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Supporting women's rights

By Jane Thomson, Oxfam Australia Information Officer, Sri Lanka

"I saw people running. They said the sea was rising and coming to the land. When the first wave struck, I was in the office knee-deep in seawater. I also started running then."

These are the recollections of Koralai Pattu North Development Union (KPNDU) Field Coordinator Nagendram Peramalathevi who was at work in Vakarai on the day of the tsunami. KPNDU is one of Oxfam Australia's community-based partners in Sri Lanka.

Nagendram feared the worst for her family as her house was located 50 metres from the shore. Fortunately, her parents and siblings had held onto a tree during the tsunami and escaped. However, three of Nagendram's other close relatives died.

Despite the tragedy, Nagendram returned to work in Vakarai three days later and went about organising groups of tsunami-displaced people in camps to manage the distribution of tsunami relief.

"The groups were divided into three sections — firstly distribution, then child protection, and stores. In all the nine camps this was the system. The stores section was responsible to maintain a record of articles received, the dates and the donors and supplied the goods. The distribution section classified the beneficiaries and distributed the goods according to needs."

The child protection section was responsible to meet the special nutritional needs of children and to ensure their safety in the camps. A health and sanitation section was formed later, again by the camp residents themselves.

"Regarding the privacy of women" Nagendram said, "we erected separate sheds for breast-feeding, dress-changing and for pregnant women to rest. We erected fences to cover around the wells so they could change their clothes after a bath."

Nagendram joined KPNDU in 1997. At the time, Nagendram had not been out of her small remote village of Muriankat, in north-eastern Sri Lanka. "Though I studied up to the GC Ordinary level and I'm from this area, I was confined to my village and had no connection with the outside," she says.

So when she started working in the village of Panichchenkerny, she found many females like her: “Women who never went outside their village were surprised to see a girl from another village coming along to work with them. It was mainly because of the tradition that girls who have attained the age were not even allowed to attend schools.”

Nagendram saw that females in Panichchenkerny faced multiple obstacles including the negative social and economic consequences of alcohol abuse among males, male domination and generational exploitation at the hands of the Mudalalis, or businesspeople, who own key resources such as land and boats and hire local villagers as labourers often at reduced rates.

Nagendram found that females from poor families were restricted in their opportunities and activities.

“Whether 12 or 13 years old, as soon as girls attain age, they are given in marriage. When they conceive, they don’t attend any maternity clinics and even at delivery time, local midwives attend them. Due to this, there were infant deaths and mother mortality,” she says.

“During menstruation, they are not allowed to go out for five days. They were confined to a small hut erected next to the house. To enter the hut, one had to crawl in. Marriages are organised without the consent of the bride. The women have no rights in decision making in that village.

“There are families who are a little better of than these people but this group lives separately from them. Their houses are located a little away. It is on an economic basis that they have separated. The other group feels that these people are unaware of the present world.”

Of 534 families in Panichchenkerny, KPNDU works with the 364 who are considered extremely poor, building 26 houses for female-headed families and families with a large number of female children.

“These people don’t own any land,” said Nagendram. “About 10 families get together and occupy someone else’s land and build small huts. The only belongings they had were one or two cooking utensils.

As part of our activities, we were able to provide them with small pieces of land through the local government. So far, 34 families have been given permanent land title deeds, 160 families have been given permits to occupy land and the rest have been allocated blocks of land.”

In addition to providing support to families to secure land and housing, KPNDU mobilised, formed and trained groups for collective livelihood activities.

“We formed small groups among women and introduced home gardening, goat breeding and poultry farming as income generating activities. There are 175 women group members and 123 men group members. There are five persons in each group and in total 298 members,” Nagendram says.

In addition, KPNDU and Oxfam Australia have a marketing network which receives and sells produce from the Panichchenkerny groups in exchange for food and non-food items. Oxfam Australia provided boats and nets for women’s fishing groups and constructed wells and small tanks for bathing and cultivation purposes.

While the formation of the livelihood groups serves a functional role in dividing work and responsibilities among members, groups start to utilise the power of collective action in meeting their strategic interests.

Nagendram noted that while KPNDU provided information to poor women in Panichchenkerny so that they understood what government assistance they were entitled to, women’s groups began to organise their own affairs..

“They go to the government offices in groups to attend to their affairs,” she says. “Whenever women have any problems, both the women’s and men’s groups settle the problem together.”

All the houses that Oxfam Australia and KPNDU constructed in Panichchenkerny were destroyed during the tsunami. Nagendram says that they will start again, building shelter and providing livelihood support. “I have come to a point where I am determined to do something for the poor,” she says.

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