

What can women do?

Rebuilding lives post-tsunami

Some attempts to recover and rebuild since the 2004 tsunami have been successful, while others have been knocked down by constraints or unwillingness. Each tsunami-affected village has had its own problems and its own way of dealing with them. However, some recurring themes can be seen:

- Self Help Group membership has helped to increase women's independence. Women feel more secure and less afraid to venture outside their houses.
- For the first time, women are approaching government and NGO officials to submit formal complaints or applications for village improvements.
- Women are active in spreading health and sanitation information within the villages.
- Women have actively sought alternative livelihood sources
- Traditional gender roles are still restricting women from participating in village decisions and accessing village information.

The following four village profiles are accounts of both success stories and failures in NGO, community and women's initiatives in the post-tsunami period in Cuddalore District, Tamil Nadu.

Thazhunguda: Unwilling and Unaware

Women's Perspective: Silent Voices

Before the tsunami, women's lives were inside the house and their voices were silent. There were only 7 active Self Help Groups (SHGs) in Thazhunguda, now there are 50, all started with NGO help. All the SHGs are used for savings purposes. With the aid of UNICEF, one group have become the village sanitation team, taking on the task of

village cleaning and spreading awareness of water and sanitation issues, such as safe drinking water. From their own initiative, another group has started a take-away food shop.

Now women have the confidence to approach government officials to talk about any problems in the village. With a group of SHG members, *Gomathi* approached the District Collector to request house to house water facilities in the new permanent housing area. Currently there is only one communal tap in each street.

The District Collector agreed and promised to install house to house water facilities as soon as the construction of all the permanent houses is complete. While in some cases, women seem more confident to approach officials, they are still generally excluded



Communal street tap.

from village decision making. In most cases, the Village President talks to government officials about village issues. Village decisions are made by the men in village assemblies, and the women are merely told about these decisions.

Immediately following the tsunami, there was little women involvement, as the women were in shock, and afraid. They didn't know what to do. Since then, disaster management and first aid training has been given to the villagers and the women feel confident to handle another disaster.

The Invisible

During the immediate relief phase after the tsunami, *Lakshmi*, a widow with a young son was given provisions such as food and clothes, but because she doesn't have a husband, or son of fishermen age, she was not given a boat or fishing net. She received no resources to rebuild her livelihood.

Challenges

Despite some cases of women's activities, women are generally unwilling to participate in development activities. Anjugam, leader of the village sanitation team, says the biggest challenge to their activities is women's involvement.

There are currently only 3 members in her team, and other women in the village are unwilling to help with village cleaning. She says the problem is a lack of awareness, *"If an awareness program is given to 200 women, only 100 will change their behaviour. More awareness programs need to be held"*. Despite NGO training in tailoring, computers, making candles, washing powder and toilet cleaner, there have been no enterprises started. One of the women suggested that after training, many women were busy moving into their new permanent houses, so had no time focus on enterprises.

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Singarathoppu: Women Go It Alone

Strength in Numbers

"As individuals, the government won't help us, but as a team they will listen."

SHG, 'Team Mukhani' (three fruit), started in 2000 with the help of Bless. There are 20 members who all donate 55 rupees a month. 50 goes into a bank savings account, and 5 is used for daily needs. The bank account can be used by any team member for emergencies. The women joined the team not only for savings purposes, but as a way to lobby the government. *"As individuals, the government won't help us, but as a team they will listen."* Before the tsunami, Team Mukhani was one of three SHGs in the village. Now there are 64. They have used their strength in numbers to approach the government for loans to start their own small businesses. They have started businesses such as sari selling, dry fish production, fresh fish selling and an idly shop.

Challenges

Most of these businesses have been started by individual SHG members and there are few partnership businesses between women. There are a few factors contributing to this. One is a timing problem, in that the women are not all free at the



A woman making idly at her take-away idly store outside her house.

same time to do business together. Another is disagreements. For example, two women go into a fish selling business together, but they work separately due to time constraints. One woman works one day, and her partner works the next. But if one woman incurs a loss because she is unable to sell enough fish, her partner is not willing to take responsibility for that loss, saying it's not her problem.

Disenchanted

NGOs have offered training in the village, in tailoring and other skills, but the women are not familiar with these skills and feel they are not useful for them, so they are not interested. Instead, they have started their own businesses such as an idly shop and dry fish. **"Most NGOs only give training, training, training. They don't help with the future. So, next time any NGO comes, I'm not going to go to training or any meetings."**

Women's Roles

"After the tsunami, women feel strong enough to go anywhere and approach government officials."

Team Mukhani agree that, "After the tsunami, women feel strong enough to go anywhere and approach government officials." But, their movements are still restricted by their husbands. When their husbands are back from 4 or 5 days fishing, the women must return home early. The women called this 'tsunami fear'. Fishermen are much more worried about their wives now, and demand that they are home by 5pm.

