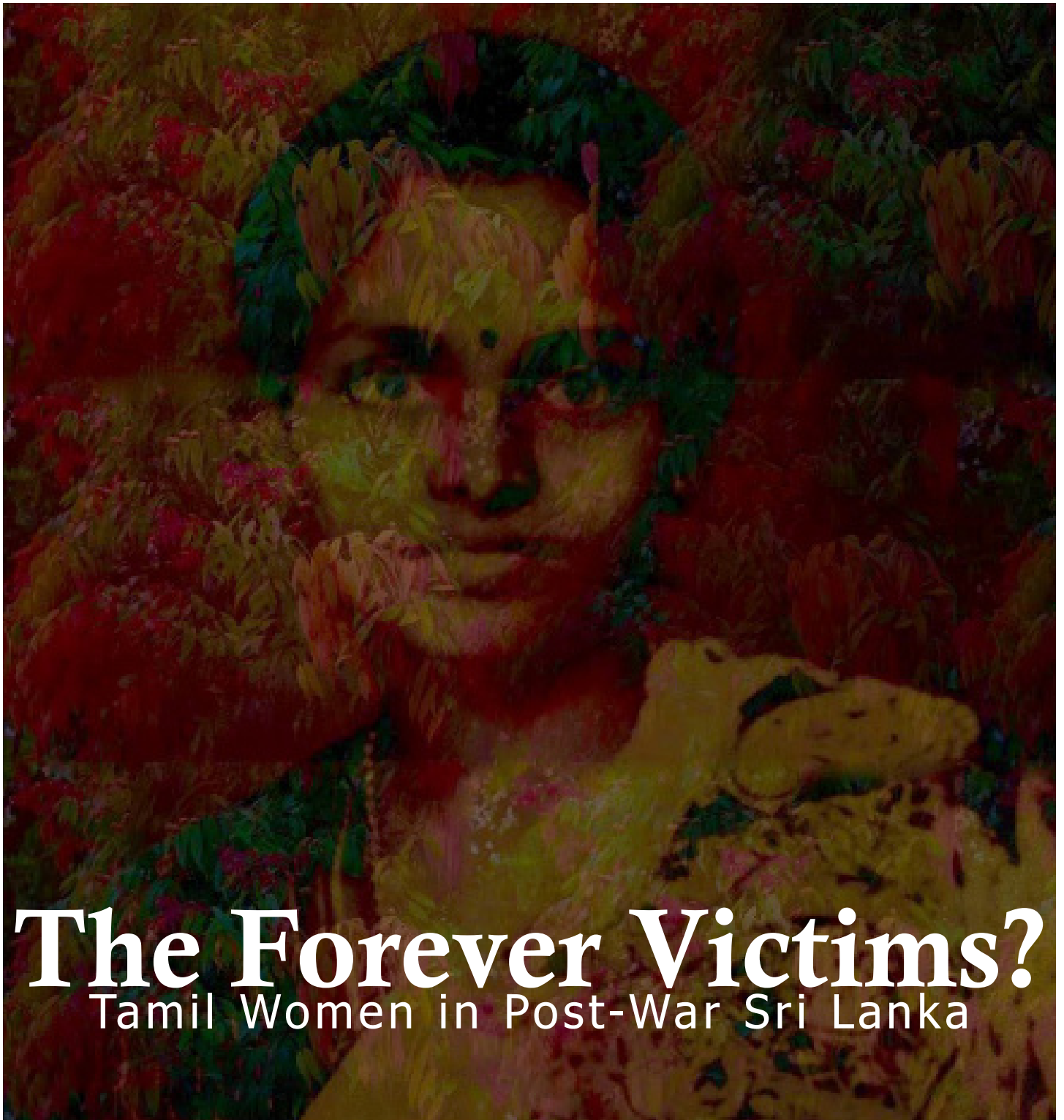


Politics of Sexual Violence Initiative

Colin Powell School
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The Forever Victims? Tamil Women in Post-War Sri Lanka

Abstract

In this report we document the negative impacts of six years of militarization on Tamil women's lives in Sri Lanka. Based on over 50 interviews in the former conflict zone, we uncovered a very disturbing dynamic, in which efforts to protect women from sexual violence end up undermining their political and economic agency, making them even more vulnerable to victimization. Tamil women in Northern Sri Lanka still face the risk of rape and harassment by the security forces present throughout the region, but their lives are even more negatively impacted by the climate of fear and by a worrying uptick in violence against women within the Tamil community. The ever-present threat of violence by the military has led women to lead tightly circumscribed lives, limiting their daily activities in order to minimize their risk of sexual assault. Their reduced participation in public life keeps them in the home, where they are increasingly vulnerable to violence at the hands of the men in their lives, many of whom are also struggling with the after-effects of wartime trauma. And the measures taken by the community, by the state, and by international actors to address their needs have only made the situation worse. Hasty marriage for protection, well-being schemes that entail isolation and exposure to state agents, and disempowering livelihood programs have further undermined their economic and political position.

The Forever Victims? Tamil Women in Post-War Sri Lanka

White Paper

By Nimmi Gowrinathan and Kate Cronin-Furman

August 28, 2015

Introduction

The 2015 presidential election brought stunning change to southern Sri Lanka. Maithripala Sirisena's administration has walked back the powers of the executive presidency and relaxed restrictions on civil society and the media. And the August parliamentary elections, in which Sri Lanka's voters demonstrated decisively that they did not wish to wind back the clock and return former President Rajapaksa to power, consolidated these changes. But in the north, the benefits of this political shift have been limited. While there has been some movement on land confiscations and political prisoners, the military remains a pervasive presence that defines daily life in a way that is simply not the case in the south.

