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Alyssa Banford

Cameron Kiely Froude

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Ecofeminism and Natural Disasters: Sri Lankan Women Post-Tsunami

By Alyssa Banford¹ and Cameron Kiely Froude²

Abstract

Women experience a host of negative consequences during and after a natural disaster. A variety of feminist theories have been used to explore this phenomenon. The aim of this paper is to posit the need for an ecofeminist perspective on analyzing women's vulnerabilities post-natural disaster. The authors will discuss the history and branches of ecofeminism, highlighting their utility in exploring the intersection of race, class, and gender in the aftermath of disaster. An ecofeminist analysis of Sri Lankan women's vulnerability in the wake of the 2004 tsunami will be used to illustrate the utility of the theory. Implications of using ecofeminism in natural disaster research will be discussed.

Key Words: Ecofeminism, Natural Disaster, Tsunami, Sri Lanka

Introduction

The consequences of natural disasters impact individuals at a social, cultural, and political intersection (Ariyabandu & Wickramasinghe, 2003; Blaikie, Cannon, Davis, & Wisner, 2003; Mileti, 1999; Quarantelli, 1994). Individuals and institutions play a role in determining the extent to which communities will be impacted by the disaster and its aftermath (Enarson, 2004; Enarson & Morrow, 1998; Wiest, Mocellin, & Motsisi, 1994). The 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami is no exception. The impacts of and responses to the tsunami existed within a context of warfare, militarization, and socioeconomic hardship in Sri Lanka (Uyangoda, 2005; de Mel & Ruwanpura, 2006; Hyndman, 2008).

In the spirit of Ruwanpura's (2008) argument, the authors support and will substantiate the claim: "there is a case to be made for understanding the pre-existing social structures and social preconditions for women's marginalization..." (p. 326). A contextualized understanding of the effects of the tsunami on women is especially important given the negative impacts on Sri Lanka's most vulnerable populations. A survey conducted by the Asian Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development reported that in Aceh, Indonesia, India, and Sri Lanka almost 80% of tsunami fatalities were women. Among the women who died, the most vulnerable were widows, single or disabled women, women with low income, and those belonging to marginalized racial or cultural groups (Abeysekera, 2006).

In the landmark book, *Disasters by Design: A Reassessment of Natural Hazards in the United States*, Mileti (1999) discusses the critical interrelatedness among the forms of oppression

¹ Alyssa Banford is an assistant professor at Alliant International University, San Diego. She completed her PhD at Texas Tech University in marriage and family therapy. Alyssa conducted one year of post-doctoral work at the University of Connecticut and also spent an additional year as an assistant professor in residence at the University of Connecticut in the marriage and family therapy training program.

² Cameron Froude is a doctoral student in human development and family studies at the University of Connecticut. She completed her MA in marriage and family therapy at the University of Connecticut in 2012 and her MA in general psychology at Catholic University in 2009.

that subjugate marginalized communities during and after environmental hardships. Mileti argues that the adversities following natural disasters are designed by society to harm certain groups and protect others. The natural disaster is not inherently disastrous. Rather, the natural phenomenon has disastrous effects on groups of people who hold fewer resources and less social capital than others. Individuals' increased vulnerability after disaster is reflective of a larger process, a manifestation of social relationships that are determined by a variety of sociocultural factors, such as gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), age, and disability (Ariyabandu & Wickramasinghe, 2003; Blaikie et al., 2003; Quarantelli, 1994).

An intersectional analysis is critical for understanding the effects of natural disasters for women. The concept of intersectionality says that forms of stratification such as race, class, and gender, must be studied in relationship to one another in order to understand the perspectives of marginalized individuals and communities (Crenshaw, 1991). Furthermore, Collins (1990) argues that these intersections must be conceptualized as a "matrix of domination", which addresses the power dynamic at play. The "matrix of domination" in Sri Lanka reflects the interceding cultural, ideological, and religious viewpoints that preceded and followed the tsunami (de Mel, 2007). We also argue that age and disability status are central to an intersectional analysis, particularly when discussing individuals' responses to natural disaster.

Although there is no blanket theoretical frame that covers all discussions on natural disasters, most literature includes a social vulnerability approach, which assumes that the effects of natural disasters are socially constructed and reflective of regional and global distributions of power (Blaikie et al., 2003; Enarson, 2004; Enarson, Fothergill, & Peek, 2006; Hewitt, 1997). While research has argued for the value of a feminist analysis of women's hardships following natural disaster, Sri Lankan women's vulnerability has yet to be conceptualized within an ecofeminist framework. The authors' adoption of an ecofeminist lens reflects our commitment to understanding human reactions and relationships to natural disasters in the given social context.

