TEMPORALITY OF DISASTERS:*
THE POLITICS OF WOMEN’S LIVELIHOODS ‘AFTER’ THE TSUNAMI IN
SRI LANKA

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Temporality of Disasters: The Politics of Women's Livelihoods “After” the Tsunami in Sri Lanka

Abstract: The devastation the tsunami caused in Sri Lanka is represented as a “natural disaster”. Yet, the tsunami did not occur in a socio-political and historical vacuum. How people responded to the tsunami, the challenges and attitudes to relocation and post-tsunami livelihoods are shaped by uneven development, social exclusion and ethnic war. All these are embedded in structures of gender, caste, class, and ethnicity. The tsunami, thus, brought to the forefront several inequalities that existed prior to the “natural disaster”. There are, therefore, complexities to the temporality of disasters. Using fieldwork carried out in two areas of Southern and Eastern Sri Lanka this paper shows how gendered structures within the local political economy influenced the way local actors, communities and women initially responded in the ways they devised livelihood strategies. These reactions show how place matters as much as does the prevailing gendered political economy conditions. They point to the complex ways in which women mediate and negotiate everyday responses in the aftermath of a ‘natural’ disaster.

1. Introduction

The incredulity that a tsunami struck the island shores is a reality that many Sri Lankan’s find hard to grapple with. Official figures in early 2005 documented that the tsunami resulted in 30,527 deaths, 3,884 missing, 15,686 injured, and 773,636 displaced. Nearly 70.0% of its coastline was also affected by the tsunami (Department of Census and Statistics 2005). The devastation and magnitude of destruction caused by all counts was catastrophic. Yet, human tragedy and destruction is also an indelible reality of the Sri Lankan polity, which has been besieged by violence and war since the early 1980s.

The Northern and Eastern provinces have witnessed concentrated warfare for over twenty-years between the Liberation Tamil Tigers for Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan state. The South too has experienced militarised violence with the JVP uprisings of 1971 and 1987-89. Moreover, the war reverberates in the region through the loss of Sri Lankan armed force personnel recruited from the area.

Cultural, ideological, and religious viewpoints intercede and shape our experiences and responses to “natural disasters” pointing to how our responses are never neutral (de Mel & Ruwanpura 2006, de Mel 2007:240). Sri Lanka’s protracted war and ethnic polarization, the process of militarization, the stalled peace process, and socio-economic insecurity was the backdrop that shaped people’s responses to the tsunami (de Mel &
Ruwanpura 2006, Uyangoda 2005, Hyndman 2007a, 2007b). The tsunami was thus temporally constituted through previous social interactions and relations which are embedded spatially in multiple and uneven ways (Davies 2001:133-137; see also Massey 1999).

Against a politically embroiled backdrop, the purpose of the paper is three-fold. First, it hopes to explore the livelihood responses in the post-tsunami period among a cross-section of Sri Lankan women. Through this investigation, secondly, it shows how gendered political economy structures influence the politics of livelihood strategies deployed by local communities. Thirdly, this paper attempts to show how place matters for the ways in which women negotiated their daily realities (McDowell 1999:4). The evidence thus points to the ways in which prior inequalities were exacerbated by the tsunami across gender and ethno-nationalist identity. This paper then endeavours to underscore that “natural” disasters don’t represent clean slates full of new opportunities since prevailing “conflicts over space, resources and identity” make this improbable (Grundy-Warr & Sidaway 2006:481).

This paper draws on fieldwork of a 12-month long research project carried out during July 2005 and June 2006 to narrate the ways in which place was reiterated in conversations with affected women. Before embarking on a discussion of fieldwork methods and techniques (section 3), the next part – section 2 – locates Sri Lanka. This setting offers an entry-point for analyzing the exchanges with local communities and women. Section 4, which is the penultimate part, pulls out the central thrust of this paper: i.e. using fieldwork evidence it points the need to pay attention to locating the politics of women’s everyday livelihood strategies.

2. The Sri Lankan Scenario
Sri Lanka is a tale of two critical contradictions. On the one hand it is the battle-ground for a protracted, tragic and bloodied ethno-nationalist ethnic war that has spanned over two decades (Uyangoda 2005, 2007). On the other, this bitter reality sits uncomfortably with the exemplary gender egalitarian human and social development indices that the
country has achieved and somewhat curiously manages to maintain (Humphries 1993, UNDP 2001).

Somewhat unsurprisingly, these paradoxical realities mean that the Sri Lankan polity is littered by uneven social processes and geographical spaces that shape and structure everyday life. Pockets of concentrated poverty and socio-economic deprivation heighten women’s vulnerability because of the armed conflict and socio-economic transformation (de Mel & Ruwanpura 2006:5-6; see also de Alwis 2002). This backdrop aids “unpicking myriad geographies of the event, context, and aftermath” (Sidaway & Teo 2005:2) so as to recognize the gendered political economy structures and ethnic tensions that bear upon mundane practices.

The fieldwork sites were chosen to capture the multi-faceted aspects to regional discrepancies and spatial specificities. The fieldwork locations – Hikkaduwa and Batticaloa – were concentrated within Southern and Eastern Sri Lanka, respectively. The narratives encountered during the fieldwork evoke the “missing story lines” that needed articulation (Glassman 2005:164).

