

Single But Not Alone

A Report of EKTA Resource Centre for Women

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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Foreword

EKTA's survey of 4,444 women from 21 villages of Cuddalore district, and focus group discussions on the status of widows and gender equality reveals challenges facing poor families, women, girls and single women in post-tsunami context in this district, and in a country facing 8-9 per cent growth over the past few years.

The challenge facing poor families is **high levels of poverty**. A high thirty eight per cent of the families earn income of less than Rs.1000 per month. It indicates that benefits of economic growth are not trickling down to the poor, and whether there has been a **decline in income of the poor with declining natural resources** merits studying. The study nevertheless shows improvement in human poverty measured in access to basic needs like drinking water, toilet, (government) health services and (government) education. That is 38 per cent of families in the villages may have better access to basic needs other than food and nutrition. Neither can they afford tertiary or professional (and English) education for children for which they have to pay, which is necessary for gainful employment in the context of growth in services and stagnancy in agriculture and fisheries.

While India moves to the 21st century, and is emerging as a global player, **the position of women and girls continues to be secondary when compared to men and boys**. In the survey women's and girls' day to day condition (in terms of access to water, toilets, health) has improved, but the survey also reveals gender inequalities in access to tertiary education and property rights, persistence of domestic violence and growing practice of dowry; which was not there in the fishing community earlier. To give credit to the government, the houses distributed by the government post tsunami have been on the name of women; but in the 21 villages the loss of houses has been few. However, women's livelihood losses during the tsunami have been invisible. There appears to be a crisis in male livelihoods as well with 38% families earning less than Rs.1000/- per month, and high rates of male alcoholism. Unless women and girls benefit equally from development, 50 per cent of Cuddalore (and India) will be left behind in the road to development.

The study shows that roughly 15 per cent of the respondents were single women, of whom 27 per cent are below 45 years of age. Only sixty one percent are working, and the economic condition of others is a point of concern; with government pensions being inadequate. **Single women face a range of gender issues that are specific to their marital status**. Property, if any, of their late husbands is in the name of their sons or in laws. Majority stay with their aged parents after whose demise the women

are mostly left uncared for. They fear going out alone in the dark, as they have less “male protection”. A few are forced into having relationships in exchange for male protection. In half the coastal villages, single women are expected to pay taxes to the Meenavar panchayats, like the male headed households. **Whether they get better services from the Meenavar Panchayats if they pay taxes is a matter for study.**

The study shows that while attitudes towards widow remarriages are more favourable than before, the community favours remarriage mainly if the widows are young and do not have children. Single women themselves hesitate to remarry (probably knowing the abuse within), and also to attend social functions. If they remarry it is expected that they will transfer their property to their second husbands.

EKTA proposes to raise the incomes of poor families, improve the position of women and girls and address gender issues facing single women in these 21 villages through a women/girls led poverty reduction and empowerment programme. Simultaneously, it will work with men and boys to change gender attitudes. We hope all readers of this survey will partner with EKTA towards addressing the challenges that the survey points to.

Ranjani K. Murthy

President, EKTA

Introduction:

On 26th of December, 2004 the Tsunami shook the coastal belt of several Asian countries. More than 300,000 people were killed, 500,000 injured, over 100,000 are still in the missing list and more than one million people are internally displaced, mostly in South and South East Asia, in particular Indonesia, Srilanka, India, the Maldives, Thailand and to a lesser extent Bangladesh, Malaysia and Myanmar (Burma). Four Countries in East Africa were also affected, Kenya, Somalia, Mauritius and the Seychelles (Media Report)

In India the tsunami caused extensive damage to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh, and the Union Territory of Pondicherry. The official death toll was put at 10,749 persons but an additional 5,640 persons were reported missing and feared to be dead. In Tamilnadu 13 coastal districts were directly hit by this disaster. Huge boats were thrown in different directions to distances unthinkable, dwelling houses of the coastal communities were wiped out, children and adults fell dead and injured to the ravaging force of tsunami. The ravaging impact of this disaster would remain forever in the minds of people in this region. Hundreds and thousands of families living on the coast were rendered homeless, deprived of livelihood options and faced emotional vacuum as a result of the loss of lives. There was an urgent need to rebuild their homes, their lives and their future. Encouraged by the government which provided an enabling environment, many NGOs swung into action and organized themselves to play different roles, all towards achieving sustainable disaster resistant settlements creating livelihood options and providing psycho social care.

In response to this situation EKTA Resource Centre for women based in Madurai undertook a study to understand the gender dimensions in Tsunami. The study team visited the affected areas, held focus group discussions with various stake holders and participated in the district and state level consultations of NGOS and the Government. The findings were published in the form of a report. During this interactive phase, the

need for mainstreaming gender concerns and also to build the capacity of the most vulnerable groups; women and children in relief and rehabilitation process was realized. This realization led to the initiation of a programme called “Protection and Promotion of Childhood”. This is being implemented in 21 select villages of Cuddalore district with the **support by CESVI from Italy.**

The 21 villages fall within 4 village panchayats (Pudukuppam, Kothattai, Silambi mangalam and Villianallur) and 2 special panchayats¹ (Parangipettai and Killai). The interventions with children, adolescent girls, youth and persons with special needs began on the basis of a data base arrived after a preliminary survey. This survey indicated details like population; infra structural facilities in the areas with regard to health, education, livelihood and other need based facilities for the community. This survey was mainly undertaken with the traditional leaders and the youth groups who played a pivotal role after the tsunami struck. A simple questionnaire was administered to collect information on the persons with special needs like single women, physically challenged persons and children of single parent.

During our course of action in the past three years the need to undertake a survey focusing on the status of women in the above villages was felt. A questionnaire was evolved, the field staffs were trained to administer the questionnaire and focused group discussions were facilitated to elicit qualitative information.

The questionnaire focused on getting the details of the women respondents in the 21 villages relating to their general family information, their caste, occupation and income, marital status, violence against women and children and the nature of loss suffered due to Tsunami. Also capturing their responses towards the availability and functioning of the infrastructures relating health, education, water, PDS. Further focus group discussions were conducted on specific topics; gender equality and widow remarriage.