Building on feminist, environmental, and ecological perspectives, ecofeminism explores the relationship between nature and humanity, striving to move beyond the domination both of women and nature (Warren, 2000). Sex/gender is the starting point for critiquing oppression in an ecofeminist philosophy, but it certainly invites an extension to include an intersectional analysis. Ecofeminists have focused primarily on the theoretical and empirical links between women, race, SES and children and environmental degradation such as deforestation, pollution, pesticide usage, etc. The social structures that contribute to the oppression of marginalized people and environmental degradation are often a focal point of the analysis (Warren, 2000).

Pre-existing social conditions and factors set the stage for the populations of people who will be most impacted by the natural disaster. We will draw on ecofeminism as a novel approach to discussing the social oppression that exists pre- and post-natural disaster. Examining the effects of a naturally occurring event on society allows for a discussion about the bidirectional relationship between environment and humankind. This paper posits the need for an ecofeminist perspective on analyzing women's vulnerability post-natural disaster. First, we will introduce ecofeminism, discussing the history and branches of the theory. Ecofeminism will be discussed as a useful framework for understanding women's vulnerability in the context of race, class, gender, disability, and power. The authors will then utilize an ecofeminist approach to discuss Sri Lankan women's oppression pre- and post-tsunami.

Ecology and Feminism

History

In 1962, marine biologist Rachel Carson set the stage for later ecofeminist theory with her famous book, *Silent Spring*. Carson wrote *Silent Spring* in reaction to the increased usage of the pesticide DDT on crops in the United States. Carson described in vivid detail how DDT and other pesticides entered the food chain and caused serious genetic damage in animals and humans. Several years following Carson's stand against chemical pesticides, more research on the relationship between women and nature surfaced (Boserup, 1970).

The term *ecofeminisme* was coined by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 in her essay, *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* [Feminism or Death], within which she argued that overpopulation and degradation of resources were the most critical threats to survival. She called upon women to lead an ecological revolution in order to turn around the environmental destruction that threatened the survival of humanity. In 1980, a group of women organized the first national ecofeminist organization in the United States, *WomanEarth*, in Amherst, Massachusetts. The conference discussed the relationship among feminism, militarization, and environmentalism. Ecofeminist concepts continued to advance through the 1980s with a series of conferences that postulated a feminist environmental ethic (Warren, 2000).

The link between women and nature was not confined only to the Western world. Throughout many cultures, women joined in solidarity to protect nature from abuse and domination. For example, in the early 1970s, a group of Indian women in the sub-Himalayan region united in a social, ecological movement, known as the Chipko movement, to preserve forests. The movement, spearheaded primarily by women, drew attention to the status of women in society, particularly around decision-making processes (Jain, 1984).

The "eco" in ecofeminism refers to the influence of ecology on the ecofeminist movement (Mellor, 1997). The green movement subscribed to many of the same ecological tenets as ecofeminism. Namely, both adhered to the basic tenet of ecology, which was that all living things must be understood in the context of the natural environment in which they existed. Ecofeminists shared the green movement perspective that humanity was not only dependent on the physical environment. Rather, all aspects of the natural world, including human beings, are connected and interdependent.

Nature is referred to both as a metaphysical concept, "mind of nature", and as the physical world (Mellor, 1997, p. 8). Transpersonal ecology requires that we accept that humans and nature share a mutual connection. Adopting this worldview begins with awareness of the self and also of ecology, a process Mellor (2000) describes as "both teleological and idealist, reaching for the 'cosmic mind' of nature, a timeless essence revealing itself" (p. 117).

Ecofeminist Frameworks

At the broadest level, Ynestra King (1990) identified that both feminism and ecology share a commitment to re-conceptualizing the relationship between humankind and nature. There are a variety of different approaches to exploring the relationship between humans and nature and intervening in that relationship. Ecofeminism is a field of study that is as varied and diverse as the feminisms that inform it. According to Merchant (1996), liberal, cultural, social, and socialist feminism have significantly shaped the way in which the human/nature relationship has developed theoretically.

In her discussion of ecofeminism, Warren (2000) rejects the Western notion of theory, which proposes a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. Rather, she presents the metaphor of

quilting for that of theory conception. She explains that the necessary conditions for the theory comprise the borders of the quilt. The border dictates the boundary of the quilt, but leaves space for a diverse group of quilters to create the design and patterns of the quilt. The quilt that inspired Warren's metaphor was comprised of:

10,500 panels of individual quilt-patches that record and commemorate human lives lost to AIDS—lives that collectively represent different ages, ethnicities, affectional orientations, race and gender identities, and class backgrounds. While each patch is unique, what the patches have in common is what constitutes the necessary condition for inclusion... (p. 66-67)

Unlike an embroidered quilt, a patchwork quilt is comprised of individual pieces that contribute to a greater whole. Each patch could stand alone in its own right. When stitched together the commonalities and differences among the patches are evident. The patches are not collapsed into a single view. Rather, they are unified by a shared mission and strengthened by the tensions between them.