Hikkaduwa is the archetypical seaside tourist village. Tourism has also led to local trade spin-offs, which include way-side clothing boutiques, fast-food restaurants and local handicrafts, all of which mark the landscape in a jagged fashion. The political turmoil in the country, however, has negatively affected the tourist industry during different epochs.

Coral mining and fishing are the other core economic activities. However, shifts in the national economy, particularly since 1977, brought with it commuting service workers to Galle and sometimes even far away as Colombo.

A cross-section of society lives in Hikkaduwa. Most respondents in this study, however, were low or lower-middle income people. The villagers are mostly poor and there is economic instability. Still, there is no (manifestly) acute deprivation and no physical and infrastructural destruction caused by the war.
Batticaloa too is a coastal town. Hence, it hosts fishing communities too. A severely depressed part of the country from pre-war years, Batticaloa in more recent times has been ravaged by the ethnic war in multiple ways (Goodhand & Lewer 1999, Uyangoda 2005, 2007, Sarvananthan 2007). Poverty, socio-economic deprivation, militarization and war are endemic and disconcerting features of the district. Statistical figures, as partial as they are for these areas, testify to Batticaloa's destitution (Sarvananthan 2007). Nevertheless, it is also a region well-known for matrilineal inheritance patterns and communities among Muslims and Tamils, which is regionally specific (McGilvray 1982, 1989).

Batticaloa has extreme weather conditions, making its geography prime terrain for cash-crop production. The demarcation of the district into government and LTTE-controlled areas plus the existence of the Karuna-faction of the LTTE feeds into a highly fraught scenario. These factors worsen the structures of poverty and shape political economic conditions (Korf 2004, Sarvananthan 2007).

Militarized structures constraint and enable, often simultaneously, people's ability to stake decent survival levels (Korf 2004:285-291). Poverty manifests for Tamils, Muslims, and Burghers, residing in Batticaloa vis-à-vis the Sinhalese in Hikkaduwa. The two coastline communities are differentiated in their socio-economic positioning.ii

Dimensions of militarization, economic dispossession, and social practices suggest that women across ethnic groups are likely to have experienced the tsunami differently. The fieldwork focused on unravelling the political economy and militarized dimensions that impacted upon various ethnic communities, Burgher, Muslims, Sinhalese, and Tamils,iii so that their responses to the tsunami is contextualized.

3. Positioned Practices
While the entirety of the research project spanned a 12-month period, the fieldwork for this study was undertaken during July 2005 - January 2006.iv Security conditions in
Batticaloa partially dictated the ability to access the area, while travelling to Hikkaduwa did not impose similar travel restrictions.

The fieldwork trips lasted between 5-10 days, which were determined by the resources allocated for the field-research. Five fieldwork trips were undertaken. Sinhala was spoken by the research group members, but none of us were fluent in Tamil. Because of this a translator assisted conversations with local people from Batticaloa. On occasion people spoke in English or Sinhala in Batticaloa. We spoke Sinhala in Hikkaduwa. In-depth interviews and participant-observations were used to gather information from a total of twenty women across the Burgher, Muslim, Sinhala and Tamil communities. Each conversation lasted from a minimum of 45 minutes to a maximum of 1 and ½ hours. Six Sinhalese women and two men directly affected by the tsunami spoke with us. They came from Peraliya, Seenigama and Telwatte, which are villages that fall within the Hikkaduwa town limits. They were mostly either fisher people or casual labourers and came from a cross-section of ages. In Batticaloa we conversed with fourteen women. They were Burgher, Muslim, and Tamil communities and cut across varied class locations, ages, religions, and livelihoods. They lived in Thiraimadu, Poonachchimoonai, and Dutch Bar, which are all villages within the Batticaloa town limit.

We met our respondents on more than one occasion because of repeat visits to each area. Partly, the continual visits were aimed at building rapport, which also offered us the chance to record their everyday lives at different moments. Equally, the catastrophic experiences these women had encountered and talking through their experiences brought with it both ambivalence and humane concerns about conducting field research. Our concerns about carrying out this research was conveyed to the women we spoke with. Talking about our anxieties helped forge social connections to be based on a sense of empathy, leading to a rapport in some instances that has extended beyond the research phase.

To obtain a grounded sense of the efforts of non-governmental organizations in each local community, we also spoke with ten staff members. These were supplemented by
extensive (lasting 2 and 2 and ½ hours) interviews with two religious priests, three government officers, and two community activists. The numerous dialogues led to a rich kaleidoscope of field material for analyzing.

Intellectually, I pursue feminist economist calls for adopting varied approaches to conducting research that extends beyond orthodox empirical techniques (McDonald 1995, Berik 1997, Pujol 1997). Furthermore, as Wong (2005) states, getting “to the location of the event, to the people affected, their homes, their economic activities and their communities in real...geographical space” motivates grounded and cosmopolitan research (2005:259).

My social position, however, is prone to have shaped interactions and situations in distinct ways, colouring conversations and responses to varying degrees. My fieldwork practices therefore reflect my multiple and intersecting social and intellectual positioning. My claim, therefore, is not to represent the voices of the people spoken with. The purpose rather is to contribute to the nascent interventions on post-tsunami Sri Lanka (de Mel 2007, Hyndman 2007a, 2007b).