The situation remains particularly grave for Tamil women. For them, the last six years have brought lives circumscribed by the threat of violence and ever-diminishing economic opportunities. Militarization has meant both the omnipresent possibility of sexual violence by state security forces, and the deterioration of community networks. Many Tamil women have been raped by Sri Lankan military, especially in the immediate post-war period, but many more have seen their activities constrained by the climate of fear. And while the rate of sexual violence perpetrated by security forces against Tamil women has declined (but not disappeared), earlier violations remain unaddressed, and the strictures on women's lives have only been further entrenched.

This report details the current challenges facing Tamil women in northern Sri Lanka.¹ Our research team conducted more than 50 interviews on the island, with women in the former conflict zone and activists and advocates working on their behalf.² On the basis of these interviews, as well as extensive primary source, secondary source, and field research on the broader post-war context, we conclude that the limitations imposed upon women to reduce the risk of sexual violence actually make them systematically more vulnerable to victimization by leaving them with less social and economic power. The testimony presented below suggests that the reduction in women's economic agency puts them at higher risk of sexual violence (both from military and inter-community sources) and of engaging in transactional sex. What's more, interventions aimed at helping appear to be exacerbating these dynamics by reinscribing an extremely limited political and economic role for Tamil women.

1 Most of the firsthand testimony presented in this report comes from non-Muslim Tamil women living in the Northern Province. However, on the basis of discussions with victims' representatives and activists who work throughout the country, we believe that our findings characterize the situation throughout the northeast, where militarization has persisted since the war's end. We expect, however, that many of these dynamics are complicated and exacerbated for Muslim Tamil women in the east and elsewhere, whose situation is made more dangerous by rising levels of anti-Muslim sentiment among the Sinhala-Buddhist population.

2 The majority of these individuals are not identified by name, due to concerns about their security.

Section 1

The Post-War Context

The final phase of Sri Lanka's civil war brought devastating hardship to civilians in the north. As the military pushed across the Vanni, the population was caught between them and the retreating LTTE. Successively displaced over a period of months, with insufficient food and medical care, their situation was desperate. Credible evidence exists that during this time government forces intentionally shelled declared "No Fire Zones" as well as hospitals and humanitarian aid operations. The rebels offered no protection. As the military situation became more untenable, they forced the civilian population to serve as human shields and a source of free labor, shooting those who attempted to flee to safety.

As the war ended, the government held more than 280,000 civilians in a network of internment camps.³ With humanitarian and media access heavily restricted, abuses were rampant. The occupants were viewed with suspicion as terrorist sympathizers, and surveilled heavily by their military keepers. Those taken for questioning were subject to brutal interrogation tactics. The women in the camps, many of whom had been separated from male family members, were particularly vulnerable.⁴

For those believed to be members of the LTTE, the situation was even worse. More than 10,000 suspected ex-combatants were taken into government custody. Some were extra judicially executed, a fact recorded in cell phone videos taken as trophies by members of the Sri Lankan army. Many more were sent to secret camps, ostensibly for "rehabilitation." Among them were thousands of women. One, interviewed in 2015, says *"I did what I had to do to get out of there. I cannot talk about my time inside of that place."*⁵

By 2012, most of the camps had been emptied. (Although reports persist that even in 2015, several "black sites" continue to operate.⁶) But life in the north did not return to normal. More than 100,000 people remain unaccounted for.⁷ Most of the missing are men, many likely killed in the final days of the war, others detained by the government for actual or alleged membership in the LTTE. For their families, life in the post-war period has been dominated by the need to uncover their fates. They have been forceful advocates for themselves, organizing to demand justice and pursue all possible avenues of information. As Tamil politician Ananthi Sasitharan says of her search for her husband, former LTTE member 'Elilan', *"If I knew God's address, I would write to him too."*⁸

The campaign for information about the disappeared has carried significant risks for the

3 International Crisis Group. *War Crimes in Sri Lanka*. 17 May 2010.

4 International Crisis Group. *Sri Lanka: Women's Insecurities in the North and East*. 20 Dec 2011. Human Rights Watch. *We Will Teach You a Lesson*. February 26 2013.

5 Personal Interview. Ex-Combatant (2). Jaffna 2015.

6 International Crisis Group. *Sri Lanka Between Elections*. 12 August 2015.

7 According to the bishop of Mannar, Rayappu Joseph, the figure is approximately 147,000.

8 Personal Interview. Ananthi Sasitharan. Jaffna 2015.

families, who have been targeted by the government for their advocacy.⁹ They have been surveilled, harassed, and in some cases, jailed. In the most high profile incident, Jeyakumari Balendran, whose 15-year-old son disappeared after surrendering to the army at the end of the war, was arrested by the Terrorism Investigation Division in March 2014, during a crackdown on civil society in the north that appeared to be aimed at preventing the flow of information to the international community in the run-up to the 2014 UN Human Rights Council session. Jeyakumari was detained without charges under the Prevention of Terrorism Act for an entire year, while her 13-year-old daughter, who had been arrested with her, was held in state custody.

