images and anecdotes presented in this thesis are directly related to my experience, which was shaped by a number of factors such as my immersion with the local culture (residing with a local family), my proficiency in the national language, Sinhala, and of course ascribed physical features such as my race, nationality, sex, age and educational status. Undoubtedly, my presence and position could have potentially biased participants to withhold or provide false

information. On the other hand, as I operated through RRWO, which has a positive reputation in the villages where I researched, the participants may have felt more at ease disclosing their life stories to myself, a seemingly neutral woman, who would not spread village gossip. It is incredibly difficult to assess the influence that my presence and position have had on my research, but undeniably, my personal experiences have shaped the structure of this thesis.

E. Images and Video

In a country where politics permeates everything, who you know is paramount. Hence, many of the images presented here are a result of opportunities that, for the most part, foreigners would not have had access to. Although my camera became an extension of my hand and I was constantly photographing my surroundings, I would always assess the situation with the utmost respect for those around me. In situations where I sensed discomfort or awkwardness, most often through body language and facial expressions, I would refrain from taking the picture. As a rule, I would print out photographs and give them to the locals whom I had become acquainted with, as it seemed like the most appropriate way of giving back to the community. Many of the research participants did not own a picture of themselves, except for their wedding photos, and thus were surprised and delighted with their new gift. In regards to the video footage, my initial motivation for filming the interviews was to facilitate the transcription process. Keeping to the ethical guidelines inherent to the research process, I was sure to obtain permission by all participants so that the footage could be viewed publicly. As my thesis took a different trajectory, I deemed it a powerful tool to incorporate into the overall project, as it would add an audio-visual dimension to this cross-cultural dialogue.

Theoretical approach to thesis

➔ **Vulnerability theory**

The unprecedented global response to the Indian Ocean tsunami sheds light on the fragility of the human condition in relation to the natural environment. Much of this philanthropic response may be attributed to the fact that among the scores of indigenous victims were foreign tourists, evoking fear, anxiety and a sense of helplessness against the might of nature to those in the West, who may have never before been directly affected by a natural disaster (de Mel, 2007). The international reaction to the tsunami, and other natural disasters in general, was mediated through various cultural, religious and ideological viewpoints, and was reinforced by popular and media interpretations that focused on the naturalness of the disaster. Consistent with widespread natural disaster explanations, the centre of attention gravitated towards the idea that disasters are simply unavoidable extreme physical events that require technocratic solutions (Varley, 1994; Bankoff et al, 2004).

This dominant paradigm is substantiated by the United Nations (UN) and multilateral funding agencies such as the World Bank, who occupy the highest ranks of national and international decision-making power, as is highlighted in the UN resolution declaring the 1990s as the "International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction" (Bankoff et al, 2004:29; Cannon, 1994:16; Hewitt, 1995:118). According to Mitchell (1990:147), the approach taken by this declaration involves:

> A narrow view of hazard and hazard reduction… the concept of… interaction among physical risks and human responses is largely bypassed in favour of a focus solely on physical risks… [with] expansive and optimistic assumptions about the role of natural science and engineering knowledge in the hazards policy arena.

This position is shared by a majority of literature on natural disasters, and assumes that disasters are departures from 'normal' social functioning, and that recovery therefore entails a return to this state of 'normality' (Blaikei et al., 2004). The foundation for this point of view can be attributed to early research into natural disasters, which was instigated by Samuel Prince, who studied the implications for social change in the munitions explosion in Halifax harbour in 1920 (Oliver-Smith, 1999). Soon after, social scientists began to approach disasters as unpredictable and extreme happenings that fell upon human communities.

During the 1970s and 1980s an alternate hypothesis emerged, describing the classical model as problematic as it inevitably leads to the oversimplification and neglect of significant components of disasters. In particular the social structures that produce inequalities of gender, ethnicity and class (among others), that, in turn, produce vulnerability to hazards (Blaikei et al. 1994; Hewitt 1997). Central to this competing theory is the notion that history prefigures disasters, and that populations are rendered vulnerable by overarching social structures that place certain individuals and groups at greater risk of exposure to natural hazards (ibid; Bankoff et al. 2004). According to Blaikei et al (1994: 10)

> Disasters are produced by the complex mix of social, political, and economic forces that produced vulnerability of people to hazardous environments. Important here is the focus on human agency as expressed in culturally reinforced social practice. That is, the specific things people do, situated in time and space, affect their vulnerability to various kinds of natural hazards.

Therefore, while hazards are natural, disasters only strike when it has an effect on vulnerable people (Cannon, 1994).

The term *vulnerability* is defined as "the characteristics of a person or group and their situation that influence their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural hazard" (Blaikei et al, 2004:11; Fordham, 1998). Vulnerable groups are often categorized under age, class, ethnicity, gender and physical or mental disability. Depending on the nature of the hazard and the socio-cultural context, different groups are more vulnerable than others.

One such population group is women - in particular women from a low socio-economic status. For the most part, vulnerability theorists agree that women are the population most at risk when hazardous conditions unfold as disastrous events. However, as Enarson and Morrow (1998) contend, disaster research in the U.S. has failed to adequately engage in feminist theory or gender analysis (1998; Fothergill, 1998; Ikeda 1995). Therefore, in order to effectively address the implications of the Indian Ocean tsunami on Sri Lankan women, it is necessary integrate the fundamental ideas stemming from feminist theory, that, according to Kalwant Bhopal:

> Emerged as [an] important area of study… [and] attempted to explain the position of women in society; the limited access of women to economic, social and political power, the nature of the sexual division of labour and those social expectations about the behaviour of women which limit and inhibit their achievements (1997:1).

➔ **Feminist theory**

Feminist theory is a system of concepts, propositions and analysis that seeks to understand women's situations and experiences in order to improve them (Code, 2000). The first feminist document was introduced in 1792 by Mary Wollstonecraft in her critically acclaimed book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Since that time, feminist theory has been constantly evolving to encompass a variety of disciplines including anthropology, sociology, economics, philosophy, history and development, and will presumably continue to change as it is redefined by different groups (ibid). Largely influenced by feminist perspective, the feminist movement (also known as the women's movement or women's liberation) is a series of campaigns aimed at breaking the silence on women's issues by using national and international law and the state to initiate and enforce social change (Nelson and Robinson, 1999). Put differently, this social movement focuses on limiting or eradicating gender inequality and promoting women's rights, interests and issues in society. Advocates of this movement have insisted that their personal struggles stem from social, not individual problems, thereby popularizing the phrase 'the personal is political' which involves a re-definition of power and politics. In other words, this movement challenges the assumptions of political theory, which is itself seen as an instrument of male domination that justifies or conceals the reality of male power and its basis in 'private' life (Bhopal, 1997).

Despite the myriad approaches within the feminist debate, the foundation of this theory holds that women are oppressed on the basis of their gender due to dominant patriarchal ideology (Steward, 2003). In contemporary feminism, the concept of patriarchy has received considerable attention and has been subjected to a number of

different interpretations. The root of the word patriarchy stems from two Greek words –
'*pater*' meaning father and '*arche*' meaning rule[3]. While recognizing the debates
surrounding the implications of this concept, for the purpose of this project, it will be
defined as a system where male power, domination and control over women results in
and maintains unequal power relations between men and women (Jaggar and Rothenburg,
1984).

Closely related to this term is Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony' which
refers to the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in
social life (Gramsci, cited in Connell, 2005:78). In relation to the ideological production
of gender, hegemony relates to the dominance of one group, in this case men, and the
subordination of the other group - women. Although Gramsci did not specifically refer to
any gender issue, and in fact concentrated his discussion of women within domestic and
sexual activity in relation to the economic realm, hegemony has become an important
tool for feminist analyses of patriarchy (Code, 2003). This point is likewise related to
Amartya Sen's contention that the question of power is central to gender inequality,
"where the more powerful party, men, obtains a more favourable division of the family's
overall benefits and chores and is also able to exercises power and control over others in
the family" (Sen, 2005). In her application of Sen's concept of power to the household,
feminist scholar Deniz Kandiyoti argues that:

> One reason for continued inequality within the household is that is that the weaker
> party (women) often speaks and acts in support of this inequality… women may
> perceive that it is in their interests to maintain and support existing power
> relations, even though such belief and behaviour are in reality harmful to them
> (1988:25).