Flannery (2001) identifies the cultural inclusivity of the quilting metaphor when she says: "Quilting is close to the center of experience for many groups for whom science is at the periphery of experience" (p. 640). In a keynote address regarding feminism and natural disasters, Enarson (2007) discusses key issues "as told through the eyes of women who have been through disasters" and intertwines photographs throughout. A striking part of the address was the myriad needs of women experiencing natural disasters all over the world. The compilation included a picture of a woman in India "using harvested rainwater caught in a tank", another of a woman in Sri Lanka "sifting through seeds", one of a "professional Anglo woman 'mucking out' her flooded house in North Dakota." Enarson sewed these pictures, reflective of patches, into her keynote on feminist perspectives on women and disaster. Enarson's quilt included stories and pictures from women whose experiences converged and diverged in terms of race, ethnicity, geography, type of disaster, age, and other contextual factors. Yet, they all belonged in the same keynote because they spoke to a collective theme, women's responses to natural disasters.

Warren's (2000) quilting metaphor speaks to the process by which the quilt, or, theory, is constructed across time. Theory, Warren says, "is not something static, preordained, or carved in stone; it is always *theory in process*" (p. 66). The authors support Warren's quilting metaphor as one that fits with the ecofeminist tradition. Below is a description of the central feminist influences on ecofeminism and how they have informed the ecofeminist framework. Ecofeminism includes cultural, social, liberal and materialist epistemologies and positions for social change.

A primary misconception is that all branches of ecofeminism espouse pagan spirituality and goddess worship (Carlassare, 2000). Another common belief is that ecofeminists believe that change occurs solely through personal enlightenment and heightened awareness regarding the connection between humanity and nature. These beliefs comprise the cultural ecofeminist position. A primary assumption of cultural ecofeminists is that culturally and historically women have been closer to nature because of their roles in society, which are closely connected to nature. For example, physiologically women bear the effects of childbirth and rearing, which keeps them closer to the home and unable to travel as freely as men (Spretnak, 1990).

While aspects of the cultural orientation certainly comprise an important contribution to the quilt, they certainly do not reflect the quilt in its entirety. Materialist orientations contribute to the ecofeminist framework drive with such assertions as: "changes in relations of production and

social and biological reproduction are...the basis for social change” (Carlassare, 2000, p. 90). Unlike cultural feminism, a salient goal of socialist ecofeminism (Mellor, 1993; Merchant, 1989; Salleh, 1995) is not only to analyze race, class, and gender as factors of oppression but also to critique oppressive systems, such as capitalism and patriarchy. A critical argument made by socialist ecofeminists is that broader systems of oppression are destructive both to women and to the environment.

Socialist ecofeminism also argues that knowledge and nature are constructed within the sociopolitical context. Similarly, social feminists, highly influenced by Marxist theory, believe that all knowledge is socially constructed. Knowledge is conceived through the production of human beings, which means that it is neither neutral nor objective. Because capitalism is the vehicle for production, it privileges the interests of the dominant majority and introduces bias into science and technology advances (Hesse-Biber, 2011). Therefore, social and socialist feminisms reject the essentialist claims purported by cultural ecofeminists, which is a consistent concern that feminists have raised. Prentice (1988) extended this concern over two decades ago, suggesting that cultural ecofeminism creates a binary regarding how men and women relate to the environment. Because women are more naturally in tune with the environment, cultural ecofeminists suggest that their actions are benign.

Merchant (1990) privileges the material over the cultural position when she says: “Materialism, not spiritualism, is the driving force of social change” (p. 103). Merchant (1996) explains that socialist ecofeminism represents a transformation of socialist ecology. Instead of focusing on production, socialist ecofeminism focuses on reproduction as the means to a sustainable world. Similar to Marxism, socialist ecofeminism understands nature as the material basis of all life. Food, clothing, shelter, and energy are necessary for individuals to survive. Nature and society are socially constructed with a historical context that is shaped by praxis (Merchant, 1996).

Concurring with socialists, liberal ecofeminists assert that women will only contribute to resolve environmental issues when they have equal education and employment opportunities (Merchant, 1996). Liberal ecofeminists extend the liberal paradigm to concerns about environmental conservation. Echoing Carson’s concerns about pesticide usage and the environment, liberal ecofeminists argue that environmental problems stemmed in part from improperly regulated pesticide usage and environmental pollutants. Additionally, they suggested that the unrestrained development of natural resources also contributed to environmental problems.