¹ Special Panchayat – some of the needy town panchayats were classified as special village panchayats in order to enable them to receive more funds from the Central Government. Recently this classification has been withdrawn.

Profile of the villages

The total population of Cuddalore district is 2,285,395 with the total households of 511,400 of which the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes counts for 634,479 (28%) and 11,773 (0.5%) respectively. The Cuddalore district consists of six Talukas, 13 Blocks, 16 Town panchayats, 5 Municipalities and 681 Village Panchayats. Sex ratio is 985 which is just above the National average (933) but fall short of the State average (986).

EKTA is a Resource Centre for women established in 1990 committed to the gender just society. In the aftermath of Tsunami, EKTA had consultations at the affected districts to assess and grapple with the situation from a gender perspective. Based on an early diagnosis of the situation and in order to infuse Gender and Child Rights perspective, EKTA established a shelter home for girls at Killai, one of the town panchayats of the Cuddalore district in the year 2005. This centre is the central office for undertaking developmental activities in the 21 villages which fall within 4 village panchayats and 2 special panchayats constituted in the Parangipettai block.

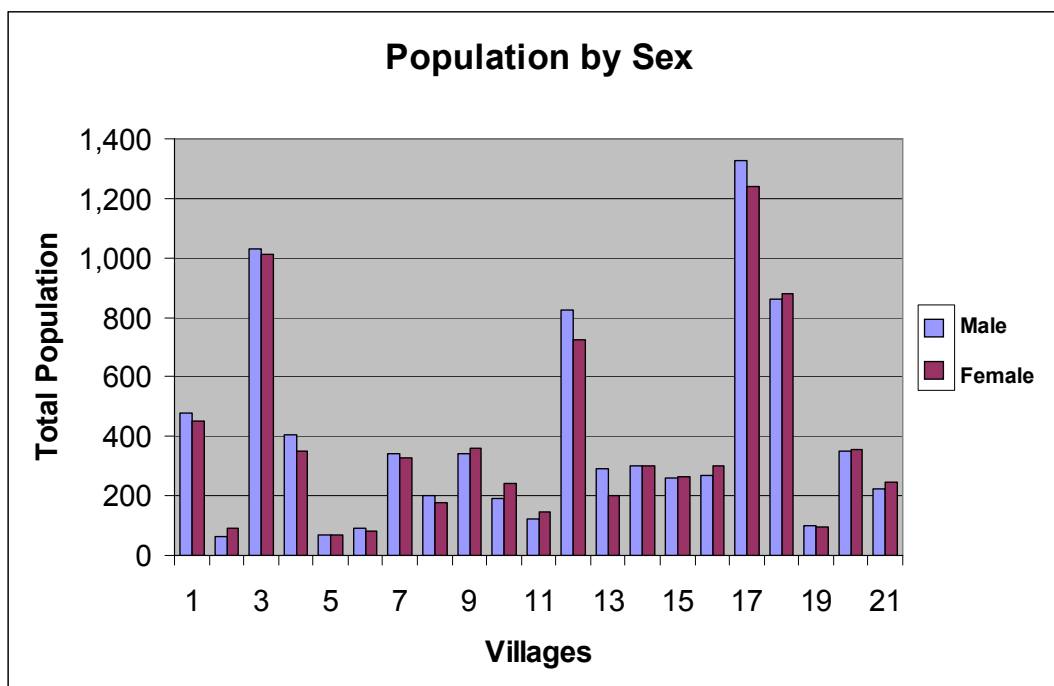
The population of these villages totals to 16,071 with male, female ratio of 51:49. The following table gives the detailed list of male, female population of the 21 villages.

Name of the Village	Population		
	Male	Female	Total
Pudukuppam	478	451	929
Madavapallam	65	93	158
Samiyarpettai	1,029	1,012	2,041
Killai	407	350	757
Chinnavaikal	70	68	138
Pillumedu	92	83	175
MGR.Thittu	342	330	672
Kumarapettai	200	179	379
Kalaingar Nagar	340	360	700
Mudasalodai	193	240	433

Manampadi	125	145	270
Ponnanthittu	825	725	1,550
Indra Nagar	292	202	494
Mullukuthurai	301	300	601
Velingarayanpettai	258	266	524
Mathakoil	269	301	570
Pudupettai	1,326	1,239	2,565
Chinnur	864	878	1,742
Koolaiyar	101	96	197
MGR.Nagar	350	355	705
Singarakuppam	225	246	471
Total	8,152	7,919	16,071

