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Enabling Women's Empowerment in Post Disaster Reconstruction

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Abstract

The occurrence of disasters has increased tremendously during the recent past. Although disaster management efforts are designed to benefit both men and women in real practice, a larger share of benefits and resources goes to men and women continue to remain marginalised. Recent studies have recognised the need to include women's contribution to disaster management and emphasised its importance in building disaster resilient communities. Empowerment is a process by which women could acquire the ability to make strategic life choices, which could not only overcome above barriers but also to achieve disaster resilient societies. Hence this study explores women's status in post disaster situations and examines the concept of empowerment. Further it discusses the factors that influence women's empowerment in post disaster reconstruction. This study was based upon a theoretical as well as practical ideas obtained through comprehensive literature review.

Keywords: Disaster, Empowerment, Reconstruction, Women

1. Background

United Nations (2003) describes a disaster as a severe disruption of the functioning of a community or a society causing extensive human, material, economic or environmental losses which goes beyond the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources. In order to address the various issues of the disaster and to reduce the occurrence of future disasters, it is important to take
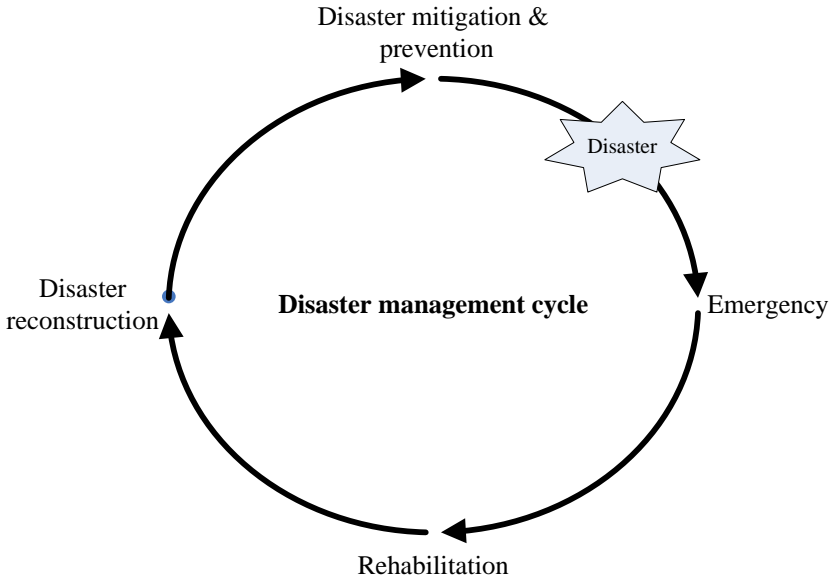
corrective measures by managing disasters in an effective way. Delaney and Shrader (2000) have acknowledged that disaster management is a circular model in which disasters and development are intertwined. According to Ariyabandu and Wickramasinghe (2003), disaster management is a collective term encompassing all aspects of planning for and responding to disasters which includes both pre and post disaster activities. Even though in disasters it is difficult to differentiate between different stages, policy makers and researchers have identified a disaster cycle for management purposes. Although different scholars use various ways of naming the phases, generally the disaster cycle includes disaster mitigation and prevention, emergency, rehabilitation and reconstruction as shown in Figure 1 (Delaney and Shrader, 2000). While each phase of a disaster cycle should not be seen in isolation (Delaney and Shrader, 2000) the construction industry should increase its focus on the right phases to build long term disaster resilient communities through reconstruction.