4. Spaces of Survival Strategies
Similar to most other post-disaster situations, in post-tsunami Sri Lanka there has been a shift in discourse from effective emergency humanitarian involvement to strategic interventions (IPS/UNDP/ILO 2005; see also Goodhand and Lewer 1999:70, Lautze & Raven-Roberts 2006). The interim period offers insight into how conflict and disasters contiguously exist and overlap each other in multiple ways (Lautze & Raven-Roberts 2006, de Mel 2007, Hyndman 2007a). These processes underscore the central import of place in shaping daily lives, which as McDowell (1999) notes is “made through power relations which construct the rules and define boundaries” that are both social and spatial (1999:4; see also Massey 1994). For those affected by the tsunami after the immediate trauma and shock their reality was also about how to get back on their feet. Quite often they literally had to pick-up the pieces. This process, nevertheless, was
shaped by socio-spatial relations that show places are not necessarily fixed and bound to territorial coordinates on the Sri Lankan map (Batticaloa vis-à-vis Hikkaduwa) but to social practices that are fluid, contested and ambiguous (McDowell 1999:2-6).

Survival in the aftermath of a humanitarian emergency is partly about forming livelihoods, which tend to be embedded in highly fraught social processes and practices (Lautze & Raven-Robert 2006:394; see also Oberhauser, Mandel & Hapke 2004). Yet, interventions by local foundations and domestic or foreign NGOs offering livelihoods for women show that they do not necessarily negotiate this terrain sensitively. There were, therefore, instances in which women reverted to occupying themselves through economic activities that were previously their primary or supplemental income. Other women found themselves in this position because they and their communities had fallen off the radar-screen due to neglect, disregard, or incompetence and failures of humanitarian intervention, whether by the state or the NGO sector. It is vital to interrogate these themes in some detail as they show both the ambivalence and resourcefulness of communities as they sought to rebuild their lives.

4.a Resourcefulness, Resilience, Paralysis

Women’s disclosure of how they went about pursuing survival options revealed the ways in which political economic factors circumscribe the strategies adopted. Invariably external interventions, whether in the form of private philanthropy, philanthropic foundations, or NGOs, were crucial in a number of instances in either offering start-up finances or setting-up economic activities.

Whether pre- or post-tsunami, a significant proportion of women sought income-generation through informal sector activity. Thus, the post-tsunami shift had to do with a change in the type of economic activity rather than the conditions of work. Moving from coral mining to coir weaving, selling kadayapam (local fast food), growing and selling vegetables, making handicrafts, or knitting woollen baby clothes illustrates this reallocation of tasks.
“Before this, like many people here we too supplemented our household income through coral mining.”
(Kamalini, a 37-year old woman from Hikkaduwa)

“I don’t want to lie. On that Sunday morning my son-in-law and I were on the beach doing work related to coral mining... I earned a living by breaking large coral pieces into smaller ones. A number of women were engaged in this work. The money I earned from coral mining was used to renovate our house... We lost all that to the tsunami....We think the government should be strict against coral mining. We don’t want to do coral mining again. Although there are regulations against mining, they are not implemented properly. I think we are partly responsible for the severity with which the tsunami affected our village. The sea gave us life and took it away.... Now we have set-up the street-side boutique to sell lunch packets. I also buy and sell coconuts”
(Lalitha, a 47 year old Sinhala woman from Hikkaduwa)

The ways in which coral mining was a core economic activity in the pre-tsunami years in Hikkaduwa is captured by the above commentaries. Lalitha in particular willingly acknowledges that despite a governmental proscription, low-income communities in the area relied on coral mining as an economic activity.

A transition from informal sector work with damaging environmental consequences, such as coral mining, to economic activities that are less damaging is praiseworthy. The change was brought about not purely because of a budding environmental consciousness, but because many alternative occupations were introduced through external interventions. None one these agencies, however, necessarily articulated these socio-economic activities as seeking just environmental goals.

This external assistance was influential in the array of tasks undertaken by women to eke an income. However, economic imperatives were not the only reason for keeping themselves active. Many women pointed out that it was a way of keeping themselves occupied so that they could attain “normalcy” or sometimes simply maintain “sanity” from not having the time to indulge in a recurring nightmare. Lalitha, cited above, articulated this as follows:
“...If I don’t keep myself occupied, I keep wondering about that calamitous day. It was a nightmare of a day to be washed away and then loose two of my daughters and my two-year old grandson too. As it is I have dreamt of my second daughter who died that day.” (Lalitha, a 47 year old Sinhala woman from Hikkaduwa)

Similarly, a woman from Batticaloa conveyed in some detail to us her home-based economic activities, and went onto note how their work is a way of avoiding indulging various thoughts on what happened on the day of the tsunami.

“... We got together with some neighbours and knitted woollen clothes for babies and make handicrafts. We sell a doll for (and show’s one to us) Rs 225.00 – and we sell it to the town people and those who stay here. We also sell sets of woollen baby hats and socks for Rs 175.00 Red Cross people only taught these handicrafts, and we got a loan of Rs. 25,000 from them – where each neighbour took responsibility for Rs 5,000.00 in repaying the loan...This keeps us occupied and distracts us from going through what happened on December 26th.” (Renuka, a 42 year old Tamil woman from Batticaloa)

Frequently, however, many of the economic tasks the women talked about are scripted into prevailing gendered structures of placing women in home-based work. Their occupations reveal the extent to which gendered structures are embedded in a larger political economy, which continues to reinforce labour into productive/non-productive spheres (Brennan 2006:404; see also Beneria 1999, Bergeron 2001, Himmelweit 2007). Equally, their engagements in the informal economic sector reflect the lack of viable economic opportunities in a political economy marked by war, economic deprivation, and recurring political instability (Goodhand & Lewer 1999:76; Korf 2004). Their cases thus illustrate the ways in which material realities come together with ideological processes of gendered work to determine access to resources and strategy options (Oberhauser, Mandel & Hapke 2004:205; see also Beneria 1999:70, Himmelweit 2007).

