

# Women And War – A Brief History Of Women’s Struggles During The Civil War In Sri Lanka

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**Abstract:** women have played diverse roles in times of war, often contributing to the war efforts in various ways. Despite facing significant societal and cultural barriers. It is estimated that close to 90 per cent of current war casualties are civilians, the majority of whom are women and children, compared to a century ago when 90 per cent of those who lost their lives were military personnel. Although entire communities suffer the consequences of armed conflict, women and girls are particularly affected because of their status in society and their sex. Parties in conflict situations often rape women, sometimes using systematic rape as a tactic of war. Other forms of violence against women committed in armed conflict include murder, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy and forced sterilization. Despite this, women should not be viewed solely as victims of war. They assume the key role of ensuring family livelihood in the midst of chaos and destruction, and are particularly active in the peace movement at the grassroots level, cultivating peace within their communities. However, the absence of women at the peace negotiating table is undeniable. This paper examines the struggles of the Tamil women in the civil war of Sri Lanka.

**Keywords:** women, war, rape, violence, displaced

When most countries in postcolonial era were debating the issue of giving voting rights to women, Sri Lanka boasted of giving the world’s first woman Prime Minister in 1960. The country was a model to other countries in South Asia as the most rapidly developing country economically and also with respect to empowerment of women.

In the north and the east women owned sixty percent of land as a customary practice where land ownership went from mother to daughter. Despite these achievements women’s current political representation is a mere 4% at the national level and 2% at the local level.

Though the civil war in Sri Lanka was declared over on the 18<sup>th</sup> of May 2009, the remnants of the war continues, the 30 year old legacy of ill treating women continues as the fundamental human rights violations especially on women and children continues unabated in the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps where nearly 280,000 civilians are holed up behind barbed wires

Out of a population of twenty lakh Tamils living in the war zone, more than one lakh of them have been killed directly and large numbers indirectly. It is sad to note here that one in every twenty Tamils was a victim of this war and a large number of them were women who had no direct or indirect role in the war.

## **Women and family Separation**

As the up keepers of family tradition and being the unifying factor of the family, the conflict in Sri Lanka has squeezed even the last ounce of emotional and physical strength of these women. The war has separated thousands of mothers from her beloved children. Wives from husbands, young girls from her parents and siblings, aged women from the rest of their families. It has led to isolation from the rest of the society as war brings in suspicion and it is not possible to separate the good Samaritans from the informers of armed groups. It is also not an easy task for a woman to part with her son or daughter to join the ranks of the militants where death snares at one many times. It required a Tamil woman to part with at least one of her beloved ones to join the militant movement as a compulsory contribution of every family towards the cause of achieving self-determination.

### **Women and employment**

Women being the most affected, have also been compelled to dawn a new role, that of becoming the main breadwinner. There again the state forces and the other warring groups have been a stumbling block to her. In the areas controlled by the armed forces and the paramilitary groups, she is compelled to pay 'taxes'; hitherto she had to do the same in the LTTE controlled areas. It is reported by National Fisheries Solidarity(NAFSO), Sri Lanka that women and men engaging with small-scale fisheries lost their property and income due to restriction of fishing areas and safety zones, armed groups snatching the catch of fisher women and men, increased check points affecting the smooth transportation of fish, increasing costs of living such as oil and food<sup>1</sup>.

After the tsunami of December 2004 the women headed households were helped by aid agencies in the former militant controlled areas to set up their own Income Generation Projects with the help of micro financing. They were supported to rear cattle and other livestock's.

Social stigma too is attached to working women especially among the Muslims. A Muslim woman in Ampara has to travel 25 kilometers from her home as domestic helper of a restaurant after her husband lost his livelihood as a fisherman due to the national security measures set in force in the area which forbid him to go fishing. She has to go through four check points to go to work and come home everyday. As a Muslim woman she is blamed and harassed for traveling by herself and engaging in this kind of job. The mosque also urged her to stop doing the job. She was depressed but has to keep herself up and sustain her family<sup>2</sup>.