In addition to the all-consuming search for the disappeared, women's struggle to rebuild their lives has been complicated by the ongoing and oppressive presence of the Sri Lankan military in the north. There has been extensive documentation of direct violations against the Tamil population in the North and the East committed by the state (military/paramilitary), during, and in the immediate aftermath of the war.¹⁰ Rape and sexual torture were particularly pervasive in the immediate post-war period. The complete control of military personnel over internment camps and resettlement camps, coupled with a lack of privacy in overcrowded spaces, and the persistent removal of "suspicious" women for questioning led to a rash of sexual violence by state forces.¹¹

Six years after the war's end, security forces remain heavily deployed throughout the Northern Province. The Sri Lankan government under both Rajapaksa and Sirisena has argued that the troops are performing crucial development tasks and avoided clarifying the exact numbers present. But by one estimate, more than 160,000 soldiers were stationed in the north in 2014, indicating an approximate ratio of 1 soldier for every 6 civilians.¹² Huge areas of land remain demarcated as "high security zones," off-limits to civilians, including the former owners. And the military retains police powers to operate checkpoints and stop people for questioning.¹³

The extent to which militarization has permeated civilian life is clear in even the most intimate details of cultural life in the north; for instance, a press release announcing that "Sri Lanka Air Force helicopters sprinkled flowers" on a temple festival in Mullaitivu, the site of the bloody end to the war.¹⁴ They are also deeply embedded in the local economy, operating a variety of businesses ranging from farms and vegetable stands to hotels and restaurants. And despite gestures in the direction of returning land to its rightful owners, there is no indication that the current government plans to reduce the military presence.¹⁵

9 Oakland Institute. *"I Speak Without Fear..." Where Are Our Loved Ones Who Have Been Abducted, Arrested, and Disappeared?* May 2015.

10 Saroor et al. 2014. *Our Struggles, Our Stories*.

11 International Crisis Group. *Sri Lanka: Women's Insecurities in the North and East*. Dec 20 2011.

12 Oakland Institute. *The Long Shadow of War: The Struggle for Justice in Postwar Sri Lanka*. May 2015.

13 These powers were suspended by the Sirisena government in March 2015, but subsequently reinstated.

14 Army Media Unit. "Vattapalai Kannaki Amman Temple Pongal Festival on with Unprecedented Crowds." June 9, 2014.

15 And indeed, any action adverse to the military's political and economic interests, given the critical role its support played in bringing this government to power.

Section 2

The Situation for Tamil Women in 2015

In the aftermath of the 2015 election, some observers have predicted rapid improvements to conditions in the north. Others have argued that as long as the military remains deployed throughout the former conflict zone, the risk of rape at the hands of state forces remains the primary human rights concern for Tamil women. In fact, neither of these narratives accurately characterizes the situation on the ground. Tamil women still face a real risk of violence from the military, and will continue to do so as long as the troops remain deployed and deterring and punishing violations is not prioritized. But the most acute threats to their well-being stem from the climate of fear engendered by six years of militarization, which limits their social, economic, and political agency, and exposes them to increased violence from state forces and from within the war-traumatized Tamil community.

Abuses by State Security Forces

While the incidence of rape allegations against state forces has declined since the immediate post-war period, current conditions cannot be considered separately from the deep trauma experienced in the final stages of the war and the subsequent six years of militarization. Rape by state forces remains a highly salient concern for the women in the Tamil community. As one activist explains: *“At the end of the day, Tamils are shown the kind of power the military has over us as subjects, and that they can also subject women and men to sexual violence. Like anywhere else in the world, rape in Sri Lanka is used as a tool to punish the community, and to strip Tamil women of their dignity.”*¹⁶

The entrenchment of the military presence has pushed ongoing abuses by the state further underground, while continuing to constrain the choices of Tamil women for whom elements of the military apparatus are present in nearly every aspect of their daily lives. While military representatives continue to argue that *“the allegation that the presence of the security forces in the North contributes to the insecurity of women and girls is a myth,”*¹⁷ the link between militarization and the vulnerability of women has been well-documented in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.¹⁸ One activist urges, *“we need to recognize the impact of military presence in a region where it is not actually at the request of the people living in that area, it is against the wishes of the people”* including, and beyond, sexual violence.¹⁹

The most overt forms of violence against women, (rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment) remain a concern amongst Tamil women, particularly survivors of rape by the military

16 Personal Interview. Civil society activist. Colombo 2015.

17 Personal Interview. Civil society activist. Colombo. 2015.

18 For a more thorough examination of militarization and its impact, see research by the Center for Policy Alternatives, Together Against Genocide, and scholarly work by Neloufer de Mel (2001), Cynthia Enloe (2000), Anuradha Chenoy (2002), Sivamohan (2004), Saroor et al (2014) among others.

19 Personal Interviews. Civil society activists. Colombo. 2015.

who have reported their cases, with no follow up or prosecution.²⁰ As one priest in the north comments: “So many things are hidden when it comes to rape. Rape by the military is the most hidden. It is only the doctors who really see it.”²¹ Others point to the relationship between paramilitary forces and the military in certain regions, with collaborations extending into deep business ties, providing additional impunity for acts of sexual violence.²²

While some sub-groups of Tamil women are “particularly vulnerable” to rape (those living near large army camps, the disabled)²³, most Tamil women live with a disturbing spectrum of aggressive sexual behaviors from military personnel. This extends to the “psychological forms of sexual violence, and threats of rape and sexual intimidation through the military that is still there, even if the numbers of personnel have decreased.”²⁴

Sexual harassment by the military remains a daily reality for Tamil women, particularly young women, who must engage with state forces for basic activities ranging from purchasing vegetables to school registration. In areas with little electricity, many women’s only opportunity to charge their cell phones is to visit the nearest military camp.²⁵ Some, one rights activist notes, “are asked for sexual favors in exchange for the use of their electricity.”²⁶ Women’s lives, and daily mobility,²⁷ are shaped by the constant constraint by the presence of military camps.