Liberal ecofeminism has undergone significant critique. Morgan (1996) critiques liberal feminism for its inattention to the “organic connections between sexism, racism, class and homophobia and ethnocentric bigotries, environmental degradation and, well, everything else” (p. 6). Sharing a similar argument as Morgan, MacKinnon (2005) argues for a critical examination of the broader system in which liberal feminists are seeking to gain entry. Black feminists have highlighted liberal feminists’ lack of attention to women of diverse races, ethnicities, classes, and cultures (Mills, 1998).

Cultural ecofeminism has also been critiqued for failing to address issues of race and class (Prentice, 1988). Instead of focusing on the free-market or the broader oppressive socio-political systems of power, cultural ecofeminists focus on the influence of spirituality on women’s empowerment. Ancient, nature-based spiritual religions that located divinity within ecology shape the spiritual domain of cultural ecofeminism. Sandilands (1994) explained that interconnectedness was a theme that resonated throughout the religions to which cultural ecofeminists were drawn. For example, “the goddess, in myriad forms, represents an ultimate vision of connectedness”

(Sandilands, 1994, p. 93). Opposing the separatist worldview endorsed by the dominant culture, cultural ecofeminists argue for an interconnectedness of all life. Although connectedness is a theme throughout the cultural branch, there is no discussion regarding the connection between women's fight against oppression and other systems, such as the economy.

Application of an Ecofeminist Framework: Pre- and Post-Tsunami

Carlassare (2000) discusses the limitations and benefits of invoking a taxonomy of ecofeminism, encouraging individuals to be self-critical when employing a particular branch over another. While these words of caution are relevant for any theory, they are especially salient for ecofeminist theory, which has become dichotomized into material and cultural frames of reference. Warren's (2000) quilting metaphor allows for the integration of many perspectives into a unified whole. However, Janet Biehl (1991), ecologist and former ecofeminist, criticized the diversity of perspectives found in ecofeminism, describing it as theoretically incoherent. She argues that ecofeminists "tend to pride themselves on the contradictions in their works as a healthy sign of 'diversity'—presumably in contrast to 'dogmatic', fairly consistent, and presumably, 'male' or 'masculine' theories" (p. 3).

We were drawn both to Warren's quilting metaphor and Biehl's concern for internal, theoretical consistency. We do not align with one particular branch of ecofeminism. Rather, our goal is to draw from a diverse array of ecofeminist traditions in an effort to make visible the taken-for-granted structures that oppress women in the aftermath of natural disaster.

Our aim is to utilize ecofeminist theories to understand the socially constructed structures that oppress and marginalize women from diverse ethnic backgrounds and classes. We chose this particular theory because of its commitment to plurality of epistemological and ideological approaches. Since a primary focus of analysis includes social structures in Sri Lanka, we found it especially important to choose a theory that allows for flexibility in addressing issues of culture, gender, SES, and spirituality. Although ecofeminism was primarily conceptualized in the West, it is a movement with worldwide influences and connections that are valuable to cross-cultural discussions (Carlassare, 2000; D'Cruz, 1990; Haraway, 1988).

Pre-Tsunami Vulnerability

During the past forty years, Sri Lanka has experienced several uprisings in the South and a civil war in the Northern and Eastern regions of the country (Nebehay, 2011). The twenty-five year Sri Lankan civil war was a conflict between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan government over the LTTE's fight to create an independent Tamil state. Beginning in 1983 and ending with the defeat of the LTTE in 2009, this war predated the tsunami by several decades and continued for five years after its occurrence (Nebehay, 2011). The effects of the tsunami on women must, therefore, be understood in the context of war. The civil war caused significant disruption for the Sri Lankan population, namely ethnically marginalized women (Nebehay, 2011). The war between State forces and Tamil separatist groups, led by the LTTE amassed casualties among the Sinhalese majority and the predominantly Tamils and Muslim minority populations (Nebehay, 2011).

In her book chapter, *Naming the Cultural Forces that Push us Toward War*, ecofeminist Charlene Spretnak (1983) makes a compelling argument concerning the connection between patriarchy and the military system. Men in this system must prove their masculinity by distancing themselves from women and enduring violence. Warzones are a space where men use violence against one another to meet societal expectations of manhood. Spretnak argues that war will

continue to occur until societies address the gender-based political and social pressures. “Acknowledging the context of patriarchal conceptualizations that feed militarism is a first step toward reducing their impact and preserving on earth” (Spretnak, 1989, p. 54). Deconstructing traditional understandings of patriarchy invites the creation of a masculinity that does not revere patriarchal hegemony over other expressions of manhood.