### **Maids of the conflict**

The civil war in the North and East has completely wiped out the otherwise available opportunities for women to gain meaningful employment. As the government pumped money into war which otherwise would have been used for development, job opportunities for women eroded through out the country. The most readily available job is in the armed forces, which very few women prefer, more so the government does not recruit Tamil women into the armed forces. The ones who are most affected are those who have not completed their schooling resulting out of poverty and war related causes.

It is easy for uneducated or moderately educated woman to get menial jobs abroad than men, apart from that the sense of sacrifice for the sake of the family comes naturally to the women in the east. These woman to help their families to stave the challenges posed by the war have been victims of the trafficking network as they aspire to travel abroad to avail employment opportunities. The most lucrative place for them is the middle east where getting a job of a housemaid is relatively easy. Here in the Middle East on arrival their passports are seized so that they do not escape. They become easy victims of the lust of their masters; they are held responsible for all the domestic mishaps involving the children in the house. Back home the hard-earned money they send is often squandered by the male members of the family in war related depression coping mechanisms like alcohol, drug abuse, gambling, womanizing etc.

### **Forced marriages and compulsory abortions**

As the war resumed after four years of ceasefire the LTTE forcibly recruited any able-bodied men and women to fight the war. The former policy recruiting one person per family was overlooked for want of fighters in the battlefield. This led to a situation where parents had to get their children married at a very young age, most of the time without the consent of the girls as they were seen as a burden to the family as it was the duty of the parents to safeguard and protect her. Prior to the ceasefire period the LTTE did not recruit married women, things changed as they became desperate and went all out to recruit anybody. As the war was reaching its climax, it is alleged that many young girls to save themselves became pregnant so that they would not be sent to the front to fight. To their nightmare it is alleged that these innocent girls had to abort their fetus and join the frontline to see another day of the battle.

### **The last eight months of the war**

The last eight months of the conflict virtually turned the Tamil women into horrified walking skeletons as the militants forced them at gun point to retreat into the jungles along with basic survival material which could last only for a few days. Basic necessities of women like sanitary napkins, inner garments were never heard of as the government had imposed an economic embargo into the militant controlled areas, which included food and medicine compelling women to run in unhygienic conditions. There was no medical help available and no medicine to clean the wounds. There were only three doctors to cater to all their needs during the entire period of eight months, incidentally all the three doctors available were men with whom many women among the more than 250,000 on the run could not confide their private medical problems and expose wounds in the covered parts of their body.

“Women do not stop getting pregnant or giving birth to their babies even when on the move or when living in camps,” Lene Christiansen, country representative for the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) [see: <http://srilanka.unfpa.org/>] in Colombo said, expressing concern for the large proportion of high-risk pregnancies among women in displaced persons camps as well as increased teenage pregnancies. According to UNFPA, pregnancy-related disabilities and death often rise in conflict situations when reproductive health services, including pre-natal care, assisted delivery and emergency obstetric care are disrupted and often unavailable. At the same time, many women lose access to family planning services, exposing them to unwanted pregnancies<sup>1</sup>.

The situation has not improved though they are all held captive in the government run detention centres, which are ironically called ‘welfare centres’.

### **High rate of malnutrition among children as a result of deprivation of proper food to mothers**

#### **Deprivation of the right to mourn the dead ones and celebrate cultural practices**

All along the journey they had to brave the heavy shelling and aerial bombings of the armed forces resulting in the death of thousands of their kith and kin. As the jungle law of survival of the fittest was the only law applicable these women were even deprived of giving a decent burial to their loved ones or did not have time and strength to even produce tears to mourn the dead ones. Women were not being able to perform cultural rites related to puberty, marriage and death<sup>3</sup>.

#### **Fear of mass suicide among women cadre**

As the war neared its end, it is feared that hundreds of women cadre committed suicide to save their honor of not falling prey into the hands of the armed forces that have a dubious record of sexually assaulting women who surrender.