“In order to even fetch water or firewood, women have to go past these military camps. This certainly limits their mobility. Rape, itself, might not be happening at a large scale, but women have not forgotten the brutal rapes witnessed during and after the war.”²⁸

Tamil politician Ananthi Sasitharan explains, “Tamil women are constantly harassed by men, and also have a very serious economic problem.” In most cases the two are inextricably linked. With limited income-generation opportunities available to them, Tamil women are often left to fill positions such

20 In 2014, human rights expert Yasmin Sooka wrote of claims by the Sri Lankan government to have punished military perpetrators of sexual violence: “It is assumed this [punishment] was through court martial or other military disciplinary procedures” as a “search of the court records in Colombo has found no information regarding prosecutions in a civil court.” (Sooka et al, 2014: 82)

21 Personal Interview. Senior Church Official. Vavuniya 2015

22 In one reported case this year, a paramilitary soldier raped a ten-year-old girl in collaboration with Sri Lankan navy personnel. As activists pursued the case, it was revealed that the perpetrator and the navy were both involved in an illegal sand mining project. The girl is now in a safe shelter, though the perpetrator continues to search for her. Women’s rights activist. Colombo 2015.

23 Personal Interview. Human rights lawyer. Colombo 2015.

24 Personal Interview. Women’s rights activist and scholar. Jaffna 2015.

25 Personal Interview. Women’s rights activist. Colombo 2015.

26 Personal Interviews. One women’s rights activist is quoted here but several, across the island, noted a rise in the trend of “sexual favors” as Tamil women try to access services and resources. Colombo, Jaffna 2015.

27 Limited mobility for Tamil women was noted in most interviews with Tamil women and activists interviewed in 2015. This issue was particularly acute for female combatants (discussed in Section IV below) under direct surveillance.

28 Personal Interview. Women’s rights activist and scholar. Colombo 2015.

as cleaning toilets in military camps where *“they are often subjected to sexual harassment and abuse.”*²⁹ Similarly, the Civilian Security Department (a home guard discussed in more detail in Section III) offers destitute women a small salary and cell phone in exchange for largely manual labor, placing women under the direct authority of military personnel, forced to *“work under the military’s conditions.”*³⁰

Fear: A Barrier to Participation

A pervasive “fear psychosis” that existed throughout the conflict has seeped deeper into the Tamil psyche during six years characterized by constant surveillance and the ever-present threat of violence. This fear has a paralyzing effect, particularly for Tamil women, for whom even the most mundane decisions (who to speak to, where to walk, where to buy food) are shaped by the risk of harassment, abuse, questioning, or detention. One activist laments, *“The fear of rape stops women from doing many things, going out in the night for example. It stops women from being mobile, being productive.”*³¹

In daily life, Tamil women *“limit their public outings,”* with some women even shifting their religious habits to attend temple in daylight, rather than the traditional evening ceremonies.³² A senior educational advisor working across the region finds that *“girls are afraid to go to school, particularly in areas like the islands off the coast,”* and suggests that nearly half of students in certain schools have stopped attending, leaving them with little hope of gaining employable skills.³³

A public presence, in any form, invites threats and most women *“shrink inside their houses these days.”*³⁴ Ananthi, the lone TNA female political candidate, starkly outlines the risks of political engagement: *“My choice”, she says, “is to live or die. If you stay, you know you’ll die.”*

Violence Within the Community

Alongside, and more immediate than, the threat from state security forces sits another risk to women’s safety: sexual violence perpetrated by “known people”, members of their own community.³⁵ A hostel in the North that once used to safely deliver the babies of military rape is now a refuge to Tamil women who have been raped by members of the community, with both perpetrators and victims old as sixty years old.³⁶ While cautioning that the data is not available, one long-time Tamil activist in the North says that there *“appears to be an increase in sexual violence amongst Tamils, including concerns like marital rape.”*³⁷ This came suddenly, and brutally, to the forefront in the case of Vithya, an 18-year-old school girl who was raped and murdered in May 2015,

29 Personal Interview. Women’s rights activist. Colombo 2015.

30 Personal Interview. Church official. Killinochi 2015.

31 Personal Interview. Human rights expert. Colombo 2015.

32 Personal Interview. Senior church official. Vavuniya 2015.

33 Personal Interview. Senior educational advisor. Jaffna 2015.

34 Personal Interview. Physician, rights activist. Jaffna 2015.

35 Personal Interview. Human rights lawyer and development consultant. Colombo 2015.

36 Personal Interview & Visit. Senior nun. Jaffna 2015.

37 Personal Interview. Women’s rights activist and scholar. Jaffna 2015.

allegedly by three members of the Tamil community. Protests expressing outrage at her fate became a political flashpoint, mired in a web of competing agendas.³⁸

But the problem of within-community violence links back to the trauma of the post-war environment. A professor at Jaffna University cites *the “complete breakdown of social networks, a well-known strategy of counter-terrorism, where you now see those who have been in detention a long time becoming perpetrators of sexual violence.”*³⁹ Along the same lines, an activist highlights the constant movement and displacement of Tamil populations during the war, pointing out that it is only now that “...they have gone back to their villages; there is a breakdown in social capital and loss of social cohesion. The feeling of being part of a community is gone.”⁴⁰ A rise in alcoholism, that some blame on state-run liquor shops popping up on every corner, coupled with a general sense of powerlessness amongst Tamil men, has altered behaviors in ways that most acutely affect Tamil women.