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[3]William D Mounce, *The Morphology of Biblical Greek*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 209

Along this line of reasoning, a woman may remain in an abusive marriage if the alternative to that is perceived as worse, including a loss of children, economic support and societal stigmas on divorce (Gopalakrishnan and Mehta, 2007). However, as feminists across the globe have highlighted, patriarchal hegemony does not rely only on violence to maintain women's subordinate role, but by the same token, the structural institutions of the state, religious institutions, the media, the school, the household and greater society facilitate this gendered inequality by confining women to familial positions such as daughter, wife and mother (Jayawardena & de Alwis, 1996). The two aspects of power resulting from the system of patriarchy is that of sexual privilege – the right of men to control women's sexuality, including reproductive rights, and that of economic privilege, the right to control women's labour and earnings. Both of these aspects of power existed in the Sri Lankan past and continue to exist in the present society (Grossholtz, 1984). According to Malathi de Alwis:

> Sri Lankan women are subject to patriarchy in the family, workplace and society. In the family, the power over women exercised by fathers/husbands/sons, and women's subordination to male authority, are features of society which laws may be unable to deal with, since patriarchal tradition permeates the culture (2000:153).

Hence, it is critical to engage in feminist thought, as Sri Lankan society is structured in a patriarchal manner. The unequal gender relations stemming from this patriarchal structure is a fundamental ingredient in the fabrication of vulnerability amongst women prior to natural disasters. In addition, in the aftermath of a disaster, this patriarchal system continues to reproduce women's vulnerability, often exacerbating her risk of exposure to the most extreme manifestation of inequality – violence.

In order to employ key notions within a feminist perspective, it is important to first highlight the numerous factions within the school of thought; all of which focus on different components within the overall discussion.

➔ **Liberal Feminism**

As was previously mentioned, the roots of feminism stem back to ideas put forth by Mary Wollstonecraft, who argued for gender equality in the sense of equal opportunity for women and men, irrespective of the nature of biological sex differences (Friedan, 1963). This early feminist approach is known as liberal feminism, and seeks to reform the laws and customs that have excluded women, arguing for equality of opportunity and freedom in political, economic and social spheres, whereby no disproportional power or privilege is ascribed to either sex (Steward, 2003). Despite the successful removal of a number of legislative barriers facing women as well as improving women's status through reforms in welfare, education and health, this theoretical position has been criticized for focusing exclusively on the legislative aspects of patriarchy, while failing to explore issues of race and class (Jaggar, 1983). In the case of Sri Lanka, women do not face the same serious inequalities in regards to access to welfare, education and health that other South Asian women do (de Alwis, 2000). Thus, while this faction of feminism has paved the way for important advances of women across the globe, its narrow focus fails to adequately address women's vulnerability in the case of natural disasters.

➔ **Marxist and Radical Feminism**

The shortfalls in liberal feminism led to the development of a Marxist feminist analysis, which, based upon Marxist thought, maintains that capitalist class structure and the emphasis with private property is responsible for gender-based inequality and oppression (Hartmann, 1993). In other words, this theory married the capitalist system to the institution of family, focusing on women's financial dependence on men as a result of the unequal opportunities within the workplace, as well as the challenges in realizing women's domestic work as 'real work.' While the gender division of labour in Sri Lanka is an underlying cause of women's vulnerability, this approach is limited to the economic system, and thus overlooks other important elements within the overall female discussion. Closely related to his approach is the school of Radical feminism[4], which derives from criticisms of both Liberal and Marxist approaches, and argues that society must be changed at its core, and that nothing short of a revolution in human consciousness that dismantles patriarchy can bring about women's full liberation (Code, 2000). Again, while this school of thought provides critical insight, the lack of a pragmatic approach, renders it insufficient to an understanding of women's vulnerabilities.

➔ **Socialist Feminism**

Socialist feminism, which bridges together components of Marxist, Radical and Third World feminisms, explains the origins of women's oppression with the interaction of both capitalism and patriarchy, arguing that the gender-based inequality takes different

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[4] Within this theorization, there are two sections: radical-libertarian and radical-culture (see Code, 2000; Jaggar and Rothenberg 1984; Stewart, 2003).

forms in different settings, and that these differences are of utmost importance (Ehrenreich, 1976). An integrative approach to problems of race, class, gender, sexuality and age, Socialist feminism seeks to understand sexism as it affects women's lives within the historical context of capitalism as well as intersecting inequalities among multiple oppressions and their various manifestations: economic, social, and domestic (ibid). Unlike radical feminism, socialist feminists refuse to treat economic oppression as secondary; unlike Marxist feminists they refuse to treat sexist oppression as secondary. (Humm, 1995). While no body of literature is without its weaknesses, the Socialist feminist approach is useful as it poses questions about the interconnections between systems of domination (Hartmann, 1993). Nevertheless, it is pivotal to take into consideration the downfalls of this perspective, which were highlighted by feminists in the Third world.[5]

➔ Postcolonial and Third World Feminism

In response to the widespread criticism in the 1980s and 1990s which held that feminist theory was derived from and directed towards privileged white middle-class women, new perspectives arose taking into consideration the diversity of female experiences across the globe (Parpart, 1993). Among the numerous new schools of thought are Postcolonial[6] and Third World feminist theories, which challenge Western feminism for being Eurocentric and universalizing the female experience (Collins, 1993).

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[5] I use the term Third World with great apprehension, adopting it as shorthand for describing three regions – Africa, Latin American and Asia – with the understanding that these areas, while exhibiting certain similarities, have many differences as well. The term is not to be seen as an assumption that Third World peoples, especially women, can be lumped together in one undifferentiated category

[6] Other similar perspectives include Black feminism, African feminism, Global feminism, and Postmodern feminism. For more information on the differences between these theories, see Code, 2003; Humm, 1995

As a result, widespread recognition has transpired, acknowledging that while women share certain commonalities, women's issues differ according to class, ethnicity, race, religious and cultural norms, as well as a historical legacy of slavery and colonialism. Such views have led to the dismissal of feminist theory as inappropriate to Black and Third World women, as Chandra Mohanty persuasively concludes:

> [Western feminists]… colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/re-presenting a composite, singular 'third-world woman' – an image which appears arbitrarily constructed but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of western humanistic discourse… assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality on the one hand, and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of western scholarship on the 'third world' in the context of a world system dominated by the west on the other, characterize a sizeable extent of western feminist work on women in the third world (1988:62-3).

Consequently, one of the greatest challenges faced by feminist organizations in the Third World today is in claiming a non-Western position and non-Western domination to their own feminist approaches (Bhopal, 1997). According to Malathi de Alwis (2002b), this predicament often leads to the search for indigenous proto-feminists in the past such as "rebellious queens, stoic Buddhist nuns or fiery poetesses" (2002b:493). At the same time, she argues that one of the greatest strengths of the feminist movement is in their internationalism, which has provided a sharing of ideas and experiences transcending national borders, as well as the formation of international alliances – a tradition sustained by contemporary Sri Lankan feminists (ibid).

The quest for a more pluralistic feminism created somewhat of a paradox, as advocates of the feminist movement profess solidarity for women worldwide, cultivating

a sense of sisterhood and common oppression, while at the same time seeking to incorporate the multiplicity within women's experiences (Nelson & Robinson, 1999). Put differently, while feminists argue that the patriarchal social structure is one in which women are systematically dominated, exploited and oppressed, at the same time, they are also realizing that patriarchy and its manifestation can only be understood within cultural and historical contexts.

With that said, the theoretical position of this project will incorporate a combination of elements within the feminist debate, with the hopes of addressing the unequal and often violent relationships between men and women, in which women's subordinate position in society is perpetuated by the ideological production of gender. Hence, a mixed feminist theoretical framework with an emphasis on Sri Lankan feminist perspectives will be applied to examine the deeply embedded structural roots which position Sri Lankan women in an inferior status within the patriarchal society, that results in the production and reproduction of vulnerability in the case of natural disasters.

➔ **Gendered Vulnerability**

Consistent with key contentions put forth by vulnerability theorists, the Indian

Ocean tsunami revealed the pre-existing subordinate position of women within Sri

Lankan society as regrettably the largest number of people who perished was women and

girls (Oxfam, 2005; Pittaway, 2007). This gendered vulnerability is deeply embedded in

patriarchal values and the social production of gender within social structures, position

women inferior to men. It is often argued that cross-culturally, gender power and

privilege shape the division of labour in daily routines, including control over land and

resources, housing conditions, access to education and training programs, the use of

public spaces, health services and recreation, control over one's body, expressions of

emotion and sexuality, and of course, religious, political, economic and military

institutions (for more info, see Connell 2005; Fordham, 1998). As Anderson (1998:8)

points out: "Gender analysis makes it clear that women are vulnerable not because it is

their physical nature to be weak but because of the arrangements in societies that result in

their poverty, political marginalization and dependence on men" (1998 cited in Enarson

and Morrow, 1998:49). In this way, gendered roles that identify women as primary

family caregivers, as well as place them in social isolation or a lack of mobility within the

public sphere contribute to their risk exposure and vulnerability (Bolin et al. 1998).