Arulmathy was 19 when she entered the LTTE training camp in 2003. In her purple-and-white check shirt and long purple skirt, she does not look much like a guerrilla. But she had signed up voluntarily, angered by a video she had watched. "It showed some fighting and cruel things done by the Sinhalese army, so I joined for the adventure," she says. "I joined for the Tamil nation." She trained for seven months. In 2006, she was injured by shrapnel. By the time her unit was surrounded the following year, she had already resolved to get out.

"We were careless and we had fallen asleep," she says. "The army were only 10 metres away when we saw them. They started to jump into the bunker. We couldn't do anything. Seventy-five committed suicide with their grenades. There were parts of them spread on all sides. I can never forget that scene. Only two of us escaped. This war has been useless." Arulmathy tried to get away, but was recaptured by the Tigers and beaten. She made two more unsuccessful attempts before making it to safety. She surrendered in January this year, as the Sri Lankan army swept north. (Sunday, 12 April 2009 Guardian News and Media 2009)

#### **Life in the IDP camps**

Long queues for receiving ration

Lack of privacy – bathing in public is common as there is very less provision for good bathrooms and the available ones are either over crowded or water clogged compelling the women to take bath outside their

tents with no clothes to change resulting in they baking themselves in the hot sun to get dried up. Most of the toilets remain with open doors with very long queues, this results in women trying to control the call of nature resulting in health problems for which there are hardly any trained doctors available, **deprivation of physical and material needs**.

This life in the camps is not confined to the Tamil women alone, the Muslim women displaced since 1990 after the LTTE ordered them to vacate from Jaffna, Killinochi and Mullaithivu also face the same problems in the IDP camps spread across Puttalam in western parts of the island nation. Muslim women are expected to mourn the death of their husbands by practicing *Itha*<sup>4</sup>- which is difficult to follow in congested camp settings. Women, who left the camps to stay at relatives' houses to perform the mourning rites, have been excluded from government assistance<sup>5</sup>.

### **Increased domestic violence against women**

Confined camp conditions are very difficult to psychologically cope up with. It leads to frustration, especially among men of being reduced to a dependent. The restriction of movement behind the barbed wires brings in the tendency of being caged and animal behavior creeps into the minds of men, where might is right becomes the norm of the day. To overcome the helplessness experienced by them, men easily become prey to vices in the form of alcohol and drug abuse.

The money to fulfill these needs comes from the savings of women in the form of jewelry saved by her as an asset, failure to part with that leads to violence against women. Incidents of domestic violence have been common along with increased rates of alcohol consumption. Men spend cash from sale of government assistance items and non-food relief items distributed by aid agencies on alcohol. In informal discussions women living in the camps mentioned the enormous pressure by their men to have sex even if there is no privacy with children in the tents and more than one family sharing a tent<sup>6</sup>.

### **Women and aid**

The war has made women doubly vulnerable as they are completely dependent on aid. As the government has imposed a strict ban on Humanitarian Aid agencies from working in the camps, it is the armed forces that are involved in distributing all forms of aid for the IDPs, and many times the sex-starved soldiers who man the camps take undue advantage of the situation and physically abuse the helplessness of these women, especially young women and unmarried girls.

### **Harassment of Women during random Checks by Security forces**

Women fear the movement of troops through their villages and towns, as the troops are known for their notorious behavior and herd mentality. During search operations women are separated from the men and taken apart. The conduct of random night time checks by security forces of boarding houses and other establishments where Tamil women live created a climate of insecurity of fear and women passing through security check points became particularly vulnerable to rape and other acts of sexual violence<sup>7</sup>.

Lack of commitment to implementation of policies to improve gender equality negatively affects women in terms of accessing to education, employment opportunities, social security entitlement, etc. On top of those disadvantages women have shouldered additional roles and responsibilities to cope with deteriorating living condition by taking care of sick or injured family members, taking informal waged work to cover additional expenses<sup>2</sup>.