Family relationships have destabilized. The final stages of the war saw a rash of “early marriages,” with teenage girls marrying “the next door neighbor’s son or some uncle”⁴¹ to prevent forced recruitment into the LTTE. Some even tried hastily to get pregnant, in order to be physically unable to fight. The post-war abandonment left young widows hurriedly looking to “re-marry to protect their reputation.”⁴² With the institution of marriage—formerly the backbone of community relationships—undermined, Tamil women have been increasingly vulnerable to teenage pregnancies, inter-family and inter-community molestation, harassment, and rape.

Exploitative and Transactional Sex

In the post-war context, sex is both everywhere, and perpetually, purposefully, hidden. In its bid to maintain the cultural “purity” of Tamil culture, the LTTE limited internet and mobile technology, while social problems like alcoholism, pornography,⁴³ and gender-based violence were severely punished. “There was a sense that these things are an invasion, and would diminish the LTTE control over identity and rights.”⁴⁴

The absence of the disciplinarian leadership of the LTTE alongside heavy militarization has fostered the growth of exploitative sexual relationships. Both a local activist and a laborer point to the Jaffna Bus Stand as site where young Tamil women are vulnerable. “Here, you will see a young Sinhalese man who will stop a Tamil girl on her way to tuitions to show her a music video, or something interesting on his phone.” Abandoned houses across Jaffna facilitate pop-up prostitution by amateur

38 While the initial anger and protests stemmed from a legitimate frustration and anger of community members, some activists were concerned that the space for protest was co-opted by groups from outside the community, while others suggest state involvement in encouraging more violent forms of protest. *See also:* <http://groundviews.org/2015/05/26/the-rape-and-murder-of-vidya-do-women-really-matter-in-sri-lanka/>

39 Personal Interview. Jaffna university professor. Jaffna 2015.

40 Personal Interview. Civil society activist. Colombo 2015.

41 Personal Interview. Civil society activist. Colombo 2015.

42 Personal Interview. Ananthi Sasitharan. Jaffna 2015.

43 Several interviewees noted a “flood” of pornography in recent years.

44 Personal Interview. Human rights expert. Colombo 2015

pimps, capitalizing on space and the insecure position of Tamil women. Ananthi recounts, *“One day, I just stood at the gate at one house and the owner yelled that I cost him 10 lakhs.”* The police presence around these homes indicates the quiet complicity, if not outright collaboration, of state forces. The “clients” range from high-level politicians to low-ranking soldiers.

Women’s rights activists, and Tamil women themselves, vehemently challenge the categorization of the “transactional/exploitative sexual relationships” as prostitution or voluntary sex work. These relationships rely on coercion backed by the strength of an established order of state power and a culture of impunity for abuses of women. Rather than engage in debates as to the morality of prostitution, many activists insist that *“the real concern is the kind of environment, context, and pressure under which a woman makes this decision.”*⁴⁵ One activist highlights the critical role of extreme poverty as a driver of these relationships: *“Women mention they enter into ‘survival sex’ with the military, but only when they are in the most dire circumstances.”*⁴⁶

45 Personal Interview. Women’s rights activist. Colombo 2015.

46 Personal Interview. Development expert, writer, and scholar. Colombo 2015.

Section 3

Entrenched Vulnerability: The Tamil Woman as Perpetual Victim

The issues identified in the section above represent grave threats to the well-being of Tamil women, but their impact has unfortunately been compounded by efforts to protect them. Within the Tamil community, women have been pushed back into the home, kept “safe” by domination by male relatives. Programs set up by the state supposedly to improve their wellbeing further undermine their political and economic power, isolating some in all female villages, or confining their income-generation activities to situations in which they are under the control of state forces or their proxies. And interventions by the international community have failed to engage critically with these dynamics, offering programs that reinforce the dependent and subordinate position of Tamil women, by restricting them to traditionally “feminine” roles. In their efforts to restore women, from the “damage” of war to the “normalcy” of their pre-war position, they have failed to consider that this amounts to returning to the decades-old gender roles of 1970s Tamil society.

The Tamil Community’s Efforts to Protect Women

In a context where many Tamil men feel a general sense of powerlessness over their own lives or political possibilities, Tamil women become symbols of a cultural identity under threat. The moral policing of their behaviors is one arena where Tamil men can regain some control. *“The community feels under siege, so they try to bring back old and traditional practices. The conservatism is creeping in.”*⁴⁷ Rumors and the very real presence of women engaged in sex work, along with fear of rape by the military, has led to a conviction that Tamil women require the protection of men.⁴⁸

The protection they offer, most often, comes in the form of a hasty or ill-advised marriage where *“even if the guy is very old there is so much pressure to marry the women will do it. In these cases what happens is nothing short of marital rape.”*⁴⁹ Even those who are married are told now *“they need male protectors. This is a patriarchal form of control – and some issues (like prostitution) may be overstated in the desire to control women’s mobility, attire, and friendships.”*⁵⁰ One teenage girl complains,

“We cannot even go to meet friends, or go outside to have a chat with someone, everyone is watching so closely.”