Warren (2000) demonstrates the systemic nature of war by describing it as a circle; regardless of where one starts, one will return to the same place. She describes war as a closed system that continues unhealthy expectations and assumptions of men and women in the society (p. 211). Warren’s circle metaphor combined with Spretnak’s critique on masculinity provide a fuller picture on warfare, demonstrating how warfare is created through the interaction of social influences that call men to be violent. In Sri Lanka these social influences not only encouraged violence but also created a context of vulnerability for women in ethnic minority groups. Despite Sri Lanka’s high regional rating of women’s literacy and health, international monitoring groups and academics have long noted the gendered inequality that exists within all of Sri Lanka’s ethnic groups (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2011).

Within the context of the political war, women were embroiled in a social patriarchy that laid the foundation for a series of risk factors present before the tsunami. Women experienced a lack of physical mobility and fiscal independence, which placed them at significant risk for violence (Fothergill, 1996). Justification for abuse against women occurs in legal, police, and medical systems (Carballo et al., 2005). There was a prevalence of domestic violence and policies that favored men long before the tsunami (Hussein, 2000); with studies indicating that 60% of women are affected by domestic violence (Wijayatilake & Gunaratne, 1999).

Fisher (2010) explores the connection between societal acceptance of violence against women and pre-tsunami risk factors for women. She explains the feminist belief that the relationship between societal acceptance of violence and unequal gender relationships in family and society are the causes of violence. Women existing in an environment that espouses violence against them at family and societal levels face significant barriers to equitable treatment. Inequitable treatment in the face of a natural disaster is life threatening. Women who survived the natural disaster were then forced to overcome post-disaster obstacles such as reconstruction and development in the context of violence and inequity as well as poverty.

Warren (2000) suggests that ecofeminist spiritualities provide an avenue by which women can intervene in such patriarchal systems. Specifically, an ecofeminist spirituality provides a powerful listening tool to anyone “will[ing] to ‘let go of the door’ to destructive, patriarchal beliefs and behaviors.” Individuals create a space for others to be fully present with one another. The space is not meant to fix, heal, or cure others. Rather, it is a space where individuals can connect in a deep and meaningful way (p. 211). Furthermore, this space is applicable not just to the gendered component of the identity of people participating in ecofeminist spirituality. Rather, the open space created is reminiscent of an invitation for any and all to abandon beliefs and behaviors which oppress and destroy.

Women entrepreneurs of Northeast Sri Lanka behaved in ways that partially reflected the ecofeminist spirituality that Warren describes. Ayadurai & Sohail (2006) conducted the first study of its kind, analyzing 200 female, Tamil entrepreneurs in eight districts of Northeast Sri Lanka who became entrepreneurs as a result of war. Women living in the Northeast, an area ravaged by war, experienced direct violence in war. They also fought in the war, engaging in combat and suicide bombing when their male family members had been killed. Skilled and successful entrepreneurs, the demographic profile of women business owners in the Northeast showed that

their motivation for entrepreneurship was inspired in part to support their families and be self-reliant. In this case, women were both reinforcing the space of war that Spretnak (1989) described by engaging in combat while also creating space to build businesses and provide for their families.

Post-Tsunami Outcomes

Major gender biases have been exposed in several studies analyzing Sri Lankan women in the aftermath of the tsunami. Among other inequalities, women were exposed to an increased risk in partner violence (Houghton, Wilson, Smith, & Johnston, 2010), sexual violence and reproductive challenges (Carballo, Hernandez, Schneider, & Welle, 2005), and caregiver burden following the tsunami (Banford, Wickrama, Brown, & Ketring, 2011; Enarson, 2004). These findings support Mileti's (1999) argument. The natural phenomenon has disastrous effects on groups of people who hold fewer resources than others.

A host of not only gendered but also political hardships follow natural disasters, which place survivors at risk (Ariyabandu & Wickramasinghe, 2003; Wiest et al., 1994). Research on Sri Lankan women's oppression has focused on empirical studies reporting the psychological, physical, and mental consequences of the natural disaster. Researchers have relied primarily on theories of vulnerability to contextualize the empirical findings (Fisher, 2010). A missing link in the literature is an intersectional analysis of the creation and sustainment of vulnerability for particular populations, namely women in underrepresented communities (Quarantelli, 1994; Wiest et al., 1994).

For example, older adults comprise a population with complex physical, psychological and social needs that are often conflated with the adult population (Carballo, Heal, & Hernandez, 2005). When age is conceptualized as an isolated variable, other aspects of older adults' identities are eclipsed. Age, disability, and SES were factors that impacted individuals' ability to flee during the tsunami and also to recover in its aftermath. Older adults with low SES were at a greater disadvantage because the poor often lived in areas at high risk of landslides and floods (Carballo, Heal, & Hernandez, 2005). A retrospective cohort analysis examining 3,533 individual from 859 households observed a higher mortality rate among children and the elderly (Nishikiori et al., 2006).