Initiatives at restoring livelihoods in many situations did get a fillip from institutional actors, similar to other post-disaster situations (Goodhand & Lewer 1999, Lautze &
Raven-Roberts 2006). Still the ways in which women and communities responded to these efforts were influenced by their previous experiences of violence and war. Thus pointing how the temporality of disasters as constituted by events preceding the “natural” event of the tsunami as well. For example, many people in Batticaloa, particularly the Muslims and Tamils, have experienced the recurrent destruction of livelihoods due to intense fighting since the 1980s. Yet, others were often in a lethargic state because the devastation caused by the tsunami was a new experience. The subsequent sections show the ways in which resilience, resourcefulness and paralysis demarcate women’s daily lives.

To a degree ethnic distinctions and regional locations marked responses of resilience or paralysis. Tamil women surmounted the latest tsunami-led misfortune that suggested resilience and hardiness of having encountered and steered decades of violence. While most Tamil women embarked upon an economic activity through financial or in-kind support offered by external institutions, there was an instance in which a woman had started her corner-shop by borrowing funds from a money-lender! Therefore, despite the notable general levels of poverty in the Batticaloa district, the level of economic activity in the temporary housing shelters among the Tamil section was remarkably “entrepreneurial”. Corner boutiques retailing dry rations and toiletries, women making and selling kadayapam, and on one visit an Indian merchant trading saris and shalwar-kameez (!) testified to a hive of local economic activity in the temporary shelter where Tamils resided.

“We were given a handout from the government. Additionally, my mother and I get a monthly ration of dry food, such as flour, rice, lentils and sugar. I initially used the left-over ration food to start making vadai and manioc chips to sell. I mostly sell to people in the transitional camp and I find this to be a profitable business. Sometimes I cycle into town and sell vadai and manioc chips to the town boutiques too.”
(Sashikala, A 35-year old Tamil divorcee from Batticaloa)

“The seeds for starting home gardening were given by the Red Cross. It was so that we could have our own vegetables to eat. I find
the land and soil here nallam (excellent) and growing vegetables is very easy. Because we keep having a good crop, I also sell the vegetables to my neighbours and my husband takes the rest, if there is any, to the town market. Even though my husband is a fisherman and we are now located in the interior, I don't mind if the government builds our permanent housing here. The land is nallam (excellent), nallam (excellent)!

(Parvati, a 46-year old Tamil woman from Batticaloa)

“I started this boutique where I sell mosquito coils, biscuits, sweets, flour, soap and eggs to the community. I exchanged the food ration stamps worth Rs. 3,000.00 we got from the government and obtained a loan of Rs 15,000.00 from a money lender and repay about Rs 700.00 per month. I earn about Rs 500.00 at least as profit. I find this a profitable venture. I regularly restock items for the shop by cycling into town and getting goods from there.”

(Koushalya, a 27-year old Tamil widow from Batticaloa)

In comparison the Burgher women living in the same transitional housing camp recurrently noted their dependence on assistance offered by the government and NGO sector. More problematically, they also appeared to take for granted that there would be a continued flow of aid and assistance as long as they lived in temporary shelter.

“I used to work as an operator and line leader in a garment factory in Batticaloa. After the tsunami the work stopped and we were laid off. We were given a severance payment of Rs 22,000.00 but no ETF (Employee Trust Fund), no allowance. Now the only work I do is the housework. I can stitch if I have a machine. I have told World Vision that I would like to have a sewing machine.”

(Eileen, a 47-year old Burgher woman).

The assumption on the part of Eileen that what-ever she would request from a NGO would be granted, and that she would wait until she obtained what she had appealed for was symptomatic of this reliance. She was the norm among the Burgher women we spoke with. Many of them mentioned the numerous sources of external support they received and the various items they received in kind from external organizations. Moreover, they mentioned how one organization or another was helping their neighbours, and therefore appeared to be confident that the flow of aid and assistance would continue.
Within Batticaloa, and indeed in the same transitional site, there are differences among women – albeit largely an ethnic based differentiation (Tamils versus Burghers). Different groups of women who went about negotiating their daily lives were influenced by previous socio-spatial practices. Tamil women’s exposure to war and female-headship had propelled gradual transformations in social practices where moments of ambiguous empowerment was not uncommon (Ruwanpura and Humphries 2004, Hyndman 2007b). Quite in contrast, passivity among Burgher women, such as Eileen, was notable.

Paralysis and dependence was also found among most, although not all, Sinhala women in the Hikkaduwa area. Repeatedly women noted that they were either in or were hoping to find employment in socio-economic activities created or funded by the local philanthropic foundation or NGOs in the area.