Tamil women arrested and detained by police and security forces were reportedly subjected to rape and other forms of torture. The individual cases reproduced in the annex of this report, as well as information received from other sources; indicate that Sri Lankan security forces often used rape and sexual violence against women in detention as a means of forcing them to sign confessions stating that they were members of the LTTE. (See the case of Wijikala Nanthan and Sivamani Sinnathamby Weerakon (LKA 090401.VAW) in the case annex.

The form of torture used by police and security forces in Sri Lanka against ethnic minority women in detention clearly constitutes a gender specific form of racial discrimination. It has been estimated that a Tamil woman is raped by the members of the armed forces or police every two weeks and that every two months a Tamil woman is gang raped and murdered by the Sri Lankan security forces<sup>3</sup>.

Taking over under the provisions of the Emergency Regulation Act and the Prevention of Terrorism Act, widespread impunity continues to be enjoyed by the perpetrators of rape and other forms of violence committed against women in Sri Lanka, which provides a very strong evidence of a systematic practice of discrimination.

The consequences of this impunity are devastating for the individual victims who are effectively denied access to criminal and civil remedies including reparations. At the community level, impunity leads to a diminution in confidence in law enforcement personnel and in the judiciary and potential perpetrators are not deterred from the commission of similar crimes. The failure of the government to send a strong signal that all forms of violence and other types of discrimination against women are unacceptable has important ramifications for women's social status as the promotion and protection of women's human rights are thereby perceived as being of little value<sup>4</sup>.

Members of the armed forces or police who are suspects in criminal cases are frequently transferred away from the area in which the crime allegedly took place<sup>5</sup>.

### **Voices of reconciliation**

The voices of dissent towards any reconciliation normally come from men, who outnumber the women in holding authoritative and power wielding posts. The aggressive attitude and ego of most men come as a stumbling block towards any meaningful resolution of conflict and reconciliation. Visaka Dharmadasa, whose young son Achinte went missing in September, 1998 when the LTTE attacked his unit of the Sri Lankan army. Only a missing person's family can know the pain of waiting, day in and day out, every moment of 24 hours, for news of their loved one. They don't have the luxury of mourning, and getting on with life.

She has transformed her personal pain and sorrow into a powerful force - not in anger against the army for sending her son into a dangerous area, or the LTTE for attacking his unit, but to connect with Tamil mothers. She obtained a pass from the army to take five other women ostensibly to visit a Christian shrine in an LTTE controlled area, where the priest got them in touch with 'the other'. At an uneasy first meeting, Visaka broke the ice by asking a young soldier about his children, and pretending to be surprised that he didn't have claws, or horns on his head.

On a more serious level, they found something very special. "We found that they did not have hatred towards us, and nor did we towards them." When young LTTE boys risked their lives to get her group back across the divide, it formed the basis for a firm friendship that has transcended the breakdown of peace talks.

"I don't feel angry with the LTTE at all. They didn't target my son as an individual but because he was from the other side. And for him too, the LTTE was the enemy," says Visaka, implicitly acknowledging the common humanity of both sides - something that armies, whether state-run or private, obliterate in order to condition their cadres for violent action against 'the other'.

In 2002 Sinhala and Tamil women joined hands publicly at a rally for the missing - 12,000 in this last phase of conflict alone. The organizations Visaka founded, Parents of Servicemen Missing-in-Action and the Association of War-Affected Women build upon the grassroots desire for peace. They lobby the government to reciprocate the LTTE's actions of releasing soldiers and civilians, mobilize cross-community dialogue, and design workshops on rehabilitation, reintegration and reconciliation.

"Because this happened to someone like me who had the courage, I've been able to help thousands," she adds. "Unless there is peace, there will be more mothers like us. Since 1999 I have been going to the Norwegian embassy and asking them to include women in the peace process. At least let women sit in as independent observers."

Such inclusion may positively impact negotiations, given women's greater empathy to other people's feelings, says Visaka. "We know by the sound of our husband's footsteps when he comes home from work, what kind of mood he is in. But we have to burst into tears or do something dramatic for them to realize if we are upset!" **Some Mother's Son** By Beena Sarwar (<http://www.countercurrents.org/hr-sarwar210604.htm>).