In the recent past, number of disaster occurrences has increased (Altay and Green, 2006). They argue that policy makers and researchers need to focus on enhancement of society's capacity to withstand disasters in order to reduce damage to both human and material resources. However, post disaster reconstruction can provide windows of opportunity for physical, social, political and environmental development not only to reconstruct the impacted areas, but also to improve the socio-economic and physical conditions of the impacted population in the long term (International Labour Organisation, 2003). The reconstruction period includes the long-term, and often substantial, investments in rebuilding the physical and social infrastructure of affected regions (Delaney and Shrader, 2000). However, in practice, too often disaster responses have not contributed to long-term development but they actually subvert or undermine it (Bradshaw, 2001; Anderson and Woodrow, 1998). This, result in lengthy post disaster reconstruction activities and the development opportunities are lost. Therefore, there is a need for built environment to adapt strategies to increase effectiveness and efficiency in post disaster reconstruction. Previous research found that despite the improvements in the emergency response to natural disasters, permanent reconstruction is often inefficiently managed, uncoordinated and slow to get off the ground (Jones, 2006). This indicates a need to focus on post disaster reconstruction to improve disaster resistance in the long term.

The local community is an important segment of the stakeholders for disaster management as they are the first responders when a disaster occurs. Most often, during small scale disasters the local community is left to deal with disaster management without any assistance from external parties. In addition, top-down disaster risk reduction programmes often fail to address specific vulnerabilities, needs and demands of at-risk communities (Haghebaert, 2007). These vulnerabilities and needs can only be identified through a process of direct consultation and dialogue with the communities

concerned, because those communities understand local realities and contexts better than outsiders (Haghebaert, 2007). Generally, vulnerable communities possess skills, knowledge, resources and capacities and these are often overlooked and underutilised (Aldunce and Leon, 2007) and, in some cases, even undermined by external actors.

Figure 1:   Disaster management cycle

Disaster mitigation &
prevention

Disaster

Disaster
reconstruction

Disaster management cycle   Emergency

Rehabilitation

Adopted: Delaney and Shrader (2000)

The lack of involvement of both men and women within the community in managing disasters has exposed them to more potential dangers (Childs, 2006). Further, recent studies have reflected the need for gender consideration in disaster management, and emphasised its importance in building disaster resilient communities (Ariyabandu and Wickramasinghe, 2003; Delaney and Shrader, 2000). In a study by Ariyabandu and Wickramasinghe (2003) it is emphasised that disasters affect women and men differently due to the different roles and responsibilities undertaken by them, the differences in their capacities, needs and vulnerabilities. In most of the instances, although disaster management efforts are designed to benefit both men and women, in practice a larger share of benefits and resources goes to men while women continue to remain marginalised. In many instances after the occurrence of disasters, women's economic dependence on men increases (Kottegoda, 2001). This ultimately reduces their security (International Labour Organisation, 2003). However, during or after a disaster as job opportunities dry up, men have the option of migrating to find work (Ariyabandu and Wickramasinghe, 2003). However, women are less able to migrate due to their domestic responsibilities, which leaves them in a more vulnerable position (Centre for Policy studies, 2001; Enarson, 2001; Ariyabandu and Wickramasinghe, 2003; United Nations, 2006). During the Yokohama World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction (1994 cited Ariyabandu and Wickramasinghe,

2003), a mid-term review of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction recognised the need to stimulate community involvement and the empowerment of women at all stages of disaster management programmes as an integral part of reducing community vulnerability to natural disasters. This bespeaks the inclusion of women's contribution to post disaster reconstruction.

In addition to poverty, environmental degradation and the different needs of men and women, the marginalised role of women within many organisations and their absence from the decision-making structures contributes to women's vulnerability in post disaster situations (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1999). The concept of empowerment is a management philosophy which can help to overcome these problems. The study by UN-HABITAT (2007) found that when women are empowered, they have the capacity and the inner will to improve their situation and gain control over their own lives. This can lead to an equal share in economic and political decision-making, and control of economic resources which will reduce their vulnerability in disaster situations. This reflects the strong need to empower women who are from the affected community within post disaster reconstruction to develop long term disaster resilient communities. In this context, based on which this paper is written and was undertaken as part of a research study which focuses on the empowering women during post disaster reconstruction. This study identifies women's status in post disaster situations and examines the concept of empowerment. Further it explores the factors that influence women's empowerment in post disaster reconstruction.