“I have already asked the foundation to provide me with the necessities to start a business in making yoghurt…. The women around here earn by preparing coir. Some of them received machines to prepare coir. I have also applied for one. The factory close by pays Rs 20.00 for a kilo of prepared coir. I’m planning to do this…”

(Madhavi, a 26-year old Sinhala woman from Hikkaduwa)

Madhavi’s case was is illustrative of the extent to which local women were waiting or hoping to find self-employment through the many projects initiated by a local foundation or NGO. Women (and families) not presently benefiting from the various schemes and projects were then “awaiting” their turn and opportunity. This waiting reflects the overlapping attributes that range from forms of dependency to the absence of effective employment strategies targeting rural communities.

Some villagers cynically characterised the local situation of dependence as the “golden tsunami”. From their viewpoint, it was those connected and networked into the local patronage system that was able to profit from aid flows, generosity, and goodwill.
“A majority of people here are now totally dependent on aid and do not engage in earning a living. There is no monitoring and distribution of aid. Thus those who happen to be there when aid is distributed manage to get more than they need.”
(Asela, a 37-year old man from Hikkaduwa and husband of Kimali)

“One of the reasons we do not want to move from this location (their temporary shelter been located on the Galle Road) is because this when-ever any aid distribution is brought into the area we can ensure that we don’t loose out. Otherwise, it is the people that have connections, whether it is to the JVP, the state or know people working at foundations and NGOs that are more likely to access the aid that comes this way.”
(Imali & Hettige, a 53 year old Sinhala woman and husband from Hikkaduwa)

Such a standpoint highlights the manifold ways in which people accessed aid flows. It also underpins implicitly the expectation that each would have a change of fortune via the influx of foreign goodwill and generosity – as long as this lasted. People in Hikkaduwa, however, were acutely aware that the gush of generosity, aid, and assistance is unlikely to last for long because “some other catastrophe is likely to turn the attention away from our predicament”. Getting a step in the ladder to profit from the existing flood of generosity was then critical for perceived sense of improved welfare.

Thus, the ways in which local communities gained from numerous forms of aid flows was uneven. Moreover, the initial trauma following the disaster affected a state of paralysis and dependence, particularly among groups of people, irrespective of ethnicity i.e. the Sinhalese and Burghers, who had not undergone displacement and devastation during the war. Among such clusters aid-related initiatives was seen as a means of subsistence, even livelihood.

“I personally do no like relief aid. There are people now who are completely dependent on them. They do not make an effort to make a livelihood. I feel that those who lived comfortably lost everything in the tsunami disaster. But those who are poor and living a hand to mouth existence gained a lot by way of relief aid… Those who lived on wages are reluctant to make an earning on their own. For instance
when houses were being rebuilt people who did mason and labour work earlier were not willing to work.”
(Chamari, a 27-year old Sinhala woman from Hikkaduwa)

“The villagers have changed after the tsunami. Some of them have become greedy. If someone receives relief aid, then everyone wants them.”
(Geeta, a 44 year old Sinhala woman from Hikkaduwa)

Survivors or “victims” of disasters are not a homogenous group because access to aid create and perpetuate envy, hierarchies, and tensions within communities. At the same time, Chamari and Geeta’s sentiments echo the dangers of creating a dependency syndrome among local communities through the outpouring of generosity and goodwill. The “spaces of opportunity” to access improved living arrangements, economic security, or a better quality of life was a reality for some communities in Sri Lanka. However, the ability to mobilize access to resources through social networks (Rigg et al. 2005:375-377), also bring with it the potential hazard of creating dependent communities as well as contribute to exacerbating social hierarchies and tensions.

4.b Off-the Radar Screen!
Because social networks stretch across a number of levels, the ease with which particular groups fall off the radar screen, especially in politically contentious terrain, is altogether unsurprising. Uyangoda (2005) notes the alienation of the Muslim community in Amparai district (also in Eastern Sri Lanka) because of inefficiencies of the state machinery and divided Muslim political leadership (2005:350). Inaction by the state is perceived as deliberate discrimination (ibid).

In Batticaloa a similar sense of alienation and exclusion was echoed by Muslim women. They conveyed a sense of grievance not simply against the state but also against the reputed international NGOs, such as OXFAM and World Vision, found to otherwise work actively in the area. Just after the tsunami struck, which affected many families in the community severely because their housing was just outside the 100 meter buffer zone, the initial assistance of temporary shelter, food and clothing came through the mosque in the area. Once they returned to temporary tents, donated by Hatton National
Bank (a Sri Lankan based bank), OXFAM and World Vision had provided dry food rations, water, and basic items of furniture for the initial couple of weeks. After these initial weeks they have not been offered any kind of external support to rebuild their communities, other than via a locally based awareness-raising activist organization – SURYA.

“SURYA organization works with us. They have been working with us for about six years. Just after the tsunami hit they came and gave each family Rs 500.00. A Saudi national distributed Rs 1,000.00 to each family. No other organization came here. We have asked the Grama Sevaka (Government Officer) about relief. There is a committee (all men) to represent us”

(Farhana, a 37-year old Muslim woman from Batticaloa)

Many women had used the initial monetary gifts, as meagre as it was, to start economic activities that they had done previously to supplement household income. They were mostly involved in small-scale poultry farming while some women worked collaboratively on coir weaving. While this Muslim community was visibly poor, living in makeshift homes of wood, corrugated iron and plastic sheets, and their livelihoods were simply about aiding their efforts at meeting basic survival requirements, their spirited engagements and conversations conveyed a fervent faith in their capacity to be resilient and overcome adversities.