The Role of the State

The vulnerability of Tamil women to both extreme poverty and social stigma, within a context

47 Personal Interview. Development expert, writer, and scholar. Colombo 2015.

48 Several civilian women and activists interviewed in Sri Lanka in 2015 referenced this trend.

49 Personal Interview. Women’s rights activist. Mannar 2015.

50 Personal Interview. Women’s rights activist and scholar. Jaffna 2015.

of physical insecurity, has allowed the military to create “options” for support and protection. In addressing the stigma and exclusion of widows, one of the military plans most decried by activists and beneficiaries alike is the creation of villages meant exclusively for female-headed households.⁵¹ One activist asks, “*What kind of policy is this that vulnerable women are going to be kept in seclusion? Are they not sitting ducks for military violence?*”⁵² Another challenges the idea as potentially “disastrous” pointing out, “*What social norms and rules are going to be established here? What does it really mean to send all widows to one village?*”⁵³

One option for income-generation that remains for destitute women is work in the garment industry, an industry managed by a crop of “middle-men.” Operating in conjunction with, or with the explicit knowledge of, state forces, these men “*assume the ‘protection’ of Tamil women, taking them to hostels where nobody else is allowed, to work during the week and girls are allowed out only on weekends.*”⁵⁴

Another large-scale scheme is the recruitment of women into the Civilian Security Department. Started in the 1980s and ‘90s by the state as a means of creating a home guard in Sinhalese border villages, it functions now as an apparatus of the military police creating menial jobs (sweeping, farm work). While there is no real record of these “employees,” they are given a basic salary and a cell phone, and women are drawn from the ranks of the unemployed as well as those earning a meager income, like preschool teachers.⁵⁵ “*People, particularly women, join this force out of a mix of really needing the salary and the fear of saying no.*”

At the same time, several industries in which women have customarily worked have become unavailable to them. The military take-over of the hospitality industry, farming, and selling vegetables some feel is actually a “*strategy to manipulate the market and keep the community and poor excluded.*”⁵⁶ Military vegetable growers, benefiting from cheap labor and free fertilizer, are able to sell at cheaper prices than women who grow vegetables in their home gardens. Military machinery also cuts back the necessity of harvest labor, a seasonal livelihood Tamil women were traditionally a significant part of.⁵⁷

The International Community

International NGOS (INGOS) have been very active in northern Sri Lanka since the December 2004 Tsunami and have played a significant role in addressing the needs of Tamil women in the post-conflict years. Most INGOs seeking to “empower” and “capacity-build” amongst Tamil women have also implemented specific programming to address the vulnerability of women to sexual violence.

51 One expert highlights that the government control of documents like death certificates and land rights limits public knowledge as to the actual status of some of these widows.

52 Personal Interview. Community mobilizer. Jaffna 2015.

53 Personal Interview. Development expert and scholar. Colombo 2015.

54 Personal Interview. Human rights lawyer and development expert. Colombo 2015. The risk of abuse for women in these ‘hostels’ also emerged in field research conducted in 2010 and 2011.

55 Personal Interview. Human rights activist. Colombo 2015.

56 Personal Interview. Human rights expert. Colombo 2015.

57 This was mentioned across several interviews conducted in Sri Lanka in 2015.

While most ostensibly support a “consultative” or “inclusive” approach to project design, in practice, they generally rely upon the “livelihoods” or “income-generation” model to alleviate a broad array of women’s grievances, including gender-based violence.

These small-scale projects include everything from the distribution of chickens, cows, and sewing machines to home-gardening and beauty parlor training.⁵⁸ At their worst, they are laughably inefficient, and potentially expose their beneficiaries to danger. One woman interviewed in the Vanni in 2012 described the situation: *“An international group dropped three chickens to those of us, who were raped, and said they would come the next day with some feed and cages. They haven’t still come, and already one chicken has died. What if someone sees the two others and knows that I reported the rape?”*

At their best, these programs achieve little sustainable change to the economic well-being of their beneficiaries. They are generally too small to be considered a “cottage industry” and the supply chain to the marketplace is rarely examined. As a result, even those with sewing machines ended up only selling their goods in their homes, for visitors who happen to come by. A 2012 assessment found that the supply far-outpaced the demand for certain products (table-runners, baby dresses), and that the lack of strategic business input left most women putting days of labor into a product that would yield, at best, the equivalent of a few US dollars.⁵⁹

Beyond the inefficiency of such programs, in their task to restore “normalcy” or allow for financial independence, they are often gendered in a supposedly “culturally sensitive” way. Local activists say that, in fact, international actors impose even heavier gender restrictions than conservative Tamil society does: *“Their programs are feminizing. All they offer women are things like selling pastries.”*⁶⁰ This focus on traditionally “feminine” activities comes at the cost of women’s long-term economic prospects. As one woman complains: *“What are these livelihoods for women – tailoring, beauty parlors, candle-making? Why are women not given skill-development trainings in areas where they can get secure jobs?”*

58 Several women and activists expressed their frustration about the programs available for women.

59 Internal assessment by international disaster-relief organization, Operation USA.

60 Personal Interview. Women’s rights activist. Colombo 2015.

Section 4

The Particular Situation of Ex-Combatant Women

For ex-combatant women, all of the dynamics described above are complicated by the social stigma around their involvement in the movement. This stigma is both cultural, a conservative backlash against the involvement of women in politics and public life, and strategic: community members fear the wrath of military forces or come under increased surveillance themselves for interacting with the ex-combatant. *“Time and time again women have said they have not talked to our people, because nobody is listening sympathetically.”*⁶¹

