



Postgraduate
research news

Disaster, Women and Empowerment

Moving Forward

Empowerment is a privilege; the empowerment of women is a long and hard fought battle, a battle some countries are still fighting. Two PhD students, Nirooja Thurairajah and Kanchana Ginige from the Centre for Disaster Resilience, here at the University are researching into just this problem, examining the empowerment of women in post disaster reconstruction and the mainstreaming of the needs of women with disaster risk reduction.

How do we define a disaster? According to the United Nations a disaster is commonly defined as “a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society involving widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses and impacts, which exceeds the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources” (UN/ISDR, 2009). However, disasters may affect different people in many different ways even within the same community since there are various factors such as socio-economic class, level of education, gender, culture, age and disability that make some individuals and groups in the society less capable to cope with disasters than the others. These social factors influence the ability of people to prevent, mitigate, prepare for and respond to hazards. Thus, the poor, the elderly, children, women and disabled people are identified as more vulnerable to disasters. Women are typically disadvantaged in the event of a disaster with limited access to resources, restricted rights, and inadequate voice in decision-making, policies and measures which are insufficiently sensitive to their needs.

Kanchana and Nirooja, working under the supervision of Professor Dilanthi Amaratunga and Dr. Richard Haigh from the Research Centre, are approaching their research from two different perspectives. Since women face different conditions in disasters due to their different social roles and responsibilities, resulting in different needs in disaster risk reduction, Kanchana aims to investigate how women’s needs can be mainstreamed with disaster risk reduction in the built environment. In particular, her study attempts to find out how the different needs of women can be identified and integrated into disaster mitigation and the preparedness activities within the construction industry in order to reduce their higher disaster vulnerabilities. Kanchana identifies the role of the built environment as significant in fulfilling the needs

of women in disaster risk reduction since it provides the underlying framework for all human activities. So far Kanchana’s research findings demonstrate that women’s involvement in decision making in the construction industry, consultation of community women, conducting needs assessment and construction briefing are all ways of mainstreaming women’s needs into reducing disaster risk in the built environment.

Whilst Kanchana’s research is aimed at identifying ways of mainstreaming women’s needs in disaster risk reduction prior to a disaster, Nirooja’s research is aimed at how the affected community women could be empowered during the post disaster reconstruction in Sri Lanka. Since post disaster reconstruction can provide windows of opportunity for physical, social, political and environmental development of the impacted population, Nirooja’s research focuses on formulating a strategy that integrates community women’s empowerment in the post disaster reconstruction and it includes, identifying the key factors which enable or hinder women’s empowerment and exploring the current practices of empowerment of women within this situation. Capturing the views of these women in such difficult situations is no easy task and this research will discover the opinions of women who are from the affected communities and also the opinions of the policy makers and professionals who are working in practice within the field of disaster management, women’s development and the built environment.

If you would like to know more about this research contact Kanchana or Nirooja at: **K.N.Ginige@edu.salford.ac.uk** or **N.Thurairajah1@edu.salford.ac.uk**