SURYA was the only organization that was working with them, and yet its mandate is less about emergency humanitarian intervention and more about making communities aware of their rights and interest – and ensuring that the mechanisms for politically-grounded advocacy is championed (Ruwanpura 2007a:325-329). The Muslim women’s community initiatives at rebuilding then came mostly from local efforts and are instructive of the ways in which local communities contribute to “their own survival and recovery” (Korf 2006:245). Yet at the same time, their sense of neglect and omission was both real and perceived – with the broader political landscape and the communities positioning within the ethnic politics of Sri Lanka factoring into the lived experiences and daily realities of Muslim women.
4.c Creativity, Familiarity, or Inequality?

Women in receipt of external assistance to start and renew economic activities and even the type of aide they obtained had much to do with their positioning, whether it was geographical space, gender identity or ethnic grouping. To what extent did NGO interventions circumvent existing gender hierarchies when they went about generating livelihood projects? Did they offer sources of livelihood schemes which suggested that they had avoided replicating multiple forms of inequality? How did women's own responses to income generation potentially destabilize prevailing gendered social relations?

An analysis of the women’s conversations suggest that irrespective of whether they became involved with an economic activity through external intervention or their own efforts, they rarely – if ever – broke from the “implicit assumption that women are inextricably linked to the private and gendered sphere of the home, often through informal work” (Hyndman 2007b). Previous feminist research have offered piercing critiques into the problematic ways in which NGO intervention in war-affected Eastern Sri Lanka reproduced gendered social hierarchies and ethno-nationalist tensions (Hyndman & de Alwis 2003, 2004, Ruwanpura 2007a). Despite such interventions, the evidence is still ambivalent that current livelihood schemes are making headway in replacing prevailing geographies of inequality with spaces of hope.

“I make coir ropes as self-employment….We buy coir worth Rs 500.00 a month from a mill and each of us earns a net profit of about Rs. 500.00 a month by making ropes. Three women are needed to operate the rope-making machine. Each woman buys coir for herself. We work together and make ropes for each of us. I received the machine and initial coir worth Rs 1,000.00 from the Siyath Foundation to start work, three months after the tsunami. My earnings are spent on food items and other household necessities… I get to do this from home because the women I work are my neighbours…. This Siyath Foundation also gave us a kerosene cooker and utensils.”

(Imali, a 53 year old Sinhala woman from Hikkaduwa)

There is no resounding difference between the views shared by Imali and what other women mentioned, as the illustrations narrated in the previous sections typify.
Institutional efforts at commencing income-generation initiatives most often showed limited awareness of the need for displacing the gender inequalities by declaring “culturally there are obstacles that thwart our efforts from introducing income-generating schemes that go against the grain”.

This standpoint all too often becomes a routine way in which NGOs become sites of inaction and reinforcement that sharpen unequal gender and ethnic differences (Hyndman 2007b:542, Ruwanpura 2007a:322-325; see also Hyndman and de Alwis 2003). Livelihood strategies employed and deployed continue to perpetuate gendered political economy structures that consign women to home-based activities. Implicitly market activities are given primacy over the “non-productive”/caring sphere, and access to resources continues to be shaped by gender ideologies (Oberhauser, Mandel & Hapke 2004, Himmelweit 2007).

Similarly, Feldman (1997) highlights how various socio-economic activities promoted by NGOs “prefigure the economic and social reorganization of everyday life” (1997:46). Donor aid and intervention during crises, as the tsunami, then become opportune moments for engaging countries through “integrated development and humanitarian assistance” that thrust de-facto political and neo-liberal strategies (Hyndman 2007:366). These moments and interventions, therefore, rarely account for institutional failures, informational asymmetries and market conditions in the local economy, making such income-generating ventures unlikely to sustain in the long-run. Even where there are short-term possibilities, such as selling goods and services to a captive audience – as the fieldwork site of the transitional shelter in Batticaloa testified, neither traditional gendered skill training nor the continued gendered dichotomy of consigning women’s socio-economic tasks into home-based work hold long-term promise. As critically, the shift from one form of self-employment activity to another ignores the lack of social protection, social exclusion, socio-economic vulnerability, and economic insecurity that all too often characterise informal sector work (ILO 2002).
Gendered access to resources was promoted even by feminist organizations targeting tsunami-affected women (Crusz 2006, de Mel and Ruwanpura 2006, de Mel 2007). They too resorted to work within the rubric of gendered development which re-inscribed traditional gendered livelihoods. De Mel (2007), however, makes the intervention that “their revival, including psychological recovery, seen, and articulated by them as dependent on what they (affected women) knew, what they are already skilled in, and how soon they could recoup their familiar, pre-Tsunami ways of life” (2007:8, italics are mine). Familiarity and continuity, which are important aspects of psycho-social recovery in disaster situations, then become essential components that lead to strategizing livelihood schemes that inopportuneually maintain the gendered status-quo.