The Risks

The risks of any public presence are particularly high for ex-combatant women. Six years after the war, many are afraid to discuss their experiences, opinions, or engage in political discourse. One female ex-combatant in Jaffna, unwilling to talk, said she *“is afraid to even remember anything from the past and only focuses on the present.”* In a village close by, one ex-combatant takes a risk in a darkened house to explain how fear operates in her life:

*“I live in constant fear of the military. Right now I have two cases of suspicion of terrorism against me. I have things I want to say – but any political messages I send to a friend in India who will post it on facebook there.”*⁶²

In a context where memory of the past is a threat to living a “normal” life, many female ex-combatants try desperately to hide their identity externally, and internally repress any thoughts of “that time.” One ex-combatant explains, *“I am trying to forget, there is no need to dig up memories. I will focus on my family now, and my daughter.”*⁶³ Those that are able to get married to civilian men try to be as “domestic” as possible in their bid for cultural normalcy. One woman reports that her husband *“knows about my involvement in the movement, but we don’t talk about it ever.”*⁶⁴

For some, the unresolved trauma that forcibly invades their everyday lives becomes yet another marker of difference. One father explains his daughter, an ex-combatant, *“has hysterical attacks when she remembers the end of the war, the detention, so we don’t let people mention it around her.”* These women are often unable to get married, as they are labeled by the community as “abnormal.”

As ex-combatants are pushed further from mainstream society through multiple forms of exclusion, they increasingly find friendship and camaraderie amongst military cadres they know from their rehabilitation, or frequent visits to check-in. Although they fought on opposite sides of the conflict, their shared identity as soldiers gives them a point of connection. An activist explains that *“Where the community doesn’t accept them, the military is friendly, and many are there without their wives*

61 Personal Interview. Women’s rights activist. Mannar 2015.

62 Personal Interview. Ex-combatant (2). Jaffna 2015.

63 Personal Interview. Ex-combatant (1). Jaffna 2015.

64 Ibid.

and families.”⁶⁵

Some ex-combatants have been given cell-phones through the rehabilitation process or to maintain “friendships” with military members established post-conflict. These cell phones, while individually desirable material commodities, become a source of vulnerability, which military men exploit to use these women as intelligence, or “spies” amongst communities of concern. One ex-combatant, tired of the constant phone calls from the military, says *“I told them I dropped my cell phone in the well, and changed my SIM card myself so they couldn’t contact me anymore.”*⁶⁶ An activist notes that women complain of the “wrong numbers,” referring to the random men who constantly called their phones.⁶⁷

Others, members of the community say, *“have been brainwashed quite well,”* and feed information to the military. One activist recounts organizing a local meeting *“to discuss legal cases and strategies for mobilizing where the military suddenly turned up.”* She concludes: *“It could only be that one woman informed.”*⁶⁸ The unfortunate result of this collaboration is to render the population of ex-combatant women even more marginalized by painting them all as possible informers for the state. Speculation goes further to the presumption that these women are “sex workers” for the military.

The Effect of Livelihoods Programs

The livelihoods approach embraced by the Sri Lanka state and the international community to addressing Tamil women’s needs is particularly damaging for those who had been involved in the LTTE (even those coercively recruited). On a practical level, this population has a high rate of prosthetic limbs and/or other serious injuries. Some ex-combatants with artificial legs have been given support in the form of a pastry push-cart they are unable to push. Another ex-combatant describes the one-year sewing program she was forced to do, despite having *“no sensation in my hands and feet due to a war injury, so have no hope to work in sewing.”*⁶⁹

Further, having been socialized within the LTTE, many of these women balk at the idea of doing traditionally “feminine” tasks. One ex-combatant explains: *“The state’s goal was to train us. My goal was to learn something useful. There is no purpose for the training they give you. I did the training for icing cakes, making hairstyles. These are things I have no interest in.”*⁷⁰ Another recounts trying to purchase a photocopy machine to start her own business but being asked to come back with her father or brother, as she was not qualified to own one.

Beyond the feminizing impact, the livelihoods approach is overtly de-politicizing, ignoring

65 Ibid.

66 Personal Interview. Ex-combatant (3). Jaffna 2015.

67 Personal Interview. Development expert, writer, and scholar 2015.

68 Personal Interview. Community mobilizer. Mannar 2015.

69 Personal Interview. Ex-Combatant (1). Jaffna 2015.

70 Personal Interview. Ex-Combatant (2). Jaffna 2015.

the political opinions, and often the active political identities, of Tamil women.⁷¹ In the case of ex-combatants, this actively plays into the agenda of the state. One senior military commander in July 2015 insists that they are responsible for helping Tamil women find their femininity again.⁷² Another army official proudly described how a female combatant has “beautiful fingers” as she is put on display in a bridal dress with full make-up, juxtaposed to an earlier photo of her in the movement, holding a gun.⁷³

71 A comprehensive study on the political impact of sexual violence on individual women, as well as the de-politicizing approach of current interventions is being conducted through the Politics of Sexual Violence Initiative, based at the Colin Powell Center for Civic and Global Leadership at City College New York.