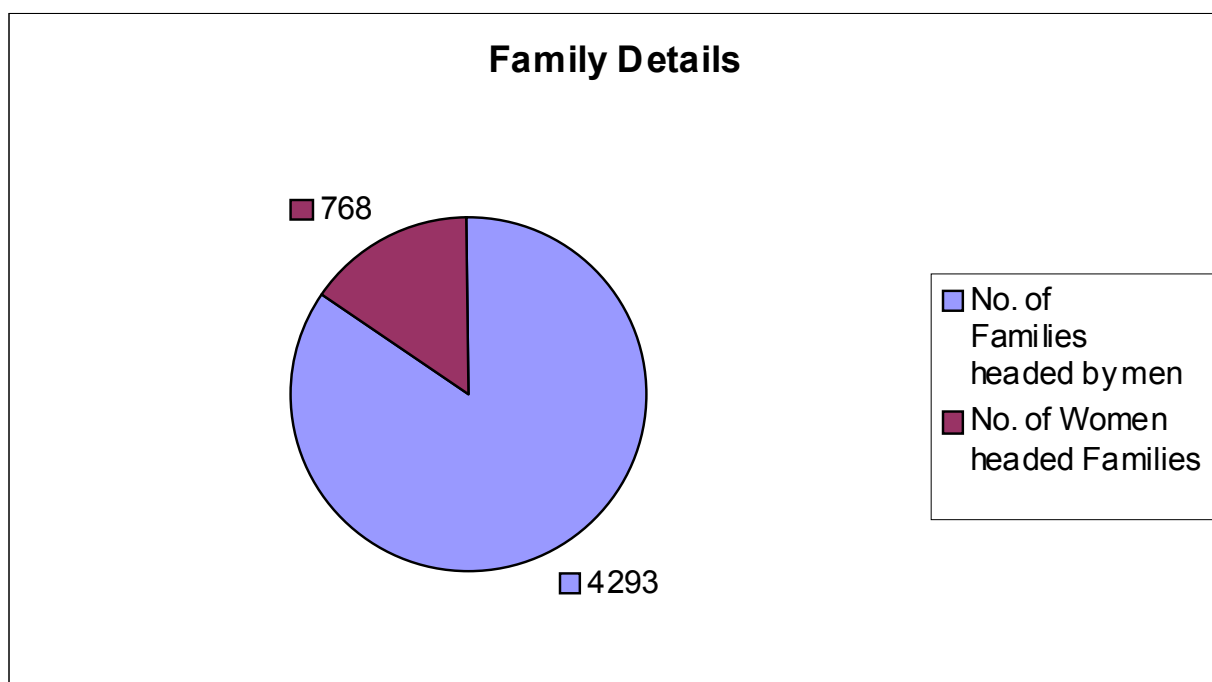
Population

The data shows that in most of these villages the male population is higher than the female population. In a few villages the female population is more than the male population. Polygamy is mostly prevalent.



Family Details:

In the above 21 villages, there is a totality of 5,061 families. Of this 768 families are headed by women (15%).



Details of the single women in the 21 villages

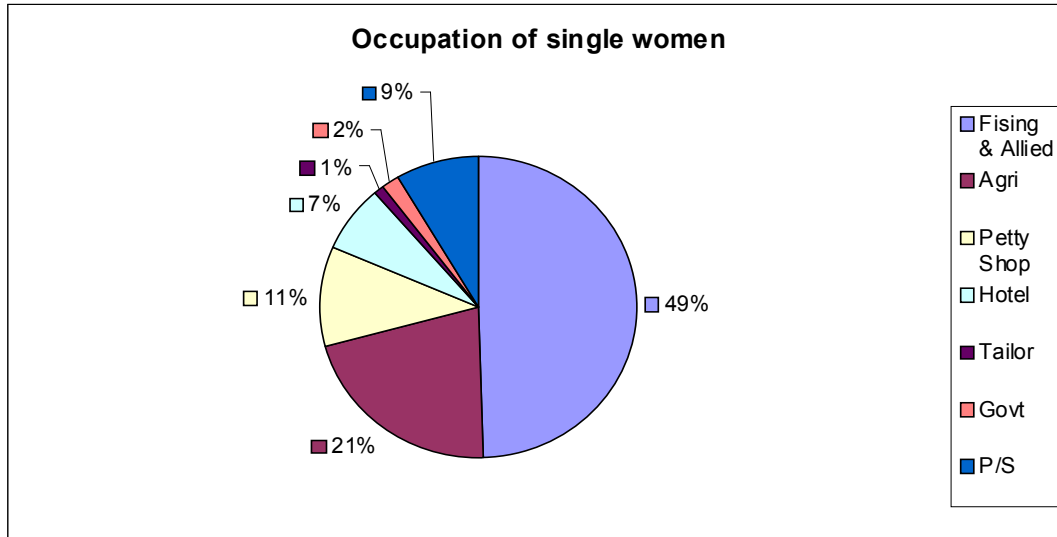
S.No	Name of the Village	18-30 Years	31-45 Years	46-60 Years	Above 60 Yrs	Total
1	Indira Nagar	-	4	4	26	34
2	Chinnur	6	25	22	10	63
3	Pudupettai	-	11	6	71	88
4	Mathakovil	2	11	28	12	53
5	Pudukuppam	2	12	19	27	60

6	Velingarayanpettai		2	13	15	30
7	Samiyarpettai	8	29	40	63	140
8	Madavapallam	-	5	11	-	16
9	Kumarapettai	4	5	20	5	34
10	Mudasalodai	1	13	33	12	59
11	Koolaiyar	2	6	5	7	20
12	Manambadi	2	9	13	3	27
13	Singarakuppam	2	12	21	6	41
14	Kalaigner Nagar	1	5	14	-	20
15	MGR Thittu	-	1	13	6	20
16	Muzhukkuthurai	-	9	21	12	42
17	MGR Nagar	1	15	13	3	32
18	Killai M C	4	22	27	40	93
19	Chinna Vaikkal	1	4	7	-	12
20	Pillumedu	1	4	6	-	11
21	Ponnanthittu	-	25	44	16	85
	Total	37	229	380	334	980

About 12% are single women comprising of widows, deserted and some women preferring to stay on their own among the total women population of the 21 villages. The details are furnished in the above table. 27% of them are below 45 years of age, 34% of them are aged (above 60 years of age), with the rest being in the age group 46-60 years.

Occupation of single women

Of the 980 single women, 61% of them are working and only 39% of them are dependent, not engaged in income earning activities. Among the working group, being a coastal region, nearly half of them are involved in fishing allied work and a quarter of them are in agriculture. The other income generating activities in which they involve (Petty shop, Mess, Tailoring, Government employment and Private services) are depicted in the following diagram.



OBJECTIVES AND LIMITATIONS

From these 21 villages, we conducted the survey with the specific objectives listed below. The structured, pre-tested interview schedule was administered by well trained local community workers. Also, well planned focus group discussions on gender equality and widow remarriage, were conducted by a team of experienced animators with more than 400 women participants.

Objectives

- To collect information on the availability and functioning of public institutions catering to education.
- To study the health needs of people living in the 21 villages to be surveyed.
- To understand the socio economic status of women particularly single women from the perspective of gender equality.

Limitations of the Survey

- Due to the temporary migration of fisherfolk, dalit and irular families, information about some families were not available for the survey.

- It was difficult to get information on the economic profile of the family in the target villages as they fear discontinuation of support from the NGOs and the government.
- Single women who are expecting government schemes were not willing to come out with the actual income and sources of income.
- Since many NGOs work with these communities only after the tsunami and since also there has been very little focus on women's rights, women were reluctant to talk on issues of domestic violence and sexual violence.