2. Women in post disaster situations

The magnitude of disasters is documented with reference to the degree of vulnerability of the affected population (Ariyabandu and Wickramasinghe, 2003; Delaney and Shrader, 2000). After the occurrence of a natural disaster, in economic downturns women lose their jobs more quickly and in greater numbers than men (International Labour Organisation, 2003). In addition, their small businesses tend to be hard-hit and their household entitlements decline. In the report by International Labour Organisation (2003) it was found that, after natural disasters, women hold fewer land titles and their small farming plots may be forced off the land. Moreover, since land and employment arrangements are often negotiated through men, women may lose access to both without men's representation (International Labour Organisation, 2003).

In a disaster, generally, women's workloads increase enormously due to damaged infrastructure, housing and workplaces; the need to compensate for declining family income and social services; and the responsibility of caring for orphaned children, the elderly and the disabled. This in turn restricts

women's mobility and time for income-generating work. In certain instances, especially social and political transitions, declining political participation and resurgent patriarchal attitudes jeopardise opportunities for women (International Labour Organisation, 2003). These disaster-related adversities compound several existing challenges for women.

Although natural disasters severely affect women they often provide them with a unique opportunity to challenge and change their gendered status in society (International Labour Organisation, 2003). Women have proven that they are indispensable when it comes to responding to disasters (Delaney and Shrader, 2000). Following hurricane Mitch in 1998, women in Guatemala and Honduras were seen building houses, digging wells and ditches, hauling water and building shelters (Delaney and Shrader, 2000). Though often against men's wishes, women have been willing and able to take an active role in what are traditionally considered male tasks. This can have the effect of changing society's conceptions of women's capabilities. Women are effective at mobilising the community to respond to disasters since they form groups and networks of social actors who work to meet the most pressing needs of the community (Delaney and Shrader, 2000).

A pre-existing pervasive culture of acceptance (or denial) concerning violence against women, including no existing criminal legislation on domestic violence in a country (Bartolomei *et al.* 2005), presents compounded problems for organisations attempting to support women in the wake of the tsunami. The denial or trivialising of violence against women by authorities only adds to the problem. In responding to disaster, interventions need to be developed around the existing skills and knowledge of women, who are the time-honoured custodians of community knowledge, social networks and community development (Bartolomei *et al*. 2005). The capacity of women to mobilise people and manage change should not be underestimated. Rather than feeling that their voices can not be safely heard, opportunities for women to engage in management and decision making related to all levels of disaster response and reconstruction should be offered . While in certain instances cultural barriers may prevent women from taking an active role in reconstruction, on the whole, women contribute to such activities as relief distribution, clearing up after disasters, preparation of land, wage labour in reconstruction, etc. (Ariyabandu and Wickramasinghe, 2003).

According to the Recovery and Reconstruction Department from the International Labour Organisation (Department for International Development, 2000), unequal gender roles often change after crisis as women and men can step out of their socially ascribed roles in their coping strategies. It was found that, engaging in construction, mechanical and other male dominated employment; creating

small enterprises; contributing to reconstruction discussions; acquiring more education while externally displaced; and having no traditional 'male' and 'female' roles in the absence of men, empowers women in terms of economic independence, ability as family providers, decision-making and social position (International Labour Organisation, 2003). The International Labour Organisation emphasised the need for sufficient and truly empowering recovery assistance for women.