In times of conflict everyone in society suffers but women bear the added burden. Particularly in societies, which face protracted conflicts, the social breakdown is prolonged through many years. Violence becomes part of the very fabric of society it trickles down from state, to community to family. And as society struggles to cope with the everyday horrors of conflict, unfortunately, issues such as violence against women are less prioritised leaving millions of women alone and in danger.

In the ongoing civilian war in Srilanka it is estimated that 80% of Sri Lankan IDPs/refugees are women and children.<sup>6</sup> A number of factors determine their future existence; they included army and rebel operations, availability of food and medicine, psychological support, security of the family (women in the east generally are more concerned about the security of the family than themselves) etc. Despite the deprivation of many of these factors, the extraordinary never say die spirit of the displaced women created a special place for them in an era where women are hardly respected. Their fight for survival against all odds shows the adaptability of women when most men were completely broke. In the traditional Eastern society women play a major role within the family, which helped in maintaining family values. It is the women who take care of the house and plays the role of a homemaker while the men earn the livelihood.

### **Women as carriers of culture:**

Frequent displacements led to the eroding of cultures. The Srilankan experience shows us that continuity of culture depends on sustenance of a community in their natural habitat, most of the Srilankan Tamil diaspora who number around 800,000 do not want to return home even if the peace moves succeed. They had moved away from Srilanka as a result of the civil war. As a new generation is born abroad, they have never seen their country of origin nor do they know about their culture as they have grown in a different atmosphere. The story of those living amidst the war is different. Srilankan Tamil women have always lived side by side their male family members as equals. When traditional norms and values are forgotten due to displacement it is the women who took up the responsibility of infusing these values in their wards. They are the symbols of protecting their culture.

At the onset of a displacement, the men are perplexed as they run out of ideas and are confined to isolation, as they are psychologically shattered. In this crisis situation when everyone is in a confused state of mind the women puts her act together. The children and others in the family immediately look up to the mother to act. It is she who gathers a few pieces of firewood, dry leaves to set up an urn and prepare a cup of tea for the others. In this way she has succeeded in keeping the flock together. This crisis may be a burden to a man but is a silent response to the challenge for a woman.

### **Changing role of women in times of war:**

The agonizing war has victimized women but it has also made her stronger. The best of her qualities is brought out. Before the war she was an affectionate wife, mother etc taking care of all the 'home needs'. Violence has forced her to learn a number of new tricks of survival. If her husband went missing she has to go to the town, enter the abandoned streets in darkness, search for her beloved missing one, meet the police, army, navy, contact the local religious and political leaders speak to them, plead with them. She takes up the role of an investigator taking clues from persons who had seen him before his disappearance. These were things unknown to her before the out break of the war. Today she is an active participant in the dharanas, human rights rally's, protest marches, and organizing peace meetings. They are also breadwinners for many

families. As the war fatigue males are worn out and also face a danger of disappearance, torture or forced conscription into the militant movements women take up the responsibility of feeding him. Many times frustrated with the treatment meted out to her she dares the men by joining the militant movement.

## **Human Rights Violations on Women:**

### **Check points ( freedom of movement)**

The towns of North and East Srilanka are known for checkpoints where everybody is required to undergo a check compulsorily. In Vavuniya there are 50 checkpoints every time you pass across one of them, you have to prove yourself to be innocent and you are subjected to a physical check. The checkpoints provoke fear because people may be detained there and disappear. Girls and women fear not only sexual harassment by soldiers at checkpoints, but rape as well<sup>7</sup>.