Continuing pre-tsunami livelihoods, whether because of familiarity or “cultural appropriateness”, was not only propagated by institutional actors. Even in the few instances where women had instigated livelihoods without the institutional actors interceding, such as Koushalya or Farhana, they too selected occupations that they had done previously or were familiar with and they could certainly engage within the confines of their temporary places of abode. Kamilini, a 37-year old woman with a 16-year old daughter from Hikkaduwa, articulated her reasons as well as her insecurities regarding her current occupation and future as follows:

“At the moment, I make food items to be sold at the boutique. My neighbours come to my place to buy them. Some of it I sell to the nearby boutique. I earn a net profit of Rs 150.00 a day… I still do not know what I would do to make a living in the future… I did this in the past so thought it was a good business to continue. It is what I was used to do…”

(Kamilini, a 37-year old Sinhala widow from Hikkaduwa)

Returning to pre-tsunami livelihoods offered the chance of stability that was not only about economic security. As Kamilini notes above, it was also about regaining former work rhythms and drawing upon their acquired expertise so as to resume a sense of ‘normalcy’.
Continuity and familiarity appears to be a significant consideration for economically active women. This tended to come together with their creativity and perseverance in getting their feet off the ground. Their own spatial location was a critical marker in whether they imaginatively used resources obtained in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, such as rice, flour, lentils, onions and other dry food rations, to eke out a short-to-medium term livelihood. *Sashikala, Koushalya,* and *Farhana* utilized this option, while *Imali* noted “When we initially received large quantities of ration, they mostly got wasted. Now sometimes we sell them to the shops”. The interlacing of ethnic identities and geographical locations, with the first three women being from besieged minorities residing in war-affected Batticaloa, and the other from the dominant ethnic group and relatively safe Hikkaduwa, is hard to miss.

Such instances illustrate the ways in which women’s identities are multiple, and sometimes even oppositional, because the geographical specificity of place is a contested and fluid social process (McDowell 1999:21). The differentiation is not simply between Batticaloa and Hikkaduwa, which it partially is; it is also about variation among and between women within each geographical location, on this occasion based on ethnic groupings.

5. Open Endings

Notwithstanding moments of skilful manoeuvrings in the way Sri Lankan women responded to the tsunami, analyzing the politics of women’s livelihood suggests that tensions and contradictions occur at differentiated points. Place, conceptualised as fluid and contested socio-political practices (McDowell 1999:4), certainly mattered. A partial explanation for the diversity lie in the predisposition of women’s rights groups to focus their activities on Tamil or Muslim women living in war-affected areas that through the 10-15 years has instilled a honed awareness of rights and agency (Ruwunpura & Humphries 2004:181-2, de Mel 2007:9). These women already came from matrilineal communities with matrilineal inheritance patterns, which may have facilitated this strong sense of awareness and rights. Recording these stories of resilience and
resourcefulness against continued adversity and disasters is critical, if least because these accounts disrupt the naïve portrayal of undifferentiated “victims”. Yet, their struggles also need to be located in the “social preconditions for an occurrence of a human disaster of this magnitude” (Glassman 2005:164; see also Pelling 2001). The prior displacement and war-ravaged incidents have toughened the Muslim and Tamil women so that they were beacons of hope in this research for the creative and productive ways in which they navigated a tumultuous landscape. The working out of these women’s lives underscored how different temporal orders, namely prolonged war and prior socio-economic inequalities, wove together with time-space social interactions to uncover the multi-dimensional aspects to women’s mediation and negotiation of the everyday (Davies 2001:137).

Quite contrarily the Burgher and Sinhalese women, who often had not experienced displacement or the constant exposure to a fierce war, were more likely to voice their dependence upon external actors, whether the state, NGOs or private philanthropic actors. They did not exercise their agency in markedly vigorous or energetic ways and were more likely to presuppose that this was a transitional phase brought about by an unseen and shocking calamity. Their confidence and optimism is also borne out of their own ethnic location in a protracted ethnic conflict. Positioning themselves as “neutral” (Burghers) (de Mel 2007) or coming from the dominant community (Sinhalese) offered them a degree of voice and advantage that the other communities may not possess.

The experience of Muslim women is a powerful reminder of ethnic exclusion, where marginal social groups fall through the cracks because an internecine war is represented by ethno-nationalist as occurring between the two dominant ethnic communities. Ground realities are far more complex and fraught, and elucidate the multiple ways in which socio-economic insecurity, exclusion, and marginalization is experienced “at different scales and from multiple perspectives” (Hyndman 2007a:367).

Prior ethnic and regional location is an important marker of the uneven ways in which women’s livelihood strategies were affected by political spaces. Yet, the narratives revealed that the diversity of experiences was not only crudely based on geographical
fixity on the Sri Lankan map. The numerous women’s stories point to the ways in which spatial differences are based on both place and time. Burgher women living within the same transition camp as Tamil women in Batticaloa, for instance, negotiated their everyday lives in markedly different ways from their Tamil neighbours. Within Hikkaduwa too, the contradictory ways in which tsunami aid was perceived and accessed point to differentiation among Sinhala women. The temporal backdrop of war and violence affected these two communities differentially vis-à-vis the Muslims and Tamils. The multiplicity of women’s access to resources and the politics of their livelihood strategies are hence indicative of the fluidity and dynamism of social practices and power relationships that continually structure place (McDowell 1999:4).