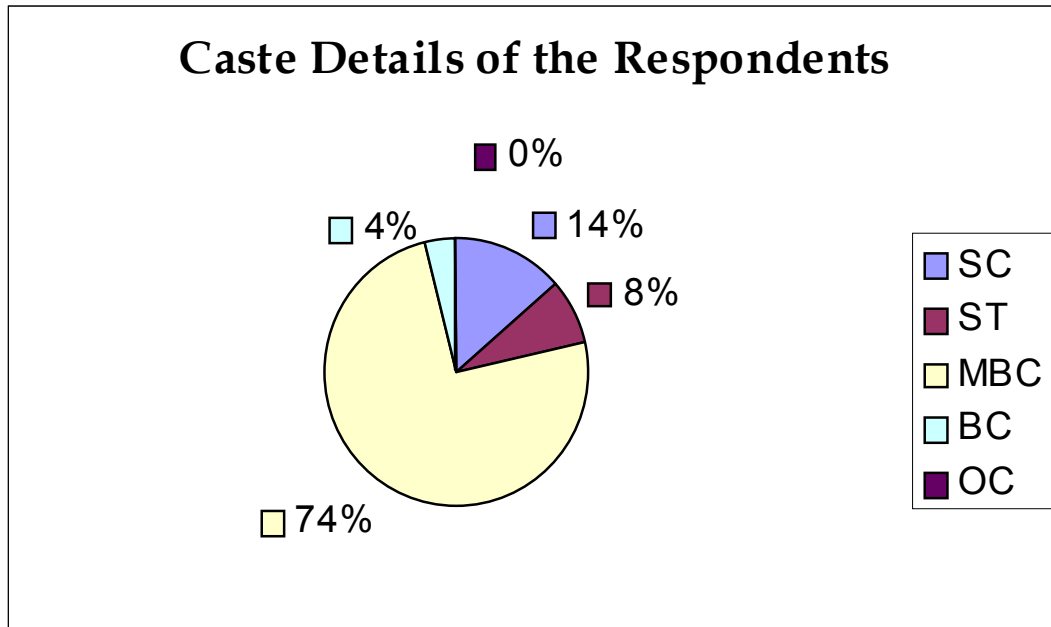
Analysis of Data

An average of 212 women from each village was covered in the survey. Close to 4,450 women respondents were covered in this survey which counts for 57 per cent of the total population. The list is supplied below with village wise.

S.No	Villages	Respondents
1	Mathakoil	202
2	Mullukuthurai	52
3	MGR Thittu	280
4	Koolaiyar	90
5	Chinnur	226
6	Samiyarpettai	491
7	Kumarapettai	161
8	Kalaingar Nagar	165
9	Killai	340
10	C.Manampadi	123
11	Singarakuppam	169
12	Chinnavaikal	61
13	Pillumedu	82
14	Ponnanthittu	378
15	MGR.Nagar	197
16	Madavapallam	69
17	Pudukuppam	385
18	Velingarayanpettai	114
19	Indra Nagar	130
20	Pudupettai	501
21	Mudasalodai	228
	Total	4444

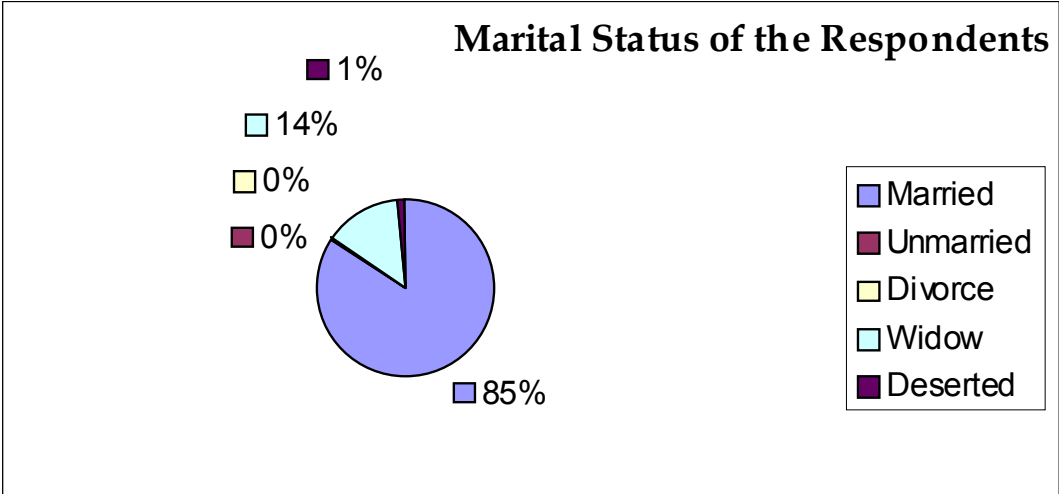
Caste :

The 21 villages are dominated mainly by the fishing community who fall in to the category of most backward class (MBC). The caste wise details of the respondents are depicted below:



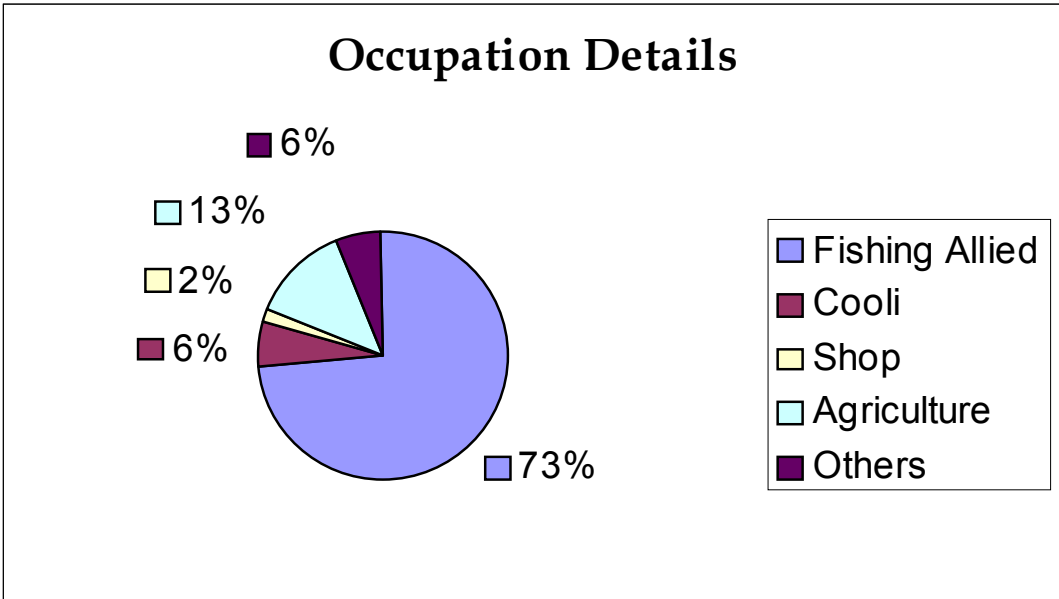
Marital Status:

Of the 4,444 women respondents, about 682 of them are single who comprise 15 per cent of the sample size. The following figure shows the details.



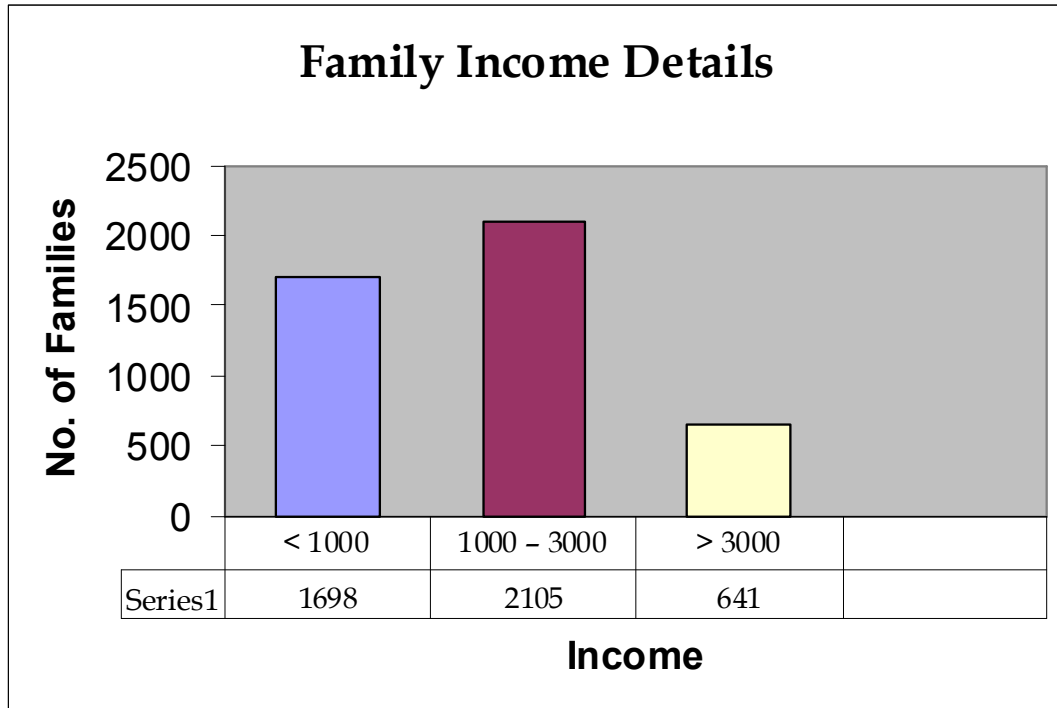
Occupation

The occupation details of the respondents are shown below. Fishing allied jobs are more common in the sample studied



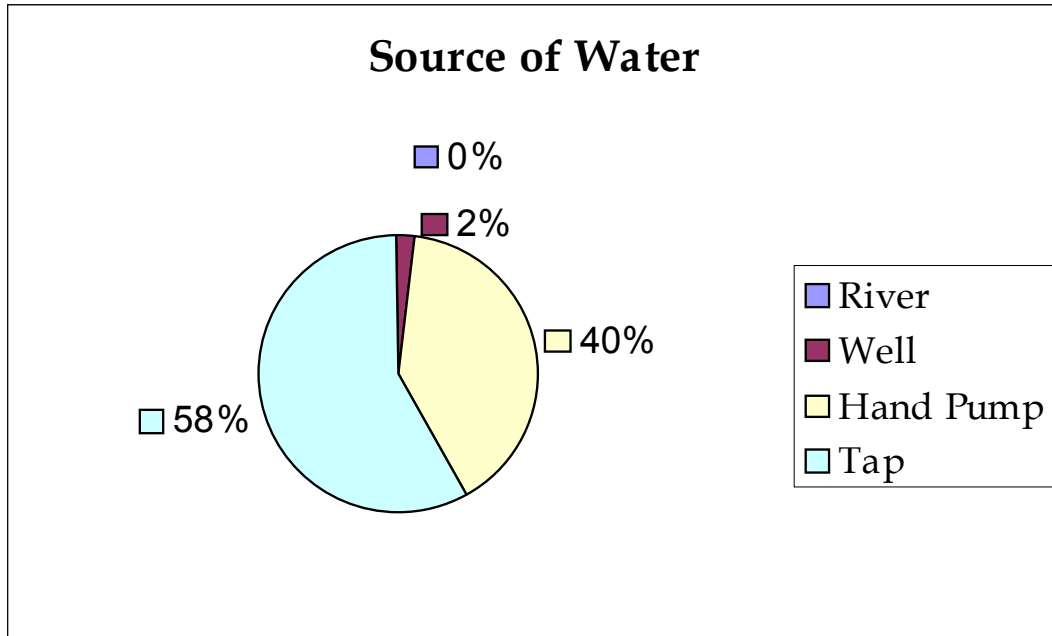
Family Income

The respondents' family income details are shown in the following graph. Thirty Eight per cent of their family earns less than one thousand rupees a month; half of them (47%) earn between Rs.1000/- and Rs 3000/- and about 14 per cent of them are earning more than Rs.3000/- per month.