C.Pudupettai: Disheartened and Disappearing

The invisible

During the relief phase, the government fund released by the government left out women-only households, and favoured those with more men. Rather than being dispersed to each household, money was dispersed according to the male head. So, households with more than one adult male received more money, and women-only households were neglected. The women in the village approached the district collector to complain about this, and organised more aid for those left out.

Womens Activities: Successes

Before the tsunami there were only 2 SHGs. Now there are 17, all started by Bless. All the SHGs are used for savings purposes. The money is mostly used for school fees and business purposes. The women have introduced compulsory attendance to SHG meetings, with a 5 rupee fine as punishment for absences. Another SHG has started a bakery, with a loan from Life Help Chennai and AWO International. The women bake their own products in a house that they have turned into a bakery and sell their products in a small shop in the village. They also cater for special events. Another SHG is in the process of starting a village waste separation project. They have been given equipment from an NGO and are waiting for the construction of vermicompost pits.



SHG bakery

Failures

Other SHG initiatives have not been so successful. Some women tried to buy a solar fish drying machine, but they needed 70 members and could only find 36 interested. In another instance, fish pickle training failed to generate any activities because of women's role in the household. Their husbands can return from fishing at anytime in the



Waste segregation trolley

afternoon or evening, so the women are expected to be waiting in their homes. While the women were willing to start their own fish pickle business, the risk of abuse from their husbands restricted them from doing so.

Women Take Control

Before the tsunami every house had an individual hand pump, but the tsunami spoilt the water source and now it is unsafe for drinking, and the

drinking water supplied by the government is insufficient. The women approached the District Collector about the lack of drinking water and requested a minimum of 60litres per day. The village also has a problem with the electricity supply. Again the women approached the District Collector with a report they had compiled. They are yet to receive a reply.

Challenges

Apart from these examples of women taking control, they are generally excluded from village decisions. *Megula* is concerned that after 18 months since the tsunami, women are regressing back into their original roles inside the house. She says, "before the tsunami I never had a chance to meet with other women and had to stay in my house. Now I am involved in an SHG and feel more independent. I feel secure because I have access to money for emergencies and don't have to depend on my husband." However,

she is concerned that women's activities have

stopped at the savings level. She is worried that women are slowly disappearing into the confines of the house, into the same, silent and excluded position they held before the tsunami. "During tsunami time, women were active and approached government officials for help, but now women are going back into the house, to the same role they had before the tsunami." Recently women have had less success dealing with officials. They have received no response from the District

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SHG meeting

Collector regarding the electricity supply problem, nor have they received a response from the Village president about their complaint that the only quality drinking water source is 2 kms away. The women are feeling disheartened by this lack of success and this is having a negative influence on motivation.

Particularly during September to January, when the fishing season is low, this village is vulnerable. Unfortunately, while the women are willing to work, and therefore provide some financial security during this lull period, they are confined to the house to wait for their husbands to return from fishing and therefore restricted from participating in any income generating activities.

Akkaraigori: Big Business

Liberated

Before the tsunami there were 10 SHGs, now there are 58. SHGs hold weekly meetings, at which all members attend. In these weekly meetings, the women discuss sanitation and childrens education issues. Asked how women's roles have changed, SHG members replied, *"before the tsunami, women were in their husbands custody. But now, we travel anywhere within or outside the village. We feel liberated"*. However, women still depend on their husbands for village information, and village meetings are exclusively attended by men only.

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Active ASHAA

Arogiya Shaki (Health Friend) for Health Awareness and Action (ASHAA) members in the village have mobilised themselves to do weekly street cleaning. However, they are disappointed with other village members lack of participation in the weekly village cleaning. ASHAA members have also promoted waste segregation. Every household has a waste pit for degradable kitchen waste. The waste is stored and then used as compost.

Alternative Livelihoods

150 SHG members grouped together to start a crab farming and selling business. They received a loan and training from International Women's Development (IWD). Because it's difficult for women to enter the water in their saris, they built a cement pit with eight compartments on the river side out of the water, where they will move the crabs when they are bigger. This makes it easier for the women to access the crabs. Another group of women have used net making training to start their own business. They make and sell fishing nets. Other local small businesses started by women include tailoring and book-binding. These women initially received training by NGOs.

Village Improvements: Women Appeal for Help



Individual house toilet made from coconut palms.

The women are not satisfied with the individual house toilets provided by an NGO. They are made from coconut palms and are not very durable. Many of them have fallen down, and most of them are not being used. The women have approached the NGO to request that the coconut palm toilets be replaced with permanent concrete structures. While they are

happy with the progress of the waste pits, they would now like to use a communal street pit, rather than

individual house pits. They would like NGO help with this and are in the process of negotiating communal pits with an NGO.