Fernandez, Byard, Lin, Benson, and Barbera (2002) explain: "Age does not make a person vulnerable. Rather it is the correlation between advancing age and the likelihood of having special needs that increases frailty" (p. 68). Aid agencies failed to effectively attend to the special medical needs of the elderly, which prevented many elderly individuals from resuming medical treatment for chronic and acute conditions. Relief packages were not tailored to the dietary restrictions of the elderly, which left many without access to the specialized nutritious diet that they needed to remain healthy. Additionally, aid distribution must be tailored specifically for an older adult population. Elders reported that younger people used physical force against older adults to obtain food and other goods (Mudur, 2005).

Younger adults, particularly women, were also at a great disadvantage due to gender role responsibilities. Houghton, Wilson, Smith, and Johnston (2010) argue that women are greatly affected in the incidence of disaster due to gender role responsibilities, employment, as well as pre-existing power structures within families. The typical division of labor in Sri Lankan families in coastal regions is for male partners to be away from the home while women and mothers remain in the home (Malhotra & Mather, 1997). The majority of employment options present for Sri Lankan men are away from the home on fishing boats (Environmental Foundation Limited, 2006). Women who are involved in the fishing industry have a stationary role in waiting on shore to

process the catches but many also stay in the home. Limited mobility was also connected with the intimate role of women as caretakers in the home (Fothergill, 1996). Ultimately we suggest that these roles left women vulnerable to experience the harshest effects of the tsunami. In attempts to save children and assist others, many women lost their own lives. The authors observe that the roles that women filled, often as caretakers, provide evidence of underlying cultural and gender-laden values. The influences behind these roles are not to be oversimplified and may include personal choice, but also complex compulsory components of the broader social context.

Women experienced economic hardship and inordinately increased care-giving burden after the tsunami (Banford et al., 2011; Enarson & Meyreles, 2004; Wilson, Phillips, & Neal, 1998). Many Sri Lankan women are financially dependent. Dillon (2000) argues for an analysis of the public policy that favors men financially. These political systems create a culture where women must remain dependent on men for survival. For example, many Sri Lankan women whose husbands died in the tsunami were left without their former property because of inhibition under Sharia law prohibiting women from property inheritance (Carballo et al., 2005).

Women whose partners survived experienced interpersonal struggles in their relationships, such as violence against women, which occurred for weeks after the tsunami struck (Fisher, 2010). In the time acutely surrounding the tsunami, damaged infrastructure impacted reporting of abuse against women (Houghton et al., 2010). However, after media coverage reported on violent acts against women and girls, including gang rape and molestation, violence decreased in camps and temporary housing (Fisher, 2010). There is also evidence to suggest that violence was long standing after the tsunami and was associated with other tsunami related challenges such as personal injury. For instance, Banford and colleagues (2011) identified a positive association between increased marital conflict and violence and the daily interference of a disaster related injury in Sri Lankan women 3 years after the tsunami.

The violence that occurred after the tsunami was not the only area of concern for survivors. The needs of survivors varied in terms of housing (Boano, 2009), physical health problems (Lim, Yoon, Jung, Kim, & Lee, 2005), mental health distress (Ganesan, 2006), and women's employment disruption (Ruwanpura, 2008b). Amidst these several needs and challenges, the terrain of aid provision was precariously settled amidst a war, political unrest, and ethnic tensions (Boano, 2009; Ruwanpura, 2008a).

Humanitarian Efforts

Even amidst the complexities of aiding survivors, the tsunami precipitated dozens of relief efforts from both local and international sources. Humanitarian aid occurs both within the context it is developed and where it is disseminated (Bakewell, 2000). This was certainly reflected in the relief efforts provided to Sri Lankans after the tsunami. Previous scholarship has indicated that the needs of women, especially poor women, have been relegated or ignored in the disaster relief process. For example, in some instances a system valuing a single head of household, which tends to privilege men, has left women without basic needs being met (Enarson et al., 2006).

Research evaluated the resources offered in the midst of Sri Lanka after the tsunami as insufficient for women. For instance, the barrage of psychosocial interventions from individuals and groups from all over the world has been strongly critiqued with regard to cultural insensitivity and a lack of focus on instating healing processes. Instead, interventions were offered in the sentiment of "care packages" which were designed without inherent sustainability (Wickramage, 2006, p. 167).