Sri Lankan women, be they Sinhalese, Tamil, or Muslim, continue to be

constructed as the reproducers, nurturers, and disseminators of tradition, community, and

nation. The main ideological message emanating from the rigid patriarchal system, which

cuts across ethnic and religious lines, is that women's roles must be that of a 'good wife'

and 'mother'. According to anthropologic fieldwork by Carla Risseeuw, Sri Lankan

women are:

> Respected, loved and praise when they conform to the ideal of the virtuous mother and dutiful wife, but girls are taught to see their fertility and menstruation as a state of impurity and sign calling for her 'responsibility to guard her virginity and her good name (1988:133).

The social construction of gender roles is revealed through a wide range of cultural practices and representations, which are embedded in the patriarchal lens through which society sees women.

The concept of 'gender' as social, as opposed to 'sex' as biological, was first used by feminist sociologists to describe the social construction of masculinity and femininity (Abeysekera, 2005). This term refers to the wide array of socially constructed roles and relationships, attitudes, behaviours, values, relative power and influence that society ascribes to the two sexes on a differential basis (INSTRAW, 2004). Likewise, gender as a social pattern requires it to be seen as a product of history and also as a producer of history. In other words, the structures of gender relations are formed and transformed over time (Connell, 2005). In the words of Sri Lankan human rights activist Sunila Abeysekera, whose commitment to peace-building awarded her the UN Human Rights Prize in 1998:

> More than ever before in history [Sri Lankan] women have become the markers of the culture and traditions of a community. The easiest way to measure this is by looking at how a community imposes a dress code on women. We find stricter dress codes for women now than in the past (Anbarasan, 1999).

With that said, it is apparent that since the vulnerability of women is deeply entrenched in patriarchal values that are maintained through social structures, it is necessary to look beyond a technocratic solution to natural disasters, and rather examine the root causes of inequality.

Sri Lanka Background

Sri Lanka, a teardrop shaped island off the coast of southeastern India emerged as the independent nation of Ceylon in 1948, following over 500 years of colonial rule by Portuguese, Dutch and British rulers. In 1972, the nation became a republic known as Sri Lanka. With a population of almost 19 million, this multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation is home to a majority Sinhala community (74%), and both a Tamil (18%) and Muslim (7%) minority, with smaller communities of Burghers (persons of European ancestry) and the indigenous Veddas[7]. Buddhism is the predominant religion, with Hindus, Muslims and Christians of a large range of denominations also living and worshipping throughout the country.

For nearly three decades, the island has been scarred by a bitter civil war arising out of ethnic tensions. A ceasefire agreement (CFA) was signed in 2002, but it was undermined by regular clashes between government troops and Tamil rebels, and in January 2008 it expired[8]. Since then, the island has witnessed an escalation in violence. The bloody legacy has inevitably cultivated a culture of violence, posing an enormous barrier in women's struggle towards equal opportunity in political, economic and social spheres.

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[7] http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/country_profiles/1168427.stm Accessed January 14th, 2008
[8] https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ce.html Accessed January 14th, 2008

Status of Women in Sri Lanka

→ **Religion and Women**

The Constitution of Sri Lanka privileges Buddhism, the nation's majority religion, as 'foremost' amongst the religions of the island (The Constitution of Sri Lanka, Article 9). At the same time, it guarantees each of Sri Lanka's religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam) equal protection under the law (ibid, Article 10). The current head of state, President Mahinda Rajapakse, following in the footsteps of his predecessors, consistently employs religion and tradition to legitimize his actions in both the civil conflict and in the perpetuation of patriarchal norms across the nation (Grossholtz, 1984; Ruwanpura, 2006). In other words, Buddhism in Sri Lanka has become linked with Sinhala nationalist ideology, and accordingly, women's roles have been constructed in such a manner that they become the main vehicles for disseminating traditional values (de Alwis, 2000; Ruwanpura, 2006). According to activist Sunila Abeysekera:

> [Political] conservatives quote religion as an excuse to retain their control over women… religious practices in South Asia have nothing to do with the philosophical framework offered by… Buddhism. They have to do with male religious leaders who interpret religious texts to suit their convenience (Anbarasan, 1999).

Therefore, while it is widely agreed upon that Buddhism offers more freedom to women than other religions, the patriarchal structure within Sri Lankan society supersedes the philosophical principles of equality upheld by Buddhism (Grossholtz, 1984; Jayawardena, 1986; Wickremeratne, 2006). Theoretically, Buddhism recognizes equality between men and women, and both sexes are charged with the duty of following the Dhamma - the teachings of the Buddha which lead to enlightenment (Seneviratne and Currie, 1994). However, the interpretations of these notions both in the Buddhist texts

and folklore has led to the concept of male dominance and the subordination of women in the course of its institutionalization (ibid).

At the same time, within Sri Lankan Buddhism, being born a woman is interpreted as a consequence of bad karma, or sins in a previous life (Grossholtz, 1984; Wickremeratne, 2006). The notion of karma, a Sanskrit word that translates into 'action' is an outcome of a person's good or bad actions, linking one's actions to one's fortunes, either in this life or another. As this concept is deeply ingrained within cultural norms, the common belief that women are born as a result of bad karma thus gives religious sanction to the inferior status of women (Wickremeratne, 2006). According to Carla Risseeuw's anthropologic account of Sri Lankan women:

> The question if one would wish to be born a woman in one's next birth is answered negativity by most women… all state vehemently that they would prefer to be men, if they got the chance, although all know it is very difficult to become a man…women describe the life of men as an easier one than theirs. They don't have to give birth and they do not menstruate, both expressions of impurity "kilutu"… they have no day-to-day responsibility for the home; they are not beaten and they have more freedom of movement (1988:277).

With that said, Buddhist teachings offer the hopes of improving one's karma through the accumulation of merit, which is attained by performing good deeds, acts or thoughts such as visiting Buddhist temples, or Buddha's place of birth; performing daily offerings to the Buddha, *bodhi pooja* (Bo-tree[9] worship), giving of alms to Buddhist priests, rituals and keeping to a vegetarian diet, as well as regular meditation practice (Grossholtz, 1984; Wickremeratne, 2006). Hence, it comes as no surprise that women practice religion more

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[9] The Bo-tree is considered to be very sacred among Buddhists as it was under the Bo-tree that Buddha attained enlightenment

conspicuously than their male counterparts, since a virtuous woman may be born a man in the next life (ibid).

In addition, a common Sri Lankan practice not only within Buddhist households but also Hindu and even converted Christians, is of the wife worshipping her husband. According to Wickremeratne: "That the husband is the theoretical head of the household is rarely questioned. His authority prevails even where the wife is more educated than the husband" (2006:9). The inscription of men being the 'head of the household' is rooted in the official state population statistics, where either the father or the husband is registered, reinforcing women's dependency on the family and on society (Ariyabandu, 2006).

In short, religion, by providing meaning in life, has a considerable influence on the traditional forms of culture. However, many of the cultural practices, social values and attitudes inspired by notions upheld by religion further perpetuate women's subordinate status in society. The implications for this are manifold, including the economic marginalization of women, whose behaviour and responsibilities are socially constrained, the lack of a political space to voice their concerns, and finally the reproduction of vulnerability among women.

➔ **Social, economic and political status of women**

The majority of feminist literature on the status of Sri Lankan women asserts that in comparison to women in other South Asian countries, they are relatively well-positioned as a result of nearly six decades of state social programs with the provision of universal education, healthcare and food subsidies (de Alwis, 2000). This point is often substantiated by the fact that the nation, in 1960, housed the first female President, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga. By the same token, however, there are less than

5% of women in Parliament and 1% in local government (Bhagat, 2005). In addition,

when women have indeed reached the highest ranks of the political hierarchy, it has been,

for the most part, contingent on the fact that either "they come into politics as members

of political families, or as a result of the assassination or death of, or following in the

footsteps of, a husband or father who had been a political figure" (de Alwis, 2000:45).

Thus, while women comprise over half of the Sri Lankan population, representation at all

levels of the political system reveals an enormous gender disparity. According to a report

on the Implementation of a Beijing Platform for Action in Sri Lanka, Sri Lankan feminist

Swarna Jayaweera (2000) states that the reasons for low participation are complex:

> The multiple roles and time constraints of women, socio-cultural norms of male
> leadership and the prevailing climate of violence limit the number of women who
> come forward to be candidates for election. Political parties and Trade Unions
> which nurture leadership are seen to be gender insensitive in their choice of
> officials or candidates…. the "glass ceiling" operates effectively in the public and
> private sectors. There is only one women Secretary in a Cabinet Ministry - the
> Ministry of Women's Affairs.