3. The concept of empowerment

The origin of empowerment as a form of theory could be traced back to the Brazilian humanitarian and educator, Paulo Freire (1973 cited Hur, 2006) when he proposed a plan for liberating the oppressed people through education. Although Paulo did not use the term empowerment, his emphasis on education as a means of inspiring individual and group challenges to social inequality provided an important background for social activists who were concerned about empowering marginalised people (Parpart, *et al.* 2003). The concept is conceived as the idea of power since it is closely related to changing power by gaining, expending, diminishing, and losing (Page and Czuba, 1999). While explaining about the origin of the concept, Shackleton (1995) says that there is no single cause or origin of the empowerment movement, rather, it emerges from the increasing specialisation of some work, the changing shape of organisations and a shift towards placing greater value on the human being at work. While describing empowerment, Nesan and Holt (1999) state that, empowerment is more a philosophy than a set of tools or management principles to be readily applied to business organisations.

The term empowerment has been used frequently in management literature and has been defined in several ways by organisations and scholars. Accordingly, empowerment is a diverse concept which is open to a number of different interpretations. Even though the meaning of the terms delegation and empowerment may look similar they are different to each other. Shackleton (1995) states that in delegation a leader or manager decides to pass on a task or a specific part of his or her job to another individual for a specific reason. However, empowerment is a philosophy of management which widens the responsibility associated with the current task or role without necessarily changing the task or role itself. Handy (1993) explains empowerment as encouraging people to make decisions and initiate actions with less control and direction from their manager. In a study by Loretta and Polsky (1991), for management, empowerment is giving up of some control and the sharing of additional knowledge of company goals and achievements. In addition, for an employee, it is the acceptance of risk by taking more responsibility. Avrick and colleagues (1992) state empowerment as giving authority commensurate with their responsibilities to initiate positive change in their organisation.

This demands total commitment, involvement, support and trust from management. While explaining about empowerment, Rubinstein (1993) states that every individual is responsible for acceptance or rejection of the quality of prior work; self inspection and control of current work; and acceptance or rejection of finished work. In the above studies the authors have explained the term from a similar perspective within the management of organisations.

Ripley and Ripley (1992) explain empowerment from four dimensions: as a concept; as a philosophy; as a set of organisational behavioural practices and as an organisational programme. They further state that;

- Empowerment as a concept is the vesting of decision making or approval authority to employees where, traditionally, such authority was a prerogative.
- Empowerment as a philosophy and as a set of behavioural practices means allowing self-managing teams and individuals to be in charge of their own career destinies, while meeting and exceeding company and personal goals through shared company vision.
- Empowerment as an organisational programme involves providing the framework and permission to the total workforce in order to unleash, develop and utilise their skills and knowledge to their fullest potential, for the good of the organisation, as well as for themselves.

In the above definition of empowerment, Ripley and Ripley (1992) identify the possible means of including empowerment into the organisation. In other words it provides a guide to practitioners and scholars to investigate the roles and implications of the concept within the management.

Further, empowerment is multidimensional and occurs within sociological, psychological, economic, political and other dimensions. Earlier studies on empowerment state that empowerment can occur at individual level or collective level (Hur, 2006; Boehm and Staples, 2004). The goal of individual empowerment is to achieve a state of liberation strong enough to impact one's power in life, community and society. The goal of collective empowerment is to establish community building, so that members of a given community can feel a sense of freedom, belonging, and power that can lead to constructive social change. Each level of empowerment has its own components. A set of four components including meaning, competence, self-determination and impact were found in personal empowerment. A set of four components, including collective belonging, involvement in the community, control over organisation in the community and community building, are explored in collective empowerment.