In addition to gender, de Silva (2008) argues that ethnicity has become a salient variable in the aftermath of the tsunami, particularly when it is examined in the context of aid distribution. Tense relationships between Muslims and Tamils before the tsunami began set the context for how relationships were negotiated after the tsunami. Politically less powerful Muslim communities in the coastal areas of Ampara experienced insurmountable suffering in comparison to the Sinhalese and Tamils. These individuals, comprising an ethnic minority group, were less likely to garner humanitarian aid. De Silva (2008) found that new mechanisms for distributing aid in Ampara created further ethnic divisions in the regions and marginalized impoverished communities. The findings in this study support the argument that intervention and prevention work must be done within the historical and cultural context of the community, accounting particularly for ethnic and class dynamics at play.

Ganesan (2006) discussed how some “possible harm and problems” resulted from many post-tsunami psychosocial interventions in the districts of Batticaloa, Ampara, and Trincomalee (p. 241). The positive relationship of perceived community participation in aid associates both directly and indirectly with decreased mental health distress in mothers even when controlling for challenges present before the tsunami hit. Indirectly, this perception of community involvement predicted lower levels of PTSD and depressive symptoms through the mechanisms of collective family functioning and mental health service utilization (Wickrama & Ketring, 2012).

The World Health Organization (2002) and the World Bank (Carlsson-Rex, Trohanis, & Svetlosakova, 2011; 2000) are challenging the neutrality with which society relates to women post-natural disaster. There is also a call for female participation in natural disaster and post-disaster transitions of which gendered analysis is an important prerequisite (Carlsson-Rex et al., 2011). Ecofeminist philosophy favors the development of settings and forums for women to have a space to speak and be heard “speaking on their own terms” (Murphy & Gaard, 1998, p. 27). Enarson et al. (2006) notes that Sri Lankan disaster planning and relief efforts often overlook the expertise and valuable contributions of women, including their sensitivity to “socioemotional needs of survivors” (Enarson et al., 2006, p. 137).

Some attempts to foster this participation have been made with female survivors of the 2004 tsunami. For example, Rees, Pittaway, and Bartolomei (2005) described their work in developing “woman to woman” groups in post-tsunami Sri Lanka, which was comprised of small groups of women who met together and then with a larger group of women involved in the initiative to discuss ideas. Content of the groups included sharing experiences of violence and abuse as well as resilience and the promotion of safety. Such a modality of providing a context for the voice of women’s resilience and perspective is critical in highlighting and addressing gendered structures that enable violence to continue.

When women contribute to decision-making processes after natural disasters systems of oppression can begin to be dismantled (Gaard, 1993). A lack of attention to resilience (Watters, 2010), particularly mobilization of the strengths of women, has contributed to uninformed external aid. Involvement of the local community in disaster relief aid relates positively for women in mental health outcomes.

Ruwanpura’s (2008a) work on housing aid responses in Sri Lanka echoed the commitment to aid being distributed within the community’s cultural and social context. Ruwanpura’s fieldwork after the tsunami included in-depth interviews with survivors facing the restructuring and resettlement of their homes. Ruwanpura refers to the “spaces of inequality” that were evidence of the way in which war and ethnic tensions are part of the political fabric of Sri Lanka, suggesting

that inattention to the social fabric and context as well as to the political climate in relief efforts is problematic (2008a, p. 436).

Hyndman (2007) discussed some of the ways in which relief was disseminated, including “buffer zones” or areas where rebuilding was inhibited to promote public safety. These zones actually created feelings of discrimination and anxiety (p. 361). In other words, the tactical use of the securitization of fear as a political resource in Sri Lanka has resulted in the potential for humanitarian relief efforts to generate fear and mistrust if they are not “conflict-sensitive” (p. 361). The value and efficacy of relief efforts in natural disasters yield a mixed appraisal of help and harm.

Ruwanpura (2008b) highlighted the gendered challenges that faced women as they navigated livelihood strategies after the disaster. For these women the political economy had an impact on this process, yielding it highly complex. De Silva (2008) strongly advocated for outside aid providers to collaborate with local networks and groups to provide services in post-disaster communities. This suggestion may be extended to other regions impacted by the tsunami. Collaboration with local groups allows for researchers to gain firsthand knowledge about aspects of cultural competence that are most salient to women’s mental health needs at the time of the tsunami and later.

Implications for the Ecofeminist Social Justice Project

Warren’s metaphor of theory as a patchwork quilt is helpful in discussing the interrelatedness of research, theory, and praxis, specifically when creating an ecofeminist social justice agenda. If we conceptualize that the quilt we are creating is one of ecofeminist social justice, there must be a border that represents necessary conditions for patches to be sewn into the quilt. We suppose that reflexive, intersectional methodology is a critical part of the border, representing a necessary condition that all patches must fulfill.

Operating within a feminist ethic demands a reflexive research process. According to Fook (2002) reflexivity is a “*stance* of being able to locate oneself in the picture” (p. 43). Reflexivity is a more complex process than merely being reflective. When one is reflexive, it is possible to understand the multiple ways in which one’s worldview and knowledge are created and influential.