While women struggle to have a voice in the political system, they are likewise faced

with the challenge of equitable integration into the formal economy. In 1997, the

unemployment rate for women was double that of men – 15.5% and 7.7% respectively

(Jayawardena, 2000). This gender disparity is related to dominant societal attitudes about

what is "appropriate behaviour" for women. Consequently, the predominant areas of

work open to women are typically within the unskilled and informal sectors. With the

globalizing economy, however, there has been a push for women to take jobs as

housemaids abroad or as garment workers in free-trade zones. According to a

CENWOR[10] report, women employed as migrant workers face the problem of long

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[10] Centre for Women's Research, Sri Lanka

working hours, vulnerability to occupational health hazards, job insecurity, and exposure to verbal and physical abuse (Wanasundera, 1990). While the State Foreign Employment Bureau has taken several positive steps to address women's needs by enforcing compulsory registration and providing access to credit, insurance and training, migrant workers continue to be exploited abroad and stigmatized at home (Jayawardena, 2000). Additionally, while women generate the bulk of foreign currency, their contribution to the household and national economy is grossly underestimated and undervalued. At the root of the problem are the societal attitudes and cultural norms that confine women to "feminized" areas of work. In order for women to participate in the formal economy on an equal basis, they require access to technology and technical training so that they can develop their full capacity and potential. In the past few years, a handful of initiatives aimed at changing the existing gender roles surfaced in the form of vocational training in non-traditional sectors, such as carpentry, masonry, welding and TV/radio repair.[11] While these training programmes are a step in the right direction, their long-term success goes hand in hand with a greater structural change in social expectations of women's roles and responsibilities. While this programme allows women to develop new skills, the sustainability of their trade and businesses are dependent upon greater society to support women in these non-traditional sectors.

In short, as the Nobel Peace Prize Economist Amartya Sen contends:

There is considerable evidence that when a woman can and do earn income outside the household, this tends to enhance the relative position of women in the distributions within the household… [Moreover]…the freedom to seek and hold

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[11] Ruhunu Rural Women's Organization (RRWO) in partnership with World University Services of Canada (WUSC) has been providing TV/Radio repair to youth in Hambantota District for the past three years. In order to highlight the success of their training programme, they focused their 2007 International Women's Day celebration on the success of a handful of self-employed women in non-traditional sectors.

outside jobs can contribute to the reduction of women's relative and absolute deprivation (1999:194).

With that said, the building of a feminist movement in Sri Lanka is not solely in the interests of women, but, on the contrary, it is a prerequisite for the development process itself. In the scholar Hensman's words (1996:69):

> By combating unequal power relations in the home, violence against women, and a gender division of labour which fails to socialize boys and men into caring and nurturing roles, it would on the one hand counteract tendencies towards large-scale indiscriminate violence and human rights abuses, and on the other hand enable a more rational use of human resources through the optimum development of people's talents and abilities.

➔ **Overview of GBV in Sri Lanka**

While the material consequences of gender inequality are myriad, including unequal access to healthcare, leading to a gender disparity in malnutrition or mortality rates; or the unequal access to education, resulting in a lower literacy rate for women as well as economic marginalization; in Sri Lanka, the most prevalent manifestation of gender inequality comes in the form of gender-based violence (GBV). According to the 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVAW), "Violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women…" (DEVAW, 1993). While there are numerous different definitions of GBV, this thesis will employ the DEVAW definition of GBV as:

> Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm done towards women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. (1993, Article 1)

Rooted in a patriarchal system, where male power, domination and control over women results in and maintains unequal power relations between men and women, GBV is thus a manifestation of women's overall subordinate status (DEVAW, 1993; Kandiyoti, 1988).

➔ **Causes of GBV in Sri Lanka**

The direct causes of GBV in Sri Lanka are multifaceted and difficult to identify in any given situation. The main cited causes include alcoholism, jealousy, sexual affairs, disputes, low or lack of education, unemployment, employment of women outside the home, financial difficulties, and a history of abuse within a family (Wanasundera, 2000). However, these immediate causes are rooted in underlying patriarchal norms that perpetuate an unequal power relationship between men and women, whereby men control women's sexual and reproductive choices, as well as their labour and earnings. According to Wijayatilake and Guneratne (2000:23): "Socially accepted norms expect women to adjust, conform and even tolerate abuse." The culture of silence on GBV is maintained by female victims who:

> Believe that shame, respect, economic dependence, family and community pressures and the presence of children force them to remain in violent situations… for many women, attempted suicide was a last resort strategy to prevent violence or to bring public attention to the violence. (de Alwis, 2000:172)

Moreover, Sri Lankan women often accept the blame for the violence, attributing it to their 'destiny,' which is a result of bad karma from their previous life in accordance to Buddhist principles (Grossholtz, 1984; Wickremeratne, 2006).

The widespread occurrence of this global phenomenon is not unfamiliar to Sri Lanka, in spite of the shortage of reliable statistics. The lack of documentation by police and hospitals is contingent upon the dominant perceptions of GBV, which is "culturally

defined as a matter that cannot be openly discussed" (Suriya, 2001:31) and consequently it is rendered a private family matter. The trend of underreporting GBV is overwhelming, and although in 1997, over 900 women were raped according to police reports, it is estimated that roughly 60 per cent of Sri Lankan women suffer from domestic violence on a daily basis (CENWOR, 2004; OMCT, 2002; Wanasundera, 2000). The unsystematic and inadequate reporting procedures by legal, police and medical systems create a serious obstacle to legal proceedings as well as proper GBV documentation (ibid). According to the scholar Kurz, the legal system has traditionally defined woman battering as a private matter and has been instrumental in enforcing its privatization. In other words:

> To the extent that these laws are not taken seriously, the legal system will continue to treat the problem of woman battering as an individual one and return battered women to the private sphere (Kurz, 1993:264).

Thus, legal instruments and practices that reinforce male violence must be uncovered and uprooted. Furthermore, there is a drastic shortage of trained counselors and psychosocial workers and of overall provision of counseling, shelters and legal aid (Wijayatilake and Gunaratne, 2000). Finally, the social stigma and the patriarchal nature of the legal provisions, law enforcement and judicial process often results in the ostracization of GBV victims seeking legal redress (de Alwis, 2000; Wanasundera, 2000).

In sum, because GBV remains a private matter, it will continue to persist in a culture of silence. Therefore, the first step to addressing this horrifying issue is by breaking the silence. According to Heise: "Governments and women's groups internationally must therefore uncover and reveal GBV through surveys, improved documentation, and awareness campaigns, to wipe out ignorance as an excuse for inaction" (1993:28).

➔ **Institutionalization of GBV**

While the Sri Lankan state is bound by its international legal obligations to prevent, protect and eliminate violence against women in both public and private spheres, it lacks a special legislation such as an act on domestic violence, to deal more specifically with the problem (de Alwis, 2000). Rather it is the basic criminal law, the Penal Code, which deals with issues of violence. However, according to its broad definition of sexual assault as: "Unwelcome sexual advances by words or action used by a person in authority, in a working place or any other place shall constitute the offense of sexual harassment," only incidences of rape are considered against the law (ibid). As was previously mentioned, cultural taboos on this issue often prevent women from seeking legal amends, leaving the vast majority of perpetrators unpunished. Moreover, although in 1981 the Sri Lankan government ratified the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), a comprehensive international agreement which imposes on states legally binding responsibilities to eliminate discrimination against women to ensure gender equality and equity, in practice it has failed to implement and incorporate key measures (CEDAW, 1979).

The significant gaps between law and practice, and the failure of the Sri Lankan state to transparently address the status of Sri Lankan women, taints the so-called "equality and independence" of women as outlined in the 1978 Sri Lankan Constitution, (CENWOR, 2004; OMCT, 2002). With that said, feminist activism has brought about a small, but significant change to societal perceptions and attitudes. In several parts of the country, a provision of women's desks as well as plans to include courses on violence against women in the police training institute have taken place (de Alwis, 2000).

➔ **Feminist Movement within Sri Lanka**

Small steps have been taken by women themselves through the development of a feminist movement, which has increased awareness on women's issues throughout Sri Lanka. Primarily in the 1970s, major advances were made with the birth of women's organizations that raised the critical issues of patriarchal control demanding women's liberation (de Alwis, 2000). Other issues include improving women's access to income and thus economic empowerment; developing legal and social networks to deal with gender-based violence; analyzing the representation of women in mass media, and rejecting the perpetuation of gender-based stereotypes (Abeysekera, 2005:13). At the same time, research on women's issues was expanded upon as books on feminism and feminist history were published in all national languages, women's studies programmes were initiated, and a relentless feminist critique developed of the economy, politics, social customs, laws, the media, religions, and all the structures of civil society in Sri Lanka (de Alwis, 2000).