Further, empowerment can be illustrated as a social process since it occurs in relation to others and as an outcome that can be enhanced and evaluated against expected accomplishments (Parpart *et al.*, 2003). In a study within the construction industry, Nesan and Holt (1999) collectively define empowerment as the process of giving employees the authority to take decisions, relating to their work processes and functions, and within the limits provided by management, but requiring them to assume full responsibility and risk for their actions. They state that, empowerment is not an act or incident that can visibly or physically happen, but it is employees' perception or realisation that they believe in, and control what happens to their work processes; and that they are capable of controlling those processes efficiently. Even though Eylon and Bamberger (2000) view empowerment from two different perspectives: a cognition (psychological approach) or social act (sociological approach), in their gender related study, they accept that empowerment cannot be neatly conceptualised as either a cognition or social act.
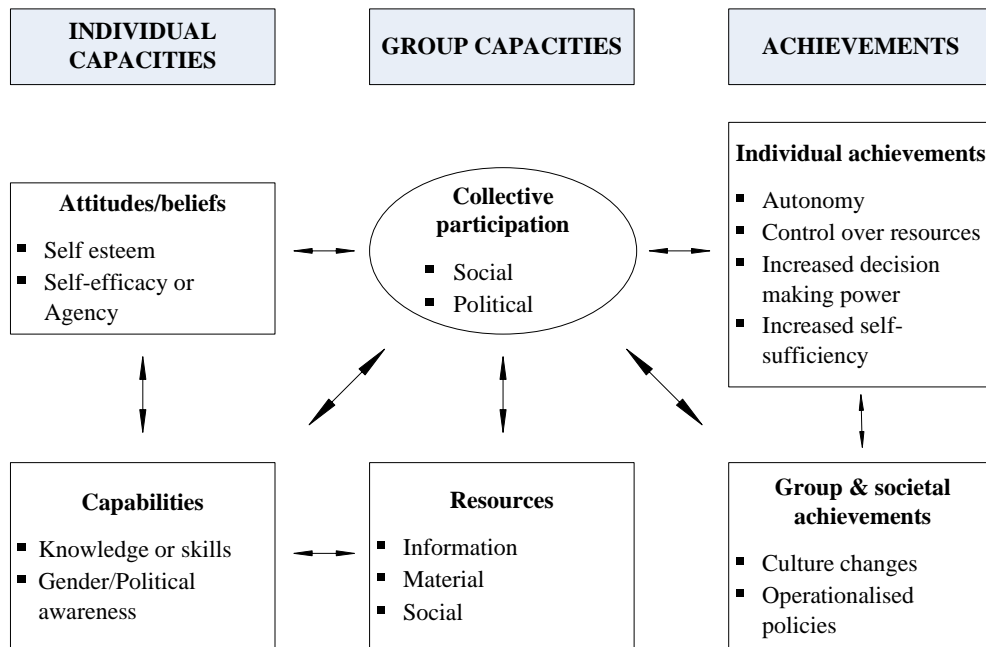
4. Conceptualising women's empowerment

The conception of women's empowerment is from the understanding that women's empowerment is about the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices can acquire such an ability (Kabeer, 1999). Amartya Sen's (1999) 'development as freedom' approach has been a starting point for many recent definitions of empowerment. Sen (1999) argues that the goal of development is not to achieve a certain set of indicators, but to increase choices. According to Magar (2003) women's empowerment is an outcome of a process whereby individual attitudes and capabilities, combined with collaborative actions, and reciprocally influenced by resources results in a transformation to the desired achievements. Kabeer (1999) describes women's empowerment as a process by which women acquire the ability to make strategic life choices in terms of three interrelated dimensions that include resources (preconditions), agency (process) and achievements (outcomes). Magar, in her study on empowerment approaches to gender based violence, constructed a framework using the findings from earlier studies (Kabeer, 1999; Stein, 1997).

This framework, as shown in Figure 2, highlights individuals' attitudes and capabilities, which allow participation in various types of collaborative behaviour which leads to empowerment. The empowerment process comprises of two levels: the level of individual capacities observed in individual attitudes and capabilities and the level of group capacities (Magar, 2003). Individual attitudes (self-esteem and self-efficacy) along with specific types of skills, knowledge, and political awareness, are key ingredients to achieving empowerment at these two levels. Self-efficacy or agency

is defined as the experience of oneself as a cause agent, not in terms of skills but rather in terms of one's judgment of what one can do with whatever skills one has (Bandura, 1995).

