

**Women's Coping
Mechanisms in Natural
Disasters and Their
Application to Disaster
Management in Sri Lanka**

**Research Study presented by
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ABSTRACT

The prime objective of this study is to observe if women's coping mechanisms have been included in the current Disaster Management (DM) policy in effect in Sri Lanka. The author has arrived at the conclusion that there is minimal recognition of women's natural coping mechanisms in disasters within the nation's DM policy, along with many other interesting observations.

To this end, the author conducted interviews with 124 women in the Hambantota and Batticaloa districts to learn the ways in which they have dealt with natural disaster situations during the period from 2000 to 2008. These two districts were chosen for random sampling for this study, as they are both indicative of natural disasters common to Sri Lanka and because they encompass resident populations representative of Sri Lanka's demography.

The emphasis of this study is on women's coping mechanisms in particular due to their greater vulnerability in disasters and broadly to narrow down the targeted sample for this study. The author has utilized questionnaires and focus group discussions to ascertain responses from the sample groups. Given the nature of the study area and its gender implications, the author's approach to data evaluation and conclusions is qualitative. The theoretical approach to the study is based on the DM cycle including the three stages of pre-disaster preparedness, relief response and post-disaster recovery incorporated in Sri Lanka's DM policy. A schedule of questionnaires, focus group discussions and interviews were extensively conducted by the author to ascertain in depth the relationship between coping mechanisms and women before, during and after a variety of natural disaster occurrences. Expert knowledge and opinions were drawn from interviews conducted to arrive at policy recommendations.

According to the findings of this study, Sri Lankan women do indeed apply coping mechanisms in the context of natural disasters, while the majority of coping mechanisms employed are within the first two stages of the Disaster Management cycle i.e. for Preparedness and Relief. The author found that coping mechanisms applied differed in

terms of the type and duration of disaster, and various other socio-cultural factors. While there is significant data to suggest that the institutional machinery at work in the area of DM in Sri Lanka has a general sense of apathy, a lack of awareness and a strong resistance to acknowledge community capacities in DM, the study also found that at the present stage and state of development in Sri Lanka, it is not feasible to expect complete decentralization and structure-less DM in the country.

Drawing from the many interesting conclusions of this study, the author primarily recommends that women's value addition in terms of coping mechanisms in disasters be recognized and incorporated into the country's current DM strategy. It is also imperative that the institutional bodies that are involved in policy and decision making in DM at all levels in Sri Lanka be gender-sensitized and equipped to work with more understanding of the needs and special abilities of women. Specific annual budgetary allocations and policy making needs to lay more emphasis on preparing for and mitigating disasters so as to make DM more cost-effective for the country, and so as not to derail ongoing development programmes whenever disasters strike. With these recommendations in place, Sri Lanka can hope to manage disasters better, minimize the loss of life and ensure a better quality of life for its people.