As soldiers manning these checkpoints do not speak Tamil, young women are always subjected to verbal gender abuse. Not many checkpoints have female soldiers manning them. The Jaffna residents have complained about their treatment at the checkpoints, particularly the inappropriate, often humiliating searches of women<sup>8</sup>. In a large number of cases of disappearance and rape the victims were last found at one of the innumerable checkpoints. The widespread fear of rape by soldiers, people worry about girls and women having to pass through military checkpoints. That concern is exacerbated by a perception that soldiers delay girls at the checkpoints. One woman said, “girls walking alone are kept for fifteen minutes at checkpoints as soldiers ask them unnecessary questions to amuse themselves”<sup>9</sup>.<sup>10</sup>

### **Rape, Disappearance and Torture:**

*“The Sri Lankan security forces have continued to commit serious human rights abuses, sexual violence, in the context of the 17 year armed conflict against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.*

*Sri Lankan Police have also repeatedly committed rape and other sexual abuse in the course of the fighting”.*

- Report by UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women

[22 Dec 2000]

These were some of the terror tactics adopted by the Srilankan armed forces. In war women are also more likely to encounter situations where someone wants to exercise power over them due to the tension and level of violence in the environment. Women particularly made mention of soldiers who respond to a ‘herd instinct’ and take chance of ‘any opportunity’ to abuse women. In war it is also easier to justify such abuse, simply as one of those “inevitable” consequences of war, as the soldiers ‘are in natural need of sexual activity’<sup>11</sup>.

Most soldiers often see the manifestation of male superiority in the form of rape as a show of power over the males of the victims’ community. In North and East Srilanka a woman’s role has been primarily defined to take care and nurture the family and home, thus the attack and disappearance of family members cripple her role and her identity as wife and mother<sup>12</sup>. Disappearances are occasionally reported but that is not the case with rape, as the victims fear social ostracisation. When cases are reported families complaining rape cases also face retribution. It is often reported that drunken soldiers enter nearby resident localities after 6pm when people are not allowed to come out and the soldiers take away young women and girls to rape them. Neighbors do not dare to come out fearing violence against them. In the now famous Ida Carmelitta rape case<sup>13</sup>. Five soldiers entered her house, tied the victims’ mother to a lamppost, shut the other relatives in another room, raped Ida, ate her breast, and shot her through the genitals. The entire family fled Srilanka fearing

threats from the army and the case was closed. The continuing pattern of sexual violence against Tamil women persists because of the climate of virtual impunity that prevails.

Apart from the solitary Krishanthi Kumaraswamy case, there has not been any other instance of the alleged offenders being meted out justice though there were some judicial inquiries, they were being conducted in a manner that indicates justice was never be done. Cases were transferred out of the original jurisdiction in favour of the accused. This however placed a great burden on the living victims or those giving evidence on their behalf. What happens also is that as cases get protracted the will to seek justice gets enfeebled. The system seems designed to help the alleged offenders rather than the hapless victims<sup>14</sup>. As the soldiers are from the southern parts of Srilanka they fear facing the courts in the north. The former Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Radhika Coomaraswamy, reported that rape was used in Sri Lanka's conflict, and that violent crimes increased against the backdrop of ongoing conflict<sup>15</sup>.

The UN Special Rapporteur in March 2000 highlighted the case of Sarathambal Saravanbavananthakurukul, a 29-year-old Tamil woman who had been reportedly gang raped and then killed by navy soldiers on 28th December 1999 in Pungudutivu, near Jaffna. She observed that despite an order by the President of Sri Lanka to immediately investigate the events, it was reported that "very little [was] being done to pursue the matter". Sarathambal Saravanbavananthakurukul had been abducted from her home, situated at about 500m from a navy camp. Four security officers dressed in black tied up her father and brother. Her dead body was found on barren land about 100m away from their home the next day. After public protest, her body was sent to Colombo for post-mortem by a senior JMO who indicated that the cause of death was "asphyxia due to gagging"; that her underpants had been stuffed inside her mouth; and that "forcible sexual intercourse" had taken place. The father and brother were allegedly threatened not to reveal the identity of the four men who came to the house. According to the Director of the Criminal Investigation Department, who had been instructed by the President of Sri Lanka to investigate the rape and murder, the brother had "not been able to identify any of the four persons who came to the house". The criminal investigations into the rape and murder of both Ida Carmelita and Sarathambal Saravanbavananthakurukul have not proceeded beyond the initial inquiry stage. No charges have been filed against the alleged perpetrators and it is unlikely that those responsible for the rape and murder of the two women will ever be brought to justice<sup>16</sup>. Reported cases of rape in Northern Srilanka were as follows as indicated in table 10:

**Table 10 – Rape victims in Northern Srilanka from 1996 to 2002**

1996 - 17	1998 - 05	2000 - 01
1997 - 16	1999 - 03	2002 - 06

(Source: Sexual violence against Tamil women in Srilanka by D.B.S Jeyaraj- Sunday Times Jan 2002)

### Plight of the school going girls

For most female students in the uncleared areas the schools were a fertile breeding ground for militant indoctrination. Many joined the militant movement as they saw the discrimination of the state towards the minority Tamils and become victims of male chauvinism. These girls did not even have the privilege of getting education aids like books, maps etc as they were banned items. Exams were not conducted on schedule and they could not move to the South for higher education as a result of the dreaded pass system. In the cleared areas school going girls had to bear the burden of standing in queues to get the movement pass and also pass through a series of checkpoints. Each of these check points were a threat to the modesty of these girls as it was here that it is feared, disappearances took place resulting in the rape and killing of innocent girls by armed forces. The famous Krishanthi Kumaraswamy case was a great eye opener to the entire world about the practice of kidnapping and raping of school going girls by the soldiers being perfected at these checkpoints. As their families were poor as a result of the economic blockade, parents saw the girl child as a burden in a society where dowry is prevalent, hence the option for survival is very limited, either to suffer or join militancy.

Though the girls in the uncleared areas were economically privileged they suffered the same plight of their sisters in the uncleared areas as too many restrictions on them prevented them from seeking higher education in the south in the absence of any university in the North except for the Jaffna University in the Jaffna peninsula. Apart from all these problems girls had to bear the mental agony of frequent displacements and at times continued loss of studies by which they were forced to remain at home and slowly tune to the sense of non-worthiness of education.

### **Women and Medical Aid:**

In the Uncleared area there was only one big hospital at Akkarayan. Frequently there were complaints from the medical staff about lack of infrastructure and severe shortage of essential medicine. The plight of the pregnant women was the most miserable. They did not get adequate food to take care of themselves. This resulted in severe pains, bleeding during delivery of the child. More than 75% of children born in the uncleared areas suffered from under weight and malnutrition. Lactating mothers did not get enough to eat to feed their young ones. Baby food was unheard in the uncleared areas. Malaria, Diarrhoea, Cholera, typhoid were very common, women and children were the most vulnerable. The UN Development Assistance Framework for Sri Lanka estimates that the rate of illegal and unsafe abortions in Sri Lanka is equal to the birth rate<sup>17</sup>. As movement of people from the uncleared to cleared areas was restricted to a single day in a week and further restricted to a fixed number, the plight of the sick was un-seeable as they were stranded in a place where there was no medicine and death awaited them joyfully.

In the cleared areas, there were two hospitals, one in Mannar town where there was no gynecologist for a very long time. The other hospital is in Vavuniya, which had to cater to a very larger number of people from both the cleared and uncleared areas, but had only 60 beds with no proper X-ray facilities and soldiers most often occupied the available beds. Further they could not even travel to the south for medical help. Corruption was rampant in these hospitals and these poor displaced women were forced to sell their jewels to save their dear ones or themselves. Here one got a feeling that unless permanent peace dawned the commerce in tears would continue unabated.

No psychological help existed in the uncleared areas. In the cleared areas the entire community had undergone lots of stress, they did not have adequate stress releasing techniques. In the uncleared areas there was no availability of medicine. In the cleared areas it was very expensive, out of reach of the common people.<sup>18</sup>

### **Plight of the widows**

There are an estimated 40,000 war widows in Sri Lanka. The loss of male breadwinners created a new group of women vulnerable to economic hardship. There are approximately 30,000 female-headed families in the north and east of Sri Lanka.<sup>19</sup> As a result of the conflict, in Jaffna alone 2,100 children live in government welfare centers and there are 19,000 registered widows<sup>20</sup>.