Figure 2:   Women's empowerment conceptual framework

INDIVIDUAL CAPACITIES	GROUP CAPACITIES	ACHIEVEMENTS

Attitudes/beliefs
- Self esteem
- Self-efficacy or Agency

Collective participation
- Social
- Political

Individual achievements
- Autonomy
- Control over resources
- Increased decision making power
- Increased self-sufficiency

Capabilities
- Knowledge or skills
- Gender/Political awareness

Resources
- Information
- Material
- Social

Group & societal achievements
- Culture changes
- Operationalised policies

Source: Magar (2003)

According to the report from the Division for the Advancement of Women from the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the Beijing Declaration 75 and Platform for Action 76 encouraged men to participate fully in all actions towards gender equality and urged the establishment of the principle of shared power and responsibility between women and men at home, in the community, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities (United Nations, 2006). It emphasises the need to bring about change in attitudes, relationships and access to resources and decision making, which are critical for the promotion of gender equality and the full enjoyment of all human rights by women.

5. Factors influencing women's empowerment

The conditions of choice needs to be recognised in order to transform people by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices can acquire such ability (Kabeer, 1999). He identifies the conditions as, taking into consideration the internalisation of norms; the consequences of

choice must be overall positive; and the choices pursued must have a transformative significance, changing the social structure in sustainable ways. In supporting this view, Hayward (1998) argues that power is faceless with social boundaries rather than identifiable agents, constraining and enabling action. According to the studies of Foucault (1979 cited Jakimow and Kilby, 2006) and Giddens (1979 cited Jakimow and Kilby, 2006), there are three categories of constraints that prevent the pursuit of interests: internal, institutional and social. These categories should not be considered as separate and autonomous aspects of power relations. Instead these can be considered as mutually dependent processes constraining action.

Internal constraints prevent the pursuit of interests by limiting the identification of what those interests are, and the actor's sense of self-entitlement to them. In an earlier study by Foucault (1979, cited Jakimow and Kilby, 2006) he argues that processes of socialisation in which punishments and rewards are brought out for certain behaviour which encourage the adherence to social norms. Jakimow and Kilby (2006) call this as normalisation of the individual within the social structure which leads to the internalisation of norms, shaping the aspirations and perceived possibilities of the actor. Further the observation by peers prevents action that deviates from these norms, regardless of their utility in the pursuit of individual interests. Institutional mechanisms can support the relative autonomy and dependence. Actors can disobey social norms when institutions provide the support that may otherwise be removed through social sanctions. Although institutional mechanisms are a product of the social system they often reinforce social norms instead of acting as an instrument to overcome them.

As already mentioned, internal and institutional constraints are a product of a social structure and so it can be argued that either reducing or removing social constraints and legitimating ideology are most important in facilitating long term changes in the ability to pursue interests (Jakimow and Kilby, 2006). The initiatives that focus on internal and institutional constraints only ameliorate relative disempowerment unless accompanied by social transformation which is about the ability to challenge or maintain social norms. In an earlier study by Parveen and Leonhäuser (2004), a cumulative empowerment index was developed using six key indicators of empowerment covering three dimensions in order to measure the empowerment of rural women. These dimensions include socio-economic dimension, familial dimension and psychological dimension. Socio-economic dimension consists of economic contribution to household welfare, access to socio-economic resources and ownership of assets. Familial dimension includes women's participation in household decisions covering six major dimensions: self-determination, bargaining power, control over resources, self-esteem, autonomy, status and power relations within households. Psychological dimension includes

perception on gender awareness with regard to basic rights of women and coping capacity to different household shocks.