Leading Sri Lankan feminist, Kumari Jayawardena, has raised the international visibility of South Asian feminisms through her critical writings in both English and her native Sinhala, exposing the complexities of Third World women's subordination within the triple bind created by male-centred imperialist, nationalist and religious revivalist discourses (Jayawardena, 1986). Furthermore, the appointment of Sri Lankan lawyer, Radhika Coomaraswamy, as the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women in 1994 can be seen as another extremely critical outcome of consolidated lobbying and advocacy work at the international level by women's groups and human rights groups. Her reporting on issues that are central to South Asian women - the use of culture and

tradition to justify violence against women, and violence against women in conflict situations - has created a space for these issues to be raised at the international and regional levels (Abeysekera, 2005:22). Moreover, after Coomaraswamy's consultation with Women and Media Collective, a Colombo-based women's organization, the Domestic Violence Bill was legislated (de Mel, 2007).

➔ **Legal Apparatuses addressing women's issues**

While women's rights are enshrined in Sri Lankan law, implementation remains the biggest obstacle to the realization of these rights for women. Among the myriad causes, the lack of awareness of these laws, most recently the Domestic Act which was passed in 2005, renders them futile. While legal reforms are a vital step for women to realize and exercise their full rights, the next step involves women learning their rights. In order to address this concern, a handful of women's organizations have initiated legal literacy programmes to make these laws visible, in the hopes of empowering women to safeguard their fundamental rights (Jayaweera, 2000). Nevertheless, in spite of the achievements at the international level accredited to the persistence and dedication by countless Sri Lankan feminists, much work needs to be done to tackle deep-seated societal attitudes as Malathi de Alwis explains:

> From 1994, there has been another shift, two steps forward, one step back. The march forward has included welcome changes in the personal laws – including raising the age of marriage and age of consent (which used to be 12), and changes in the laws on domestic violence, rape, incest and sexual harassment. The step back includes the continued harping about "good wives and mothers" and "women's traditional roles" (2000:3).

➜ Role of Media and the State

The perpetuation of gendered roles is most strongly preserved by the conservative state apparatus, which plays a central role in regulating media content (Perera, 2008). The media consistently accuses feminists of being Western, bourgeois, anti-tradition and anti-culture (de Alwis, 2002b), there acting as a chief obstacle to the feminist movement. This point is illuminated in an excerpt from an editorial on International Women's Day which was published in a mainstream English newspaper, in 1984:

> The feminist consciousness as it obtains today is another article of the contemporary ideological baggage borrowed from the West. In traditional societies, which the ideologues of women's liberation love to scoff at, woman, as wife and mother, had her own preordained place.… The mother was more often than not the real power in the household. She was the protector and mentor of the young, the link between the children and the distant patriarch who was the father. In the last analysis, therefore, she also subtly influenced the thinking and the decision-making in the household …there was a substantial element of the matriarch in traditional Sri Lankan society. Then what is this ho-ha about women's liberation? Like most other fads, to which our alienated elite genuflect, this too is a concept hatched in a West riddled by all the problems which a post-industrial society is heir to. …The fashionable women's lib in which our upper class women engage will be merely a chic posture devoid of any meaning to the large bulk of Sri Lanka's women (*The Island* 3/8/84).

Although women's organizations campaign for gender sensitive media programmes and attempt to use the media for corrective action, there has been no action at policy level to prevent the distortion of the image of women by media agencies (Jayaweera, 2000). Furthermore, strong opposition to the feminist movement comes from men themselves, and as feminist Kumari Jayawardena argues "males refuse to support women's liberation because they do not want to lose the benefits of patriarchy in their homes as well as in society" (de Alwis, 2002b:495). According to Mehta and Gopalakrishnan (2007): "Change in societal attitudes is difficult to achieve. While reforms in laws, programmes, policies, and international agreements support such change, deeply entrenched attitudes

can be changed only by people" (2007:44). With that said, only with the widespread

transformation of these attitudes will the state act to enforce the rights of women and

provide them with the necessary legal redress and support services to respond to abuses

of women's rights.

Sri Lanka and the Indian Ocean Tsunami

➔ **Vulnerability theory applied to the Indian Ocean Tsunami**

In the West while the majority of consumers were busy scouring shopping malls for the best deals on Boxing Day - December 26th, 2004, in the East, a massive earthquake in the Indian Ocean caused a tsunami that engulfed the coasts of multiple South Asian countries, reaching as far as the eastern shores of Africa[12]. This catastrophic natural hazard became known as one of the world's most devastating humanitarian disasters, leaving thousands dead and displaced.

In Sri Lanka, over 35,000 people were killed, some 800,000 were left displaced and more than 91,000 homes were completely destroyed along 70% of the island's coastline (CHA,2005; de Mel, 2007). Thirteen out of twenty-five districts were affected. Those most severely hit were Jaffna in the Northern Province, Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara in the Eastern Province and Galle, Matara and Hambantota in the Southern Province, affecting all major population groups – Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims, (CHA, 2005; Freks and Klem, 2005). However, the impact of the tsunami was neither neutral nor equitable (de Mel, 2007).

A closer look at the victims revealed that there was a significant gender gap as a greater number of women than men were reported dead or missing, (Abeysekera, 2005; Ariyabandu, 2003; Birkmann and Fernando, 2007; de Mel, 2007; Freks and Klem, 2005; Oxfam, 2005;). According to reports filed at the Police Department alone, 8,933 Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim women died, compared to 7,581 men, (Department of Statistics,

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[12] This thesis will refer to this disaster as the "Indian Ocean Tsunami" rather than the popular media term "Asian tsunami" as the latter term connotes that the tsunami only affected Asian countries, dismissing the fact that it equally affected the African coasts of Somalia and Kenya

Police Headquarters, Colombo cited in de Mel, 2007:240). This tremendous gender disparity was also observed in other studies of tsunami-affected areas such as in Aceh province in Indonesia (Oxfam, 2005; Rofi, Doocy and Robinson, 2006) and Tamil Nadu province in India (Guha-Sapir et al. 2006) pointing to the increased vulnerability among women in natural disasters. In this way, as the gender gap in statistics demonstrates, it is apparent that the Indian Ocean tsunami, like other natural disasters, affected specific groups of populations disproportionately and women were significantly more at risk than men. This trend is consistent with vulnerability theorists who contend that in order for a hazard to become a disaster, it has to affect vulnerable people, (Cannon, 1994:16).

➔ Gendered Impacts of the Indian Ocean Tsunami

The devastation and turmoil prompted by the Indian Ocean tsunami resulted in the surfacing of deeply embedded gender disparities. Rooted in patriarchal norms, Sri Lankan women are confined to gendered roles within the household, workplace and greater society. Normally, women are dependent upon male accompaniment for physical protection (brothers, husbands, fathers, uncles etc.) Because of the lack of protection by the law (i.e. police) women are dependant on male family members for protection from physical assaults. Thus, in the chaos – the breakdown of the family and institutional security and protection – women's vulnerabilities were amplified to a greater degree than in their normal day-to-day situation (Ariyabandu, 2006)

Although there are minimal gender-disaggregated data on immediate death tolls (apart from police reports), many qualitative studies, such as camp surveys and press reports suggest a serious imbalance in the greater number of casualties among women

(see, for instance, Abeysekera, 2005; Ariyabandu, 2003; Birkmann and Fernando, 2007; de Mel, 2007; Freks and Klem, 2005; Oxfam, 2005). The most common accounts point to the socio-cultural practices that prevented women from escaping the wave, such as conservative dress that restricted movement for women; their inability to swim or climb trees or rooftops; and finally, many women were in their homes busy with the morning chores and consequently were not warned of the incoming water (de Mel, 2007; Guha-Sapir et al, 2006; Oxfam, 2005; Rees et al, 2005). The repercussions of the gender gap in casualties are multifaceted. As many men lost their wives, there have been many reports of young women being forced into early marriages. In addition, there are serious concerns regarding the safety, security and well-being of the children, after a handful of cases of alleged incest (Associated Press, 2005).

On the other hand, the women who survived the catastrophe are faced with a second wave of horror, caused by the patriarchal structures that contribute to a culture of silence. The central issues that were manifested in the post-disaster environment include a gender-biased emergency, relief and recovery management with the absence of women in the planning stages of this composite operation. The absence of opportunities for women to voice their concerns placed them at greater risk of violence and further perpetuated pre-existing inequalities. This predicament mirrors the usual state of affairs where women occupy only minor positions of leadership and decision-making within the public sphere (Ariyabandu, 2006).