The young widows are very vulnerable to immoral activities; a good number of them take another husband, a few try to go abroad to earn a living and end up as maid slaves in the middle east, a few land up in the brothels of Bangkok, a few serve as concubines to the travel agents or other middle men who promise them to send abroad. Forced prostitution of migrants and displaced women and survival prostitution are said to be widespread in conflict-affected areas of Sri Lanka<sup>21</sup>. The armed groups at times used them as informers. The middle-aged widows tried to work, but getting employment was very difficult, they had to struggle to make both the ends meet. If there was some support from the family members who worked abroad, they survived or they were entirely dependent on charity. The plight of the old widows was the worst especially if they had lost their earning sons, also they did not see any point in living. They led a life remembering the past (the good times) and wept over that had happened.<sup>22</sup> Death is their destiny.

## Women in Prison:

A large number of displaced Tamil women were confined to the Anuradhapura prison and the Welikade prison, which are in the Southern Srilanka. It was impossible for the Tamils from the north to visit these women prisoners lodged in the southern jails. Most of them were only suspects; they were made to live in common dormitories along with women who are held on charges of prostitution, robbery cheating, other immoral, anti-social activities etc. These women faced danger to their lives, as prison riots were common and harassment by jail authorities was the order of the day. Women in jails suffered from psychological disorder, malnutrition, unhygienic sanitary conditions, and alienation from society. Though more than 95% of them were acquitted by the courts they were branded as “jail returnees” and faced ostracisation from their society. They did not have a compensation mechanism where the innocents could have got their justful right of getting monetary help from the state for confining them unjustfully in the jail.

## Displaced Religious women:

The role of religious women, during this war was a matter of debate. While many women religious in the war areas chose to live amidst the ruins and depravity, there were allegations that women religious in the south were indifferent to the suffering in the north. Often the government version of events was accepted without any critique. The church itself exhibited a split personality. In the north the church came under military attack, they faced aerial bombings and constant displacement. The army occupied many churches. The LTTE itself came very close to usurping many roles of the church. The church personnel in the north often felt that church in the South understood little of the agony. The South often doubted the neutrality of the northern church. Added to this, the minority nature of the Christians in the Island often came out with the Church officials rushing to support the government. The request for blood donation for the army was an example.

In these conditions the role of women religious was comparatively commendable. The real challenge was how they would fare during the time of peace making. With the women movements all over the world, campaigning for peace and rebuilding lives of the war victims, especially the war widows and orphans will be a great challenge to women religious.

The church has had a massive role to play in the civil war. The most important of their several activities is that of accompanying the displaced and rehabilitating them. As a majority of the displaced are women, the nuns in Vavuniya, Mannar, Wannu and Jaffna from different congregations working among the displaced portrayed the compassionate side of women. They have dedicated their lives for the protection of women and children. They have withstood various kinds of pressures on them with the sole aim of helping the needy without any discrimination. In situations where men find it difficult to work these religious women have contributed immensely in the education programmes, giving medical aid, counseling, providing emergency needs and most importantly accompanying them in their daily struggle as part of their religious obligations, yet in spite of all their hardship these courageous women, who's own families are/were displaced possess a smile to brighten the lives of others.

## Women Fighters in the LTTE:

In violent civil war conditions men dictate terms, women hardly have any role to play. Srilanka is an exception. Women have identified violence as a means of retaliation. Half the LTTE cadres are women. Freedom struggle is not the struggle of men alone.<sup>23</sup> As an assertion of equality to the male fighters in the LTTE, women have played an important role in carrying on their ideology of war into the enemy territory. Women cadre came to the limelight after the Indo-Srilanka pact in 1987. In order to seek revenge for the