72 Media Interview. Military Commander. Jaffna 2015.

73 Women’s rights activist recalls conversations with commanders in previous years.

Conclusions

The human rights context for Tamil women in 2015 is heavily determined by the trauma of the war's cataclysmic end and the subsequent six years of militarization in the former conflict zone. Women in the north still face the risk of rape and harassment by the security forces present throughout the region, but their lives are even more negatively impacted by the climate of fear and by a worrying uptick in violence against women within the Tamil community. The ever-present threat of violence by the military has led women to lead tightly circumscribed lives, limiting their daily activities in order to minimize their risk of sexual assault. Their reduced participation in public life keeps them in the home, where they are increasingly vulnerable to violence at the hands of the men in their lives, many of whom are also struggling with the after-effects of wartime trauma. And the measures taken by the community, by the state, and by international actors to address their needs have only made the situation worse. Hasty marriage for protection, well-being schemes that entail isolation and exposure to state agents, and disempowering livelihoods programs have further undermined their economic and political position.

Caught in a cycle of poverty and abuse, women find that *"the role of the victimized is the only place to draw benefits in a context of institutional bias, so they adopt this."*⁷⁴ Tamil women's identities post-conflict have been absorbed into variations of victim, where labels of "widow," "war-affected," "young widow," and "mothers of the disappeared" each complete with their own forms of small-scale support, and each in their own ways denying Tamil women agency and homogenizing important differences between them. One activist notes, *"They are not even seen as women anymore."*⁷⁵

The women interviewed for this report were well aware of the dynamics contributing to their precarious position. They articulated clearly the ways in which fear of rape and harassment prevented them from participating fully in public life. Particularly, many feared an identity permanently defined by their experience with sexual violence. And many expressed intense frustration with measures undertaken ostensibly for their protection that only served to further marginalize them. The livelihoods programs endorsed by the international community were a source of particular bafflement. *"I have many talents that could be used, particularly with the computer, but the only machine I have is a sewing machine."*⁷⁶

The effects of this failure to address the situation of Tamil women have been dire. Female school attendance is down, while activists and scholars working in the north point to an identifiable "feminization of poverty." Transactional sex is on the rise. Women are broadly vulnerable to exploitation by state forces and by members of their own community. Cut off from the means to

74 Personal Interview. Women's rights activist and Scholar. Colombo 2015.

75 Ibid.

76 Personal Interview. Ex-Combatant (2). Jaffna 2015.

support themselves, some borrow money only to discover too late that their lender is a pimp.⁷⁷ Others seek out assistance from politicians, the almost entirely male elected representatives of the Tamil community. In one particularly egregious case, a politician whom local women customarily petitioned for jobs for their daughters, or school admission for their sons, was recently alleged to have lured more than 50 women into coercive sex acts, many of which he filmed.

And while the grievances described above are often carefully categorized under the banner of “women’s issues,” the stakes of ignoring them are overtly political. The predicament of Tamil women has been the greatest impetus for a society-wide nostalgia for the LTTE (rather than the lack of political power). *“When people in the community think of the situation now of Tamil women, they think we have to resurrect the LTTE,”*⁷⁸ reports one activist, a sentiment echoed by several others. An ex-combatant, speaking honestly under condition of anonymity, explained: *“My life was better as an ex-combatant, there was gender-equality there.”*

Even non-combatant women report are being drawn to the political agenda espoused by TNA politician Ananthi, who explains that *“within the LTTE women had equal rights and trained and fought like men. I speak up because my husband gave me equal rights in the home. Now things have changed.”* While this nostalgia invokes a “romanticized” vision⁷⁹ of life under the LTTE, it has an increasingly powerful grasp on the political imagination of the Tamil population.

Voices from within the community have been highlighting these issues for some time now. At the individual level, many women profess a strong desire to attain some level of independence. This is particularly true among ex-combatants, one of whom notes, *“I have to restrict myself now, all the time. I want to feel free. Back then I felt happiness”*⁸⁰. And activists working at a collective level are fighting to expand the limited space available for women to engage politically. Operating slowly and quietly are staunch feminists working with small groups of women to educate and mobilize them about the multiple forms of repression that should be countered with context-specific, somewhat radical, feminism. Even groups under more enlightened male leaderships have begun to host seminars and conversations with the support of local Tamil psychiatrists to address the rise in “anti-social” behaviors within the community.

It is critical that these efforts be supported. Those intervening in the post-war context must ask themselves: *“What do we know about the kind of life Tamil women want to lead?”*⁸¹ Not every woman is a rape victim, and not every woman wants a sewing machine. But all women will benefit from expanded space for economic and political agency. An increase in the number of Tamil-speaking police women or the strategic commitment of Tamil political parties to engage Tamil women (rather

77 Activists site a growing number of suicides amongst young women unable to re-pay these loans and unwilling to engage in sex work.

78 Personal Interview. Women’s rights activist. Colombo 2015.

79 *“There is a romanticization of the LTTE, but the cultural barriers always remained – though the LTTE gave them space. They were, in the end, reinforcing what existed before, which limits women’s agency,”* said one local women’s rights activist interviewed in 2015. For more on women’s agency and the LTTE, see Gowrinathan 2013, Satkunananthian 2014, De Mel 2001, amongst others.

80 Personal Interview. Ex-Combatant (2) 2015.

81 Personal Interview. Women’s rights activist. Colombo 2015.

than politicizing their stories) may be a starting point towards real change. However, without listening to Tamil women's lived experiences, understanding how these experiences shape their political perspectives, and providing real space for their political engagement — efforts to improve their situation cannot succeed.

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