➔ **Temporary Camp Shelters in the Immediate Tsunami Aftermath**

The lack of integration of women's needs in the tsunami aftermath had grave repercussions, particularly in the immediate post-tsunami environment and in the

temporary camp shelters. At the forefront of the emergency relief and humanitarian assistance operations were a series of joint public-private institutions, such as the Centre for National Operations (CNO) and the Task Force for Rebuilding the Nation (TAFREN), who worked alongside countless INGOs and volunteers. Specific reports outlining the temporary camp shelter context (for example, the number of camp dwellers, the organization and coordination of supplies, the length of their stay, etc) are difficult to come across as the majority of INGOs engaged in relief operations report only on their own undertakings. Nevertheless, after compiling a wide array of secondary sources, a rough picture can be projected, with approximately 169,000 people or 55,000 families being housed in schools and other public and religious institutions, in addition to the tents supplied at over 730 temporary camps (Abeysekera, 2006; TAFREN, 2006). At first glance, this figure appears to be quite small in comparison to the widely documented estimates that over 800,000 people were displaced, with over 91,000 homes destroyed (CHA, 2005; de Mel, 2007). However, it must be added that many of those who were displaced by the tsunami found refuge with family members and friends. The length of stay in these temporary camp shelters ranged from six to eight months, and in some cases due to the conflict, displaced persons in the east remained in these meager dwellings for up to a year[13]. The conditions were often overcrowded, and quite often the tent material was inappropriate for the excruciating heat in Sri Lanka, contributing to increased discomfort, stress and trauma.

The contentious issue of a 100-200 meter buffer zone, instigated by the government in attempts to mitigate future devastation in the case of another tsunami, had

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[13] For more info on the temporary camp situation in Galle, Sri Lanka one year after the tsunami see http://www.undp.org/tsunami/videos.shtml

a detrimental impact on the reconstruction and resettlement schemes, leading to the construction of transitional shelters. As an intermediary between the temporary camp shelters and permanent housing, these transitional shelters were built either entirely out of tin sheets, or with wooden walls and coconut thatch or tin roofs, and in some cases, a natural fibre-based roofing sheet (like a heavy-duty cardboard) was used, which according to INFORM, is less hot than the tin but liable to 'melt' during the rains (INFORM, 2005). The construction of many transitional housing units, which in some cases even today continue to be inhabited by displaced persons who await their much overdue permanent homes, was carried out by government and INGOs who operate in a patriarchal manner. Hence, many units lacked kitchens or safe cooking areas, leading to numerous hazards. In this way, it is evident that the lack of consultation with women and the lack of any sensitivity towards women's issues and roles generated a scenario in which women were, yet again, disproportionately affected (ibid). Finally, the issue of equal rights for women in land allocation and housing as well as other grants and benefits, generated a further perpetuation of women's subordinate status in society.

➔ **Access to post-tsunami relief**

In the immediate post-tsunami environment, women's subordinate status was brought to light as dominant patriarchal norms, deeply entrenched in government and social institutions, were responsible for a lack of gender-sensitive disaster management and relief operation. The immediate implications for this were in women's access, or lack thereof, to emergency relief. The state relief distribution system is based upon the official registration system, which entitles the 'head of the household' to direct access to relief

supplies (Ariyabandu, 2006). Within the official population statistics either the father or husband is registered as the 'head of the household' and consequently women were denied direct access to them, reinforcing their dependency on the family and on society. In a number of cases, despite the fact that these allowances were meant for family support, men would spend it on alcohol, leading to often violent repercussions (ibid). Furthermore, the gender-based inequities within the existing property and inheritance laws were highlighted in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami. According to the government resettlement programs and regulations, the ownership of the new permanent houses or property have to be single, thus ruling out joint ownership by husband and wife. Even in the case where the devastated house was in the name of the woman, the new homes would be registered under the name of the 'head of household,' denying women the right to ownership (Ariyabandu, 2006; UNFPA, 2005a). Finally, the lack of a gender-sensitive approach to the rebuilding and reconstruction efforts meant that women's domestic needs were overlooked. Consequently, temporary houses were constructed without any kitchen facilities, leading to safety concerns after a handful of smoke and fire hazards (INFORM, 2005).

➔ **Role of Alcohol and GBV**

Alcohol abuse, a widespread problem among Sri Lankan males, has been identified as a serious health issue and a major cause for the eroding human values in contemporary society (Department of Census and Statistics, 2005). The severity of this social problem is amply reflected in morality statistics, which clearly illustrates the increasing death rates due to alcohol-related diseases, as well as the escalating trend of

convicted prisoners for offenses related to alcohol-related crime and abuse (ibid). While the gravity of this issue is depicted mainly through quantitative analysis by the Sri Lankan government, there have been a series of reports demonstrating the links between alcohol consumption and GBV, highlighting that it is a key factor that increases the risk of women being abused by spouses or other male family members (Ariyabandu, 2006; Freks and Klem, 2005; Oxfam, 2005).

As a cross-cutting theme across all qualitative camp surveys, women articulated their concern for the increased alcohol consumption by men in the temporary camp shelters, as it was expressed to be a contributing factor to the incidences of sexual harassment, abuse and violence. Many men from a number of temporary camp shelters admitted to their increased alcohol consumption, and described it as a common coping mechanism to the trauma and stress in the post-disaster environment (Ariyabandu, 2006). This acute trend was facilitated by cash donations by the government as well as various relief schemes, such as the cash-for-work, which consisted predominantly of men, since women remained confined to the temporary camp shelters, who, in return for their work in clearing debris in devastated communities, would receive cash, (ibid). The following first-hand account by, Mrs. Velunagagam, a field officer with Sarvodaya, a CATAW partner, illustrates this scenario:

> Last week there was a problem between a man and his wife. The government is giving people payments after they lost their relatives and homes in the tsunami. The husband went to claim the payment and spent it on Arrack (a local liquor made from palm sap) to get drunk. The wife asked where the money had gone so he hit her… We couldn't take her to the doctor because she refused to see one or to speak of it. (Oxfam, 2005:11)

It is apparent from this scenario that women's inferior status in society is rooted in and maintained by the patriarchal nature of the government, legal and medial institutions,

that, in turn, disseminate societal attitudes and cultural taboos, posing enormous obstacles to women's health, safety and well-being.

→ **Post-tsunami GBV**

At the time of my field visit 22 months after the tsunami, I visited a few transitional shelters and can attest to the deplorable living conditions which have consistently been highlighted by women's organizations and human rights groups across the globe. As an outsider, however, my observations extend merely to the physical infrastructural conditions. Moreover, as my visit was brief, I was shielded from the appalling issues which women are faced with, on a daily basis, behind "closed doors."

As the scholar Eileen Pittaway powerfully argues: "The subordinate position of women in society is manifested in the microcosm of camp life" (2007:310). In a culture where the modesty of women is deep-seated, a lack of privacy poses serious implications to women's safety and security (Rees et al., 2005). A number of qualitative camp surveys indicate that women in camps expressed their discomfort and fear due to the cramped living conditions, where most of the temporary camp shelters lacked basic amenities such as electricity, separate sanitation facilities for women and a culturally appropriate distribution of female hygiene products and garments (Abeysekera, 2006; Freks and Klem, 2005; CATAW, 2005; Rees et al, 2005). The lack of gender-sensitivity in the planning and management of the temporary camp shelters and transitional housing units compounded by the chaos in the disaster aftermath breed an increased state of vulnerability among female survivors.

This gendered vulnerability was quickly addressed by over 60 women's groups and organizations who, representing women from all ethnic and religious communities, united to form the Coalition for Assisting Tsunami Affected Women (CATAW). Primarily involved in presenting a number of press releases calling for support to women's needs in post-tsunami advocacy campaigns, CATAW's emphasis on women's issues of violence and rights demonstrates the magnitude and urgency to address women's vulnerabilities (CATAW, 2005a). After sending out a team of researchers to visit police stations along the southern coast and the Karapitiya hospital in Galle district, the Suriya Women's Development Centre, a partner of CATAW, published a report in July 2005 drawing attention to the horrific reports of violence against women, in particular to the increased incidences of domestic violence and sexual harassment in camp situations (CATAW, 2005b; Nesiah et al., 2005). A CATAW spokesperson asserted:

> Years of working with conflict and internal displacement have taught us that where law and order breaks down, where safety networks provided by family and community have disappeared, women become most vulnerable to a range of violations of their rights, including sexual and physical violence (CATAW, 2005c:2).

Incidents of rape, gang rape, molestation and physical abuse of women and girls throughout the rescue operation as well as during the residency in temporary camp shelters have been reported by a myriad of sources, including the media (Abeysekera, 2006; Ariyabandu, 2006; Associated Press, 2005; Pittaway, 2007; Rees et al., 2005). According to an Oxfam report (2005), a woman living in a camp for displaced people described her experiences using the toilet facilities there: "In the night we get scared because there are no lights. It's frightening for us, we know there are snakes and you

can't see who is around the toilets and the washing areas" (Oxfam, 2005). As a social construct, camps became sites of power and control where men exerted their dominance over women, whose voices were silenced by intimidation and fear of violent repercussions (Rees et al., 2007; Pittaway and Bartolomei, 2005). This patriarchal control was reinforced by the fact that few camp authorities and police officers were female, and in some cases, it was alleged that police officers were involved in incidences of sexual abuse (Felten-Biermann, 2006).