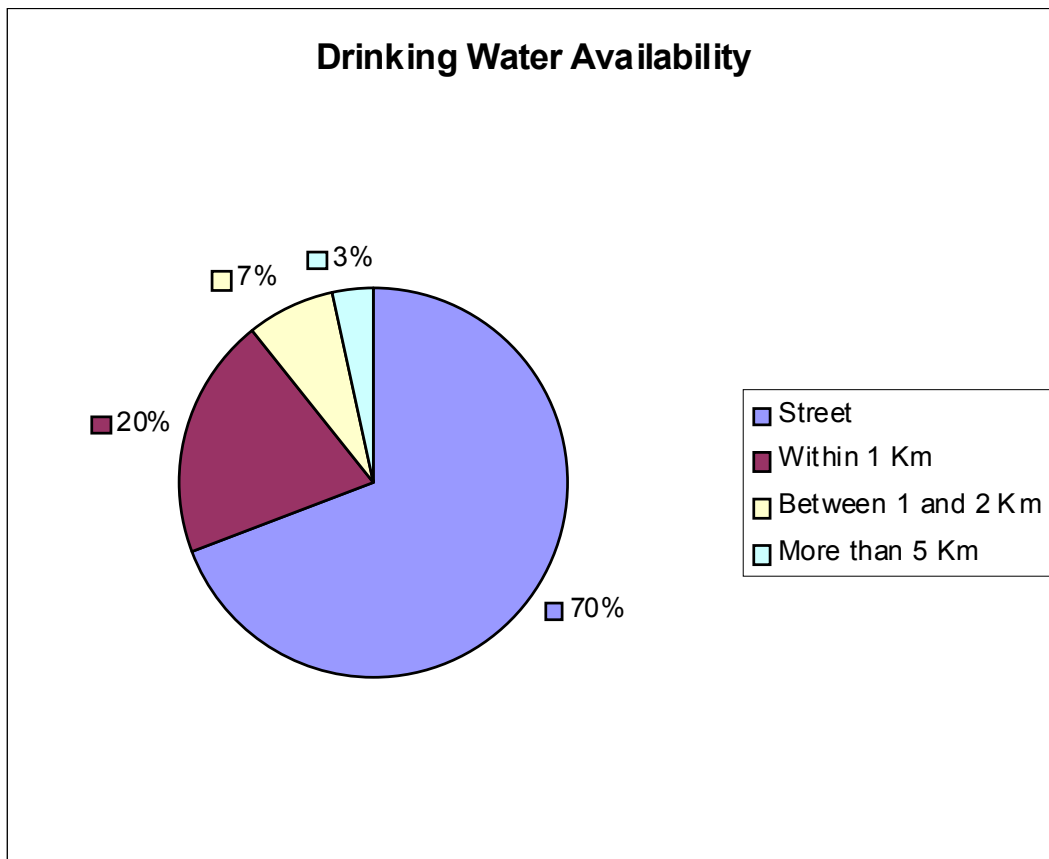
Sources of Water

Regarding the other facilities, infrastructure conditions in the 21 villages, the respondents shared that they have very good approach roads to all the 21 villages as well as good internal roads. All the households have electricity connection. About 57 per cent of the families have the toilet facilities. Drinking water availability is significantly sufficient and also adequate for their purpose. The source of drinking water is given below.



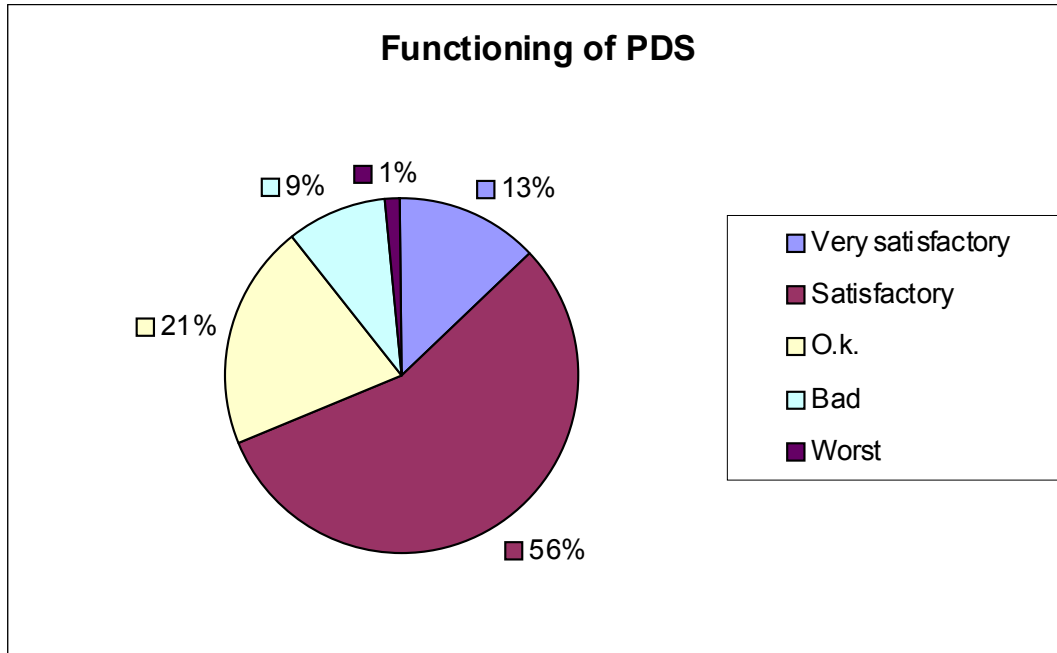
Drinking Water

Nearly 90 per cent of the drinking water facilities are available within a short distance.