Ynestra King (1983) discussed the centrality of theory and practice to ecofeminism when she said: “ecofeminism is about the connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice” (p. 10). Ecofeminism is regarded as social and political movement that conceptualizes the oppression of women and nature as related, dual phenomena. Merchant (1996) describes the diverse ecofeminist approaches utilized to connect theory and practices. Approaches vary in what is held as most salient, reflecting the particular feminist tradition that underpins it. Regardless of the particular feminist niche, most ecofeminists: “advocate some form of an environmental ethic that deals with the twin oppressions of the domination of women and nature through an ethic of care and nurture that arises out of women’s culturally constructed experiences” (p. 7).

In her paper, *Toward an ecofeminist ethic*, Warren (1988) argued that an ecofeminist ethic “not only recognizes the multiple voices of women, located differently by race, class, age, [and] ethnic considerations, it centralizes these voices” (p. 151). In a later work, Warren (2000) described the ecofeminist ethic as “care-sensitive ethics”, both building upon earlier work on and setting it apart from the concept, ethic of care.

Warren likens care-sensitive ethics to that of a bowl comprised of a diverse range of fruit. One piece of fruit is no better or worse than any other. Rather, each piece of fruit contains unique qualities that are appropriate for particular cooking needs. The array of ethical principles in

Western philosophy is like the array of fruit in the bowl. However, not all ethical principles are eligible candidates for entry into the bowl. Ethical principles must meet the minimum criteria of care-sensitive ethics, which include accounting for emotional as well as rational intelligence and contextualizing individuals' experiences rather than positing universal essentials.

Situating gender at the intersection of race, class, age, and disability status includes the multiplicity of voices that may otherwise remain absent from the body of literature (Collins, 1990). Ecofeminists would extend this argument and suggest that these contextual variables must be studied within the context of the environment in which individuals live. Exploring the environmental context is especially important in the aftermath of a natural disaster as individuals are displaced and impacted unequally. Adopting a reflexive praxis requires that knowledge is fluid and context dependent, morphing through practice, relationship, perception, and observation (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Enarson and Meyreles's (2004) review on gender relations in disaster contexts discusses the relationship among gender theorization, public policy, and practical approaches to disaster management. The dominant representations of women as "tearful, beleaguered, and overwhelmed" victims and men as "sturdy and resourceful" that once dominated the literature have given way to social vulnerability conceptualizations of natural disaster survivors and victims (p. 49-50). The authors found that gender and disaster studies often fail at providing an intersectional analysis of gender and class, caste, race, ethnicity, age, and physical abilities.

Enarson and Meyreles (2004) illustrated the regional themes in international gender and disaster analysis with a table comparing highly developed and less developed nations. The major themes on which they reported were: how the disaster was analyzed, how gender was analyzed, level of analysis, and disaster phase emphasized. Highly and less developed nations had many divergent approaches to these research themes. Researchers studying underdeveloped countries tend to explore gender as one of many factors couched in the political, social, and cultural composition of the social environment.

Highly developed nations rarely utilize groups and organizations as a level of analysis in disaster events whereas less developed nations frequently use groups as the level of analysis. Additionally, highly developed nations rarely emphasize the construction of social vulnerabilities to hazards and less developed nations frequently emphasize this phase. Developed nations rarely inquired about women's coping strategies/capacities women's economic activities/gendered divisions of labor, women as environmental resource managers/users, and women's social-psychological health whereas less developed nations frequently inquired about these topics. Interestingly, developed nations occasionally inquire about violence against women in disaster contexts where less developed nations rarely inquire about this topic (Enarson & Meyreles, 2004).

Conclusion

Ecofeminism is a theory that compliments research on victimizations of individuals after a natural disaster. Highlighting the social constructions of women's practices in daily life prior to the tsunami is one entry point into understanding the intersections of Sri Lankan women's vulnerability after the tsunami. Noting the presence of some discriminatory gender structures that pre-dated the tsunami and became more visible in the aftermath, it is clear that female victimization is not a novel concept in Sri Lanka. When women's responses to the tsunami are conceptualized with an intersectional frame, it becomes clear that marginalized communities experience more negative consequences than those with greater social capital (Enarson & Morrow, 1998).

Despite the impact of natural disaster on women, the social science literature renders women, especially elders and women of color, virtually silent in the face of natural disaster. This silence serves to privilege other discourses over those of women. There is a social environment that silences and victimizes women; researchers may begin to explore that by conceptualizing natural disaster within an ecofeminist framework. While the authors focus specifically on effects of the tsunami on Sri Lankan communities, an ecofeminist framework may also be useful in other cultural and ecological contexts.

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