The reports of increased violence against women are consistent with the literature on disaster and GBV (Enarson, 1998, 2000; Ariyabandu, 2006). As Lin Chew vividly expresses: "The silence regarding violence against women is louder than the roar of the tsunami waves" (2005). This silence stems from a pre-existing culture of acceptance concerning violence against women, palpable through the lack of criminal legislation on domestic violence (Bourke-Martignoni, 2002; de Alwis, 2000). Thus, it is probable that the reported incidences of GBV represent only a fraction of the reality. While the Indian Ocean tsunami created a "window of opportunity" for the tackling the pervasive issue of GBV, it is critical to bring to light the complexity of this problem, as the contributing factors are myriad and must all be addressed in order to combat this horrific concern.

What does the future hold?

→ **"Seeing" Women in Disasters through a Normative Lens**

In the wake of the tsunami, the international community was able to "see" women's

vulnerabilities through:

> The journalistic and amateur use of the photo-essay, made instantly available to
> global viewers through the use of new technologies such as the digital still and
> moving camera, the mobile phone with image taking capacity, the internet,
> television and the use of satellites. (Childs, 2006:206)

These advances in communication technology played a pivotal role in mediating the

public perception of the disaster, and without a doubt, the breadth of the international

response was highly contingent upon them. As Susan Sontag (1978) wrote "photographs

furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown

a photograph of it" (1978:12). It is not uncommon for the mass media to depict women

in disaster scenarios as passive victims, distraught and overwhelmed, while conversely,

men are portrayed as active, strong, resourceful and heroic (Childs, 2006; Enarson and

Meyreles, 2004). With that said, it is important to remember that "meaning is conveyed

by visual images [creating a] scopic regime … in which both what is seen and how it is

seen are culturally constructed" (Rose, 2001:6). Therefore, the gendered nature of visual

representation of the Indian Ocean tsunami in the popular media is an expression of

power and cultural values (Gold and Revill, 2004). The study "Representations of the

'Asian Tsunami' by the British Media" conducted by Tracey Skelton (2006) shines light

on this point:

> the media, which are respected for their critical investigations and incisive
> journalism, can perpetuate hegemonic discourses….[as] they construct the West
> as expert, the holders of life-saving knowledge, providers and saviours…they also

represent the Indian Ocean countries as chaotic, foolish, and as recipients and victims (2006:25).

Therefore, in addition to constructing a discourse of "Otherness[14]" between tsunami-affected countries and donor nations, the popular media further perpetuated gendered stereotypes insinuating an acceptance of women's subordinate position. While it has been acknowledged that more women than men perished in the Indian Ocean tsunami, it is fundamental that the facts be presented in an ethical and meaningful way. The first step towards challenging gendered vulnerabilities is to "see" women not simply as passive, vulnerable, and domesticated, but in their strength and resilience in coping with their complex roles and obligations in the chaotic post-disaster environment (Childs, 2006).

➔ **Gender and Development (GAD) Paradigm**

Within the broader processes and programs for development, the international community has recognized the importance of supporting the advancement of women in developing countries. As the honourable Kofi Annan, former Secretary General of the United Nations, declared on International Women's Day in 2005 "study after study has taught us that there is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women."[15] Nevertheless, there has been a consistence failure of development plans, which, in congruence to critiques about feminist theories, have been attributed to underlying assumptions about the status of women in the Third World (Parpart, 1993). The intersection of international development with feminism has produced a number of approaches to addressing women's issues, with the most recent approach being Gender

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[14] For a greater discussion of the concept of the "Other" see Said, Edward (1978) *Orientelism*.
[15] Kofi Annan (Secretary General of the United Nations), *Message of the Secretary General*, 8 March 2005, United Nations, New York, viewed 18 May 2005, http://www.un.org/events/women/iwd/2005/message.html

and Development (GAD). This perspective is theoretically based upon the Socialist feminist theory, focusing on gender rather than women, particularly the social construction of gender roles and gender relations (Rathgeber, 1990). This approach emphasizes the importance of examining the gender division of labour in specific societies, particularly the more invisible aspects of women's productive and reproductive work, and the relationship between these labour patterns and other aspects of gender inequality (Parpart, 1993). It also looks at the issue of power as it relates to gender, and accordingly develops strategies for empowering women and challenging the status quo (Kabeer, 1991). Thus, this approach offers the possibility of transforming gender roles.

Moreover, GAD recognizes that development is a complex social issue and advocates of this approach state that this paradigm takes a holistic approach, exploring "the totality of social organization, economic and political life in order to understand the shaping of particular aspects of society" (Rathgeber, 1990:494). Furthermore, within this paradigm, women are viewed as agents of change rather than passive recipients of development assistance, calling for women to organize themselves in order to achieve social, political and economic empowerment (ibid). The GAD approach has offered development planners a way of differentiating between practical (i.e. specific, daily) gender needs and strategic (or more long-term empowerment) needs for women.

➔ **Ruhunu Rural Women's Organization (RRWO)**

One Sri Lankan grassroots women's organization that has successfully employed the GAD approach to develop sensitivity to gender issues and actively promote the empowerment of rural women at all levels is the Ruhunu Rural Women's Organization

(RRWO). This approach has helped women to reduce existing burdens by improving socio-cultural practices rather than imposing additional responsibilities, thus working within a culturally-sensitive framework.

Currently, RRWO works in more than 55 villages has developed over 60 community-based organizations (CBOs) and has over 3,500 direct members. Although the focus of the organization is with rural women, some of the members of the CBOs are men, and in one case, the CBO members are only men[16]. The organization has been around since 1984, when Mrs. Daya Dadallage, formally a farmer, witnessed the many problems women were facing in her village. These challenges included a lack of roads, pre-schools, temples, potable water, community organization, and education. With the support of a monk, Buddhiagama Chandra Ratene, and other women farmers, Mrs. Dadallage started a committee to help alleviate the problems faced by rural women.

In 1993, RRWO started micro-financing on a small scale since most rural women and small-scale farmers did not have access to bank loans. A few years later, after a trip to Bangladesh to study the Grameen Bank model, micro-financing became RRWO's main product. An adaptation of the Grameen Bank model, RRWO's micro-finance scheme incorporates a savings programme, in which female members deposit a small sum at their monthly CBO meeting, and a revolving loan scheme. In order to be eligible for a loan, members must demonstrate regular attendance at the CBO meetings. Decisions regarding who should receive a loan are based on necessity, with preference given to women and is finalized by a vote among CBO members. Once that loan is repaid in monthly installments, another member can apply for a loan, and the process is repeated.

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[16] This CBO was formed in the post-tsunami context, and is made-up of fishermen who, through RRWO and donor organizations, received new boats and fishing nets.

Since the Indian Ocean tsunami, RRWO has provided numerous self employment start-up loans and grants to over 2,000 female members, for small businesses such as small shops; spices and food packet sales; coir (coconut fibre) matt-making; and market vendors. It is generally agreed upon that once women begin earning their own income, their self-esteem and self-worth is raised, leading to a sense of empowerment. In the words of Amartya Sen:

> Men's relative dominance connects with a number of factors, including the position of being the "breadwinner." On the other side of the coin, there is considerable evidence that when a woman can and do earn income outside the household, this tends to enhance the relative position of women even in the distribution of the household… she also has more voice, because of being less dependent on others (1999:194).

Moreover, economic development not only ameliorates women's decision-making power, but can also help to reduce the incidence of GBV, as financial stress is often a key trigger. With that said, it is important to note that microfinance has been faced with criticisms regarding the tendency of income-generation projects to confine women to the domestic sphere and increase the burden of women's responsibilities (Hensman, 1996). While these criticisms advocate sweeping societal changes which are unlikely to occur in the near future, it is important to acknowledge work by organizations like RRWO, who are making small but incremental steps towards meaningful change.