Parveen and Leonhäuser (2004) considered six indicators: contribution to household, access to resources, ownership of assets, participation in household decision making, perception on gender awareness and coping capacity to household shocks. The contribution to household income is referred to the wife's contribution in terms of percent involvement in subsistence productive activities that are not rewarded in cash or kind to household income. Access to resources is referred to the right, scope, power or permission to use and/or get benefits from household and social resources. Ownership of assets is referred to the ability of a woman to control her own current productive and non-productive assets and enjoy benefits accruing from them. The participation in household decision making is referred to the extent of women's ability to participate in formulating and executing decisions regarding domestic, financial, child-welfare, reproductive health, farming and socio-political matters in coordination with other family members.

Further, the perception on gender awareness is referred to a woman's ability to express her opinion with regard to existing gender inequality and discrimination against women in the society. In their study, Parveen and Leonhäuser (2004) selected fifteen crucial gender issues which include under-value, education, economic opportunity, inheritance property rights, reproductive choice, early marriage, dowry, divorce rights, son preference, attitude towards female child, birth registration, feeding priority, wage differentiation, political awareness and violence against women. Finally the coping capacity to household shocks is referred to woman's ability to face sudden risks, crises and periodic stresses in the household. Although several studies identify different factors influencing women's empowerment, the consideration of factors which influence women's empowerment will differ from one context to another.

6. Discussion

Reconstruction is a rebuilding measure which involves not only constructing physical structures but also building the confidence, self-respect, self-esteem, self-dependency, mutual support and mutual trust and, the rebuilding of communities (Delaney and Shrader 2000). This long-term process focuses on human and material resource development, coordinated effort towards independence, sustainability and empowerment. In post disaster reconstruction, the most vulnerable and marginalised sections of society like, women, children, and the poorest section of society, etc., are the primary stakeholders and

partners in the empowering process (Jayaraj, 2006). As seen earlier, during post disaster situations since women's economic security reduces and their economic dependences on men increases. In order to overcome this situation there is a need to increase their contribution to their family welfare, improve their access to resources and increase the ownership of productive and non-productive assets. In addition women's participation in household decision making can provide them the opportunity to consider their needs and vulnerabilities within disaster reconstruction. Most importantly women need to be made aware of their rights and their coping capacity to disasters. This will improve self-confidence, bargaining power, freedom of choices and coping abilities within the households (Parveen and Leonhäuser, 2004).

According to the United Nations Development Programme (United Nations, 2005), 'Eliminating gender inequalities in employment' is one of the strategies within the millennium development goal 'Promote gender equality and empower women' which seeks to improve women's economic opportunities. It was found that ensuring female property and inheritance rights would help to empower women both economically and socially and would rectify a fundamental injustice (United Nations, 2005). Other strategies for economic opportunities could include improving women's access to employment and conditions of work by offering job training, improving pay and working conditions, and providing child care. However in reality women are often left out of formal planning and decision making and marginalised from community authority (United Nations, 2005). As such, their needs and concerns are often overlooked, and their profound contributions frequently go unrecognised.

Due to the social structure and the reactions from the community to individuals' behaviours, the aspirations and actions of women are subject to delusion. This may lead them to lose their interest to enhance their positions within the community. According to Kumar-Range (1999 cited Department of Economic and Social Affairs 1999), women tend to be active in communities and households, but are marginalised by agencies and organisations responding to the disasters. However institutions can play a major role in overcoming the sanctions for women than reinforcing social systems which increases their exposure to potential dangers.

7. Conclusion

Disasters affect women and men differently due to their different roles and responsibilities undertaken by them, the differences in their capacities, needs and vulnerabilities. Further, although disaster

management efforts are designed to benefit men and women, most often men tend to receive larger share of benefits while women continue to remain marginalised. Social studies on disaster management suggest that the concept of empowerment can be integrated as a management philosophy to overcome this problem. Empowering marginalised groups will be a significant step, not only to overcome above barriers but also to achieve disaster resilient societies. This can be considered as a stepping stone to not only eliminating gender inequalities in employment but also to reducing poverty. However adequate measures should be taken to avoid mere target on women as better deliverers of services and resources otherwise this may indirectly reinforce traditional gender roles rather than empowering them.

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