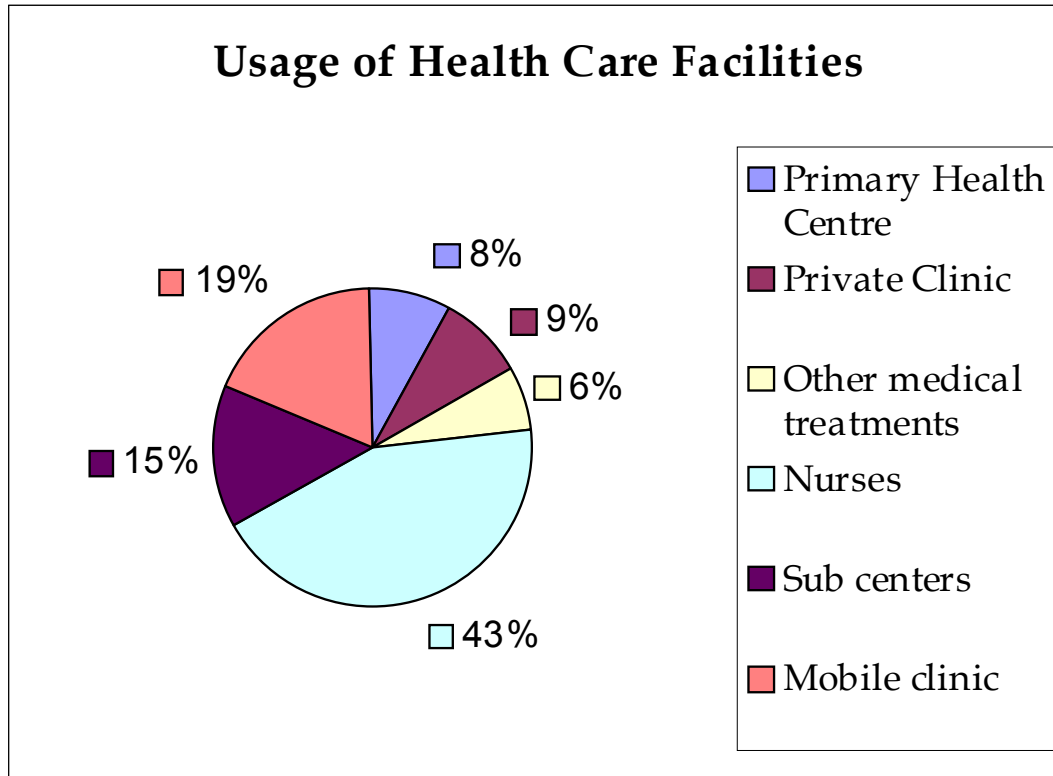
Functioning of PDS

The respondents were satisfied with the functioning of Public Distribution System (PDS). Thirteen per cent of them expressed that they were satisfied with the functioning of the PDS, but there were a lot of grumbling with regards to the quality of service in terms of the time, quantity and the staff of PDS during the distribution of the articles. Therefore a maximum number of respondents felt that the Public Distribution System should improve.



Health Care Facilities

The respondents were quite happy with the functioning of health care facilities. They have 10 primary health centres which serve for the said 21 villages. The respondents predominantly get their treatment done by the village health nurses who come to their village at regular intervals and are treated as family members.



Infra Structure Facilities:

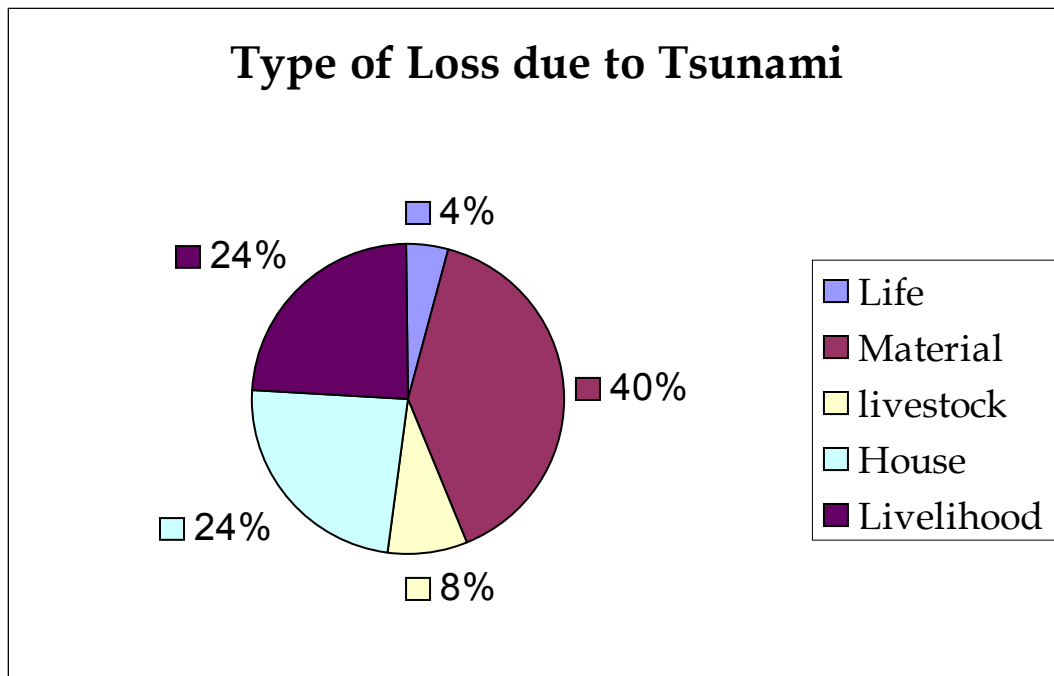
While looking into the other infra structure facilities, there are 17 community halls, 4 cyclone shelters, drying yards, solar drier, auction centres and village information centres at 3 villages, that have been put in place after tsunami, by the government and the NGOs. It was also found that there has been duplication of infra structures in a few places like the availability of 2 community centres in one village. In general there has been no clear cut criteria evolved for the usage of these infra structures.

With regard to educational facilities, there are 10 primary schools, 4 middle schools, and 2 high schools catering to the education needs of the children of these 21 villages. The Balwadi's and primary schools are within a distance of 1 kilometer from their villages. The people now make good use of the Balwadis. The Middle schools and High schools are at a distance of 2 to 3 kilometers from the villages. The facilities at the schools are good according to the respondents. After tsunami, most of these schools received support to improve facilities from the NGOs, INGOs and the Government. All the above schools

have toilets, drinking water facilities, play grounds and Computer facilities. However the usage of toilets remains as an issue.