RRWO staff addresses other community problems such as access to water through their rain water harvesting program[17], health & hygiene and environmental problems

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[17] Rain water harvesting is a method of conservation of rainwater, which is collected from a household rooftop and diverted from a down pipe into a concrete storage tank underground. A suction pump delivers water on demand. One tank can hold up to 5,000 litres of water, which is sufficient to carry the low income families through the dry season, saving up to a total of 1344 hours per year (in time spent walking to and forth a well)

through establishing home gardens and the provision of family latrines. Their most successful project, in partnership with the British High Commission is 'Making the Domestic Role of Women More Effective." The goal of the project is to ease the daily domestic activities, promote productivity for women and to improve family nutrition to over 450 low-income families. The overall impact of the project is that it frees up a lot of extra time for the women and girls within the beneficiary households, for example, the average number of working days saved a year from fetching water: 42 days; fetching firewood: 10.5; and cooking time: 31.50, total: 84 days a year (Harris & Fernando, 2006). In short, the project empowers the rural poor in the District of Hambantota in so many ways, by giving them access not only to water but to a wealth of environmental, health, financial, and community development knowledge. The most important impact is that the women's confidence and sense of achievement is raised as they become organized in CBOs and realize their power in numbers, and how together they can build and improve the socio-economic conditions of their communities. RRWO's remarkable dedication to the project has lead to much more than making the domestic role of women effective.

In short, by adopting a GAD approach to addressing the problems faced by rural women, RRWO has not only empowered women economically, but more importantly, their training programmes have enabled women to gain self-esteem and confidence to voice their concerns within the family and in the community. By working with the current structures and processes while engaging both men and women, RRWO is paving the road for the long journey towards the emancipation of women in Sri Lanka.

➔ **"Seeing" Women in Disasters through an Alternative Lens**

According to vulnerability theorists, disasters - the product of social, political and economic environments, are all-encompassing occurrences that reveal the power structures responsible for generating inequalities within society, which, in turn, make some populations more at risk of exposure than others (Blaikei et al., 2004). Therefore, in the wake of the Indian Ocean tsunami, women's vulnerabilities, rooted in the underlying patriarchal system that perpetuates an unequal gender relation, were exposed. As Anderson and Woodrow argue (1989:11):

> Vulnerabilities precede disasters, contribute to their severity, impede effective disaster response and continue afterwards. Needs, on the other hand, arise out of the crisis itself, and are relatively short-term. Most disaster relief efforts have concentrated on meeting immediate needs, rather than on addressing and lessening vulnerabilities.

Therefore, in attempts to reduce a gendered vulnerability to disasters, it is imperative that both women and men be given equal opportunities, resources and information in all stages of a disaster, from interventions to enhance preparedness, mitigation to the response, rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts (Fothergill, 1998; Ikeda, 1995; Scanlon, 1998). Furthermore, women's voices need to be heard so that appropriate steps are taken to improve disaster policies and management structures, lessening the episodes where gender inequalities have been exacerbated, such as in the tsunami aftermath in Sri Lanka. In other words, it is pivotal that all stages of disaster relief and management operations incorporate an explicit gender component, in order to "see" women's specific needs.

Until significant changes to values and attitudes regarding gender roles and a transformation of unequal power relations occurs, processes which can make women's

lives just a little better should be considered successes. The empowerment of women does not need to be threatening to men, but should rather seek to create appropriate cultural measures to improve women's status within society (Wiest, 1998). According to Enarson & Morrow (1998:130):

> Empowerment is a sophisticated, multidimensional and complex notion. It is like a ladder with many steps, including education, economic independence, political power and awareness of rights. All these steps need to be climbed in order for women to be empowered.

As cultures are constructed and are by no means static, gender conceptions and relevant socio-cultural customs can be adapted and ameliorated by those who live according to them. In the meantime, the slightest possibility of making women's lives even just a little easier should be embraced. The results may not be perfect, but a small improvement is still an infinite times better than nothing

Appendix A

Interview Questions
Basic information

1. Name
2. Birth village & date
3. Marital status, when married, arranged marriage?
4. Education – what grade until
5. What livelihood are you engaged with?
6. How did you learn this livelihood?
7. How long have you been working?
8. How were you affected by the tsunami (financially, infrastructure, psychologically, etc)

Household information

1. What is your household composition?
2. Who has the decision-making power?
3. What is your typical daily routine?
4. How many hours do you spend doing housework (cooking, cleaning, fetching water, taking care of children, etc)
5. Do your children go to school?
6. Who keeps track of the household income & expenditure?
7. Do you have electricity in your house?
8. How much do you spend on the following items:
- food
- bills (electricity/telephone/gas)
- Buddhist activities (incense, puja, arms giving)
- Transportation
- Cost of keeping animals (cows, chickens, etc)
- Special events (wedding requires dowry, funeral, new baby's birth &/or first year rice eating ceremony, daughter's first menstruation, etc)
- Addictions (cigarettes/arrack/drugs)

Participation with RRWO

1. When and why did you join RRWO's microfinance program?
2. What was your husband's reaction to you joining – i.e. was he supportive?
3. Describe your experience with RRWO's microfinance program
4. When did you receive your first loan?
5. How much was it?
6. What did you spend your loan on?
7. Did it lead to an increase in income?

8. Was it difficult for you to repay the loan?
9. How has the savings program changed your household expenditure patterns?
10. Has your participation with RRWO led to any changes in decision-making power within your household?
11. Do you keep all the profits from your livelihood activities or do you share it with other household members?
12. What have you learned from participating in RRWO's microfinance program?

Emotional well-being

1. What was your situation before you joined RRWO?
2. How has that changed?
3. Within your household, how have things changed?
4. What is your relationship with your husband like?
5. Is he angry often?
6. Has he ever hit you?
7. Does he drink arrak, smoke ganga, or cigarettes?
8. How do these things change his behaviour towards you and your children?
9. Are you afraid of him when he drinks/smokes?
10. How do you deal with him?
11. How do your children deal with him?
12. When are things peaceful in your household?
13. Is he happy when you work?
14. Is he kinder to you when you do something special for him?
15. How is your sexual relationship?

Participant's perceptions/experiences

1. What do you want to improve in your life?
2. How do you think you can be happier?
3. Have the loans you've received helped improve your living situation?
4. How so?
5. If you could do anything, what would you dream of doing?
6. Do you think that if you had more money, you would be happier?

Interview Questions Round 2

Pre-marriage
1. Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood – what you consider to be the significant events in your childhood?
2. What did your mother do in the house/work/community? And your father?
3. How was your parents relationship/marriage?
4. Did your father support your mother in her work
5. How did your parents treat your brothers and sisters?
6. When did you first get your period and become a woman? Tell me about it
7. What are the good things you remember about your childhood?
8. What are some of the bad things?
9. What was the hardest/most difficult thing you ever faced?
10. What did you dream of doing when you were a little girl?

Marriage

1. How long have you been married?
2. Are you happy in your marriage?
3. What are the good/bad things?
4. What were your hopes/expectations before marriage? How has that changed?
5. Tell me about your husband. What are his responsibilities at home?
6. Do you control the money that you earn? Who decides how you spend the money that you earn?
7. What was your financial status growing up?

Loans
1. did your parents ever take out a loan?
2. When did you receive your first loan?
3. What did you use it for?
4. Have you paid it off?
5. Has it been difficult for you to pay the monthly payments?
6. Did you use the loan for daily expenditures rather than what you said you would use the loan for?

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Natural Disasters and Adaptation to Climate Change - edited by Sarah Boulter October 2013. Experience of the Indian Ocean Tsunami on the Sri Lankan coast. In Coastlines, Structures and Breakwaters 2005, ed. N. W. H. Allsop. London, UK: Thomas Telford Publishing, pp. 19–27. Khazai, B., Franco, G., Ingram, J. C. et al. (2006). Post-December 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka and its potential impacts on future vulnerability. Earthquake Spectra, 22, S829-S824. Oxfam (2005). The Tsunami's Impact on Women. Oxfam Briefing Note. London, UK: Oxfam International. Accessed 25 October 2012 from: . Ratnasooriya, H. A. R., Samarawickram Children and the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami: Evaluation of UNICEF's Response in Sri Lanka. Country Synthesis Report. © United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), New York, 2009 United Nations Children's Fund 3 UN Plaza, NY, NY 10017. The purpose of the evaluation in Sri Lanka is to determine outcomes and impacts of UNICEF's response to the tsunami and draw lessons and recommendations, both for the UNICEF and the sectors as a whole, which will be useful for strengthening ongoing programmes or policies to improve the wellbeing and rights of children. The tsunami and its aftermath were responsible for immense destruction and loss on the rim of the Indian Ocean. On December 26, 2004, at 7:59 am local time, an undersea earthquake with a magnitude of 9.1 struck off the coast of the Indonesian island of Sumatra. Over the next seven hours, a tsunami—a series of immense ocean waves—triggered by the quake reached out across the Indian Ocean, devastating coastal areas as far away as East Africa. The tsunami killed at least 225,000 people across a dozen countries, with Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Maldives, and Thailand sustaining massive damage. Indonesian officials estimated that the death toll there alone ultimately exceeded 200,000, particularly in northern Sumatra's Aceh province.