International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction 6 (2013) 78–86

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijdrr

Spatial confrontations: Abandonment of self-labor in transitional sheltering after a natural disaster

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 6 December 2012
Received in revised form
14 September 2013
Accepted 15 September 2013
Available online 7 October 2013

Keywords:
Spatial confrontations
Sustainable post-disaster recovery
Self-labor
Transitional shelters

ABSTRACT

This study investigated various types of place-based negotiations (spatial confrontations) observed during the creation of transitional shelters that led to verbal and physical violence among evacuees following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami in Sri Lanka. It also investigated how the use of the evacuees' own labor (self-labor) during the creation of the transitional shelters affected spatial negotiations between internally displaced people and shelter organizers. A connection was found between total and partial abandonment of transitional houses and the lack of regard for self-labor during post-disaster recovery attempts. The accepted thesis of increased violence on vulnerable groups in transitional environments after an extreme disaster was expanded. The study adapted a method of systematic acquisition of themes through extemporaneous discourse based on open-ended cognitive interviews conducted among snowball sampled 32 individuals from two transitional facilities in the southern coast. Where labor is abundant and labor-intensive small-scale fishing is livelihood cum lifestyle, the evacuees found abandonment of their labor in the transitional sheltering process both unsustainable and potentially harmful for long term resiliency against disasters. The study also revealed that spatial confrontations did not exist separate from other forms of violence stemming from inevitable transactions between social and economic agents. Employment of self-labor alone cannot cease spatial confrontations, therefore, the root causes of the violence triggered by the transitional environments need to be systematically addressed.

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1. Introduction

This study was undertaken to explore the extent to which and ways in which employment of evacuees' own labor in re-sheltering process have impacted abandonment of the transitional shelters. It further investigated types of transitional-shelter related confrontations that led to verbal and physical violence among 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami evacuees in Sri Lanka. How the use of the evacuees' own labor during the creation of the transitional shelters affected spatial negotiations between internally displaced people (IDPs) and shelter organizers was seen as the premise of this investigation. A naturalistic inquiry through discourse analysis was adapted as the method to categorize themes emerged from in-depth and open-ended interviews with IDPs.

The majority of existing research on spatial confrontations focuses critically on physical violence among refugees in camp environments. Even the limited studies that deal with IDPs in transitional shelters were concerned primarily with physical violence on the two most vulnerable groups, women and children. According to a recent study, researchers must add domestic and family violence to the list of violent events experienced by some refugees, in particular women and children, who are most often the victims of this violence [13]. Furthermore, the nature

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2212-4209/$ - see front matter Published by Elsevier Ltd.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2013.09.005

of victimizer and victim is common to both refugee and IDP studies; the victims are always refugees or IDPs. None of the reviewed studies investigated verbal or physical violence by the stated parties on a third party. Generalizations about the types of confrontations that may lead to violence have focused mostly on the causes, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), interrupted pre-existing economic and social support networks, inconsistency of new support networks, negative behavioral outbursts similar to drunkenness, competition with new social groups, and challenges to tacit knowledge including local skills. In addition, the available literature agrees that prolonged uncertainty and lack of jobs or other meaningful tasks leads to passivity and anger [1]. Although tremendous attention has been given in the literature to the rise of physical and verbal confrontations in refugee camps, little attention has been paid to the violence occurring in transitional shelters before, during, and after the rehousing process. Even the limited literature on this deals predominantly with interpersonal and group violence because of disaster-enhanced pre-existing social conditions [25]. Rigorous discourse on spatial confrontations associated with transitional shelters often suffers from the paradoxical nature of these shelters, because their status fluctuates between transitional and permanent housing. In contrast, the planning and execution of emergency shelters usually takes several months or years to implement fully. Consequently, the time frame needed to build the shelters may exceed the time frame of donor and investigator interest. The following modes of violence reported in literature are able to situate place-based confrontations revealed in this research as an alternate hypothesis for abandonment of transitional shelters. These themes identify alternate factors caused by hybrid socio-physical ailments that may have potentials to explain the spatial confrontations surfaced during this research. In addition, place-based or spatial confrontations add a new paradigm for increased or continued violence on vulnerable groups due to post-disaster trauma and various other altered psycho-physical conditions. Furthermore, the collective understanding of this research argues on both violence and abandonment of the shelters as forms of spatial-confrontations against exclusionary labor practices of the camp organizers.

1.1. Increased violence among vulnerable groups

The frequency with which vulnerable groups are exposed to conditions and circumstances that perpetuate violence form the central argument of the majority of the “violence” literature. The evacuees' perceived lack of coordination and support from camp management, coupled with the unavailability of paid employment, provided fuel for the development of domestic violence, alcohol and child abuse, and social unrest [1]. In addition, despite women's enormous contributions to the rebuilding, the “gender gap” continues to be an issue during the reconstruction phase [12]. According to Pittaway [19], the majority of people who died in the 2004 tsunami were women. In addition, they were victims of rape, sexual, and gender-based violence in refugee camps and other places that were supposed to offer them safe shelter. Post-disaster reports have regularly included rumors about sex trade traffickers preying on vulnerable victims in refugee camps [15]. Refugee camps have become an open ground for a large number of sexual harassment events and violence against women, as reported by organizations such as the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law, and Development and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center [7].

1.2. Coerced interactions in overcrowded transitional facilities

Former divisions and power struggles may be recreated in transitional settings, accompanied by a breakdown of traditional systems of social protection. This exposes vulnerable groups to heightened threats and risks of psychological and physiological abuse. Confrontations in transitional facilities are easily instigated by forced interactions between people who belong to different social and religious groups that have pre-existing disputes, especially among people who belong to different castes. These pre-existing conditions may prevent lower caste people from seeking justice against acts of violence and discrimination or cause them to make quick judgments and react against upper caste people while they are living in the transitional facilities. Such acts on Dalits (untouchables) and migrant workers in India, Thailand, and Burma were reported by the Human Rights Center [1] following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. The high population density in transitional environments tends to expose vulnerable groups to acts of violence and victimization, partly because of the difficulty that evacuees have in maintaining interpersonal identities. Gender inequality and the limited representation of women on disaster response teams have often been cited as possible causes for increased violence against women in the wake of disasters. This information has led to the hypothesis that transitional environments provide extreme testing grounds for social and cultural constructs, which marginalize women and place them at risk of violence and further exploitation [5,17].

1.3. Continuation of pre-existing modes of violence

As theorized in the “nested ecological model”, domestic violence distills factors for marginalization and their inhibitors, which are broadly represented by individual and family factors, socioeconomic context, and culture. Furthermore, socio-economic factors are considered the epicenter of refugee domestic violence, mediated by individual and cultural factors [11]. Resource depletion due to displacement is one such factor that has contributed to refugees' detachment from positive communal ethics such as tolerance, civility, sociability, and consensus-building. Increased domestic violence has even been acknowledged as one of the most common characteristics of transitional environments by those who have lived and/or worked with displaced populations [21].

1.4. Post-disaster trauma associated violence

The perceived temporary condition of transitional settings is another critical factor of confrontation-led violence associated with internal displacement. Frequently, the inability or unwillingness of the displaced people to leave

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