Women across every ethnic community, however, were persistently positioned within an informal economy, reflecting the perpetuation of overlapping gendered political economy structures. Although the livelihood spaces ranged from bustling micro-economies to mere survival, their location within the informal sector portend the fragmented development processes in the country. These socio-economic processes need repeated examination. Such an exercise challenges the multiple layers of inequality, whether gender, ethnicity, class or its multiple intersections, which get continuously reinforced through the global economic policies and international aid flows (Beneria 1999, Hyndman 2007a, Klein 2007). This holds to be the case, whether socio-economic policies are implemented through the state, NGO sector or philanthropic actors. By embedding women’s livelihoods in time, place and space this paper has attempted to unearth how “broad spatial processes impact upon women in different and similar ways...depending on how place-based identities get played out” (Oberhauser, Mandel & Hapke 2004:206).

The manifold geographical spaces then highlight not merely to the tsunami shattering the coastal areas of Sri Lanka, but also the coming together of temporal and socio-economic inequities of contested gender and ethno-nationalist politics. These attributes exacerbate the everyday realities of women’s livelihoods. Post-disaster reconstruction, thus, continuously demands that we explore the spaces of optimism without neglecting the spaces of inequality and exclusion. Dictates of familiarity, continuity, and
geographies of inequality are aspects that point to the uneven ways in which the myriad landscapes that prevailed prior to the tsunami continue in the aftermath. The endings as such in post-tsunami Sri Lanka remain open for continued critical scrutiny and probing interventions.

References


Hyndman, J. (2007b, forthcoming) Feminism, Conflict, and Disasters in Post-tsunami Sri Lanka *Gender, Technology, and Development*


Jeganathan, P & Q. Ismail (eds.) *UnMaking the Nation* SSA, Colombo.


Contemporary political events in Sri Lanka have lead to some to rightfully doubt the veracity of Sri Lanka’s ability to maintain its HDI achievements despite the war (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2003). Unfortunately, however, there has yet not been sustained statistical-level analysis by economists to measure the possible declines in these much flaunted HDI achievements to corroborate this point.

Two caveats are worth mentioning. First, poverty is unlikely to uniformly afflict every ethnic community in Batticaloa. Clearly there are gradations to class positioning within and between ethnic communities. Secondly, even as economic circumstances differ in the two towns/villages, the underlying political economy structures that expose diverse communities to vulnerability was brought out with the tsunami in both locations.

Frequently Sri Lankan scholars are challenged as to how a “religious” group – Muslims – are categorised as an ethnic community (see Hyndman & de Alwis 2003: 554, footnote 2, Ruwanpura 2006). Ismail (1995) points to the colonial and post-colonial trajectories that were instrumental in the constructions of “Muslims” as a distinct ethnic category in Sri Lanka. More generally, ethnic identities in the country are neither linked to religion nor language. Sinhalese predominantly speak Sinhala but are Buddhist or Christian, Tamils mostly speak Tamil but are Hindu or Christian, Muslims are followers of Islam but speak Sinhala, Tamil or both (Ruwanpura 2006:188), while Burghers speak Tamil, Sinhala, English and sometimes are bilingual or trilingual even (!) but are primarily Christian/Catholic. The slippages and interfaces
between religion and language point to the fluidity of identity construction in Sri Lanka – and
indeed the salience of caste over ethnicity or ethnicity over caste is a confluence of political and
historical factors (Jeganathan & Ismail 1995, Silva 2002). Quite critically, during my fieldwork
visits to Eastern Sri Lanka during past the 8-9 years, the Muslims were keen to identify
themselves as a distinct religious-cultural community – and it is this self-identity that I go with
in my categorization of ethnic communities in Sri Lanka (see also Uyangoda 2005).

In this section of the paper, I shift between the singular (I) and plural (we) because the
fieldwork was almost often a group endeavour. Each of investigator was responsible for different
aspects of the larger study funded by UNICEF. This paper stems from a research area,
livelhoods, for which the author was responsible.

Because the research assistant was responsible for transcribing the interview material, she
accompanied us on almost every fieldwork trip. Our reasoning was that it was important that
she had a good sense and feel for the different situations on the ground, as transcribing (or, for
that matter translation) is never merely about a mechanical process. It is also about
remembering and reading for nuances of situations, people, and communicative relations –
although we recognizes the invariable losses in translating and transcribing that fieldwork
brings with it.

When presenting and analyzing local voices, established research conventions of using
pseudonyms to protect their anonymity is followed through.

I do not discuss the processes of widowhood, female-headship, and transforming familial
relationships because of the ethnic war and tsunami and the impact it has on coping and
‘vulnerability’ here. Some aspects to changing family structures because of the conflict and
tsunami and its implications for household theories and policy can be found in Ruwanpura and

Ruwanpura (2007a) argues that localised NGOs grounded in the lived realities of communities
acquire a commitment to work through difficult and different tensions that transient
development workers and institutional actors may not necessarily show.

Indeed Naomi Klein (2007) points out how the World Bank conditionality for post-tsunami
reconstruction aid to Sri Lanka had making its labour market “flexible” the attached string.

De Mel (2007) notes that organizations, such as CATAW (Coalition for Assisting Tsunami
Affected Women – which consists of four women’s networks in Sri Lanka), had the contentious
and challenging task of balancing their activities between humanitarian intervention and
awareness raising on gender issue related to property rights and ownership (2007:8, see also
Cruz 2006).

This sub-heading was inspired by Hyndman’s (2007b) use of a similar sub-title, “Without
Conclusion”.

This is not to negate the displacement Sinhalese living in border villages of Eastern and North-
Central Provinces have gone through during the past two decades of war.