Losses incurred in tsunami:

Loss in these 21 villages due to Tsunami includes loss of lives, livelihood, materials and livestock and houses. The tsunami washed away 951 houses with all its belongings (kitchen items, cooking vessels, groceries, animal feed, books, notes & furniture) and the livestock (cattle, goats, chicken). A total number of 324 people (Men 63, Women 161 and Children 100) lost their lives while the people who survived felt lost mentally, knowing not what to do and how to start their life afresh with literally nothing in hand. Even today, the 2004 Tsunami evokes painful memories of death and despair among the people. The details of the losses are shown graphically below.



Findings of the Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions were held in all the 21 villages to understand the perceptions with regard to gender equality and widow remarriage. These discussions were facilitated by the senior field staff along with the coordinator. The average number of participants ranged between twenty and thirty.

Gender Equality:

Women continue to have fewer rights, lower education and health status, less income, with lesser access to resources and decision-making than men. Nevertheless, women's critical roles in food production, income generation, management of natural resources, community organization and domestic responsibilities are essential for sustainable development. Equality between women and men means promoting the equal participation of women and men in making decisions; supporting women and girls so that they can fully exercise their rights; and reduce the gap between women's and men's access to and control of resources and the benefits of development. If equitable and sustainable progress is to be achieved, women's status must be improved, their rights must be respected, and their contributions must be recognized. With this understanding the focus group discussions were held.

At the outset the respondents in all the 21 villages told that the boys and girls are treated alike and there was no gender discrimination. However when asked they also shared that boys will be given preference for college education and the land; property will be registered in the name of their sons as they would take care of them in their old age.

They also shared that decisions at the home front like cooking, participation in family functions are taken by women in consultation with men but decisions at the community

level were made by men. Slowly things are changing: in one of the villages, a woman has been chosen for the community level decision making processes.

“Muniammal is a 41 year single woman belonging to the fishing community. She has a son who is now doing his graduation. She joined the SHG as a member and later became the leader of the SHG. Her leadership was recognized by the people and she has been inducted as a member of the fishing cooperative society at Chinnur.”

Men are engaged in fishing, and in some places they work as labourers in agriculture and construction works. Women are mostly engaged in fish vending and drying. Some women (Irulars) are catching fish, prawn and crab at the river.

Before Tsunami in many villages the houses were in the name of men but after Tsunami the Government with its gender sensitive approach changed this as an entitlement in the name of both husband and wife (joint patta).

In a few villages the free houses given by the Government are registered in the name of women. But still in some places men have registered their houses in the name of their sons. However the other major asset, the fishing boats are only in the name of men.

Men go to the private hospitals for their treatment. But in the case of women they first take self prescribed medicines and then if needed approach the Village Head Nurses and as the last resort to the Primary Health Centres.

Both boys and girls are educated alike till school final. However, mostly boys get priority to go to colleges. But many boys prefer to join hands with their fathers to go for fishing rather than for higher studies. In many places girl children are not allowed even to complete school education. Early marriages are a common sight. In the case of middle and high income families, girls are allowed to go for higher studies.

Almost in all places women are allowed to go outside their homes. They go mainly for market purchases and visiting their relatives. In some places men help women

when they go for purchasing. In few places, women are not allowed to go alone. They always go along with men.

In many places, dowry is in practice. It is not as an issue and there are no reported cases; mostly it is settled by the village leaders. In some places dowry is not demanded but they are given by voluntarily by the bride's parents depending on their economic status. This practice is now seen as a measure to prove their economic and financial wealth to the community at large.

Alcoholism is common in all the villages and women have to shoulder the burden of alcoholic husbands. Many women take alcoholism as a man's right as "men work very hard by going to the sea, which women cannot do".

None of them have reported about sexual violence on them. But in person a considerable number have accepted that they have no security while they return at late evenings from their work. In some villages, they have been forced to live with men without remarrying them.

Single Women

By single women we mean widows, destitute women and women who choose to stay on their own. The status of single women in a patriarchal society is a dismal. The societal stigma draws an invisible yet strong line of difference between them and the women living with their husbands. The society makes them scared to face the world with confidence. Hence their issues are left unnoticed.

Majority accepts widow remarriage, in particular, if they do not have children, and leave the choice to the widows itself. But in many places, we find a hesitation among the widows due to the fear that people will treat them badly and also out of concern for their children. Some respondents expressed that remarriage was possible only within the relatives especially within their in laws but a few preferred to marry outsiders.

Majority of the single women were found to be living along with their parents. Some of them live alone in their husband's house and only a very few of them live with their in laws.

It was shared in some traditional fishing villages that single women had to pay taxes to the local village leaders. In such villages, men who go to work, pay tax to the village which the single women are not expected to pay. Therefore, the logic is that, when the single women get any beneficiary measures from the government, they are forced to pay tax. However, many women and girls go for employment today and they have started asking the community leaders that they may be allowed to pay tax in par with the men to ensure all the rights equally to that of men.

Like elsewhere, here also very few women have the right to ownership. Mostly the property is in the name of the male head or in the name of the male children.

It was also shared that there is a fear that if the women remarry the property would go automatically to the men whom they remarry (New husband). Almost in all the villages, the stigma is prevalent that single women should not be found in functions like marriage and puberty functions.

Conclusion:

EKTA as a women's rights organization aims at women's empowerment from their rights perspective. The post Tsunami interventions by many actors has brought in the improvement in the condition of women. This refers to the material state in which women and men live, and relates to their responsibilities and work. Improvements in women's and men's condition can be made by providing for example, safe water, credit, seeds. While acknowledging the need for this process of conditional improvement, EKTA strongly believes that this gain needs to be linked to strengthen the position of women. This refers to the social and economic standing of women in society in relation to men. For example, male/female disparities in wages and employment opportunities, unequal

representation in the political process, unequal ownership of land and property, vulnerability to violence (strategic gender need/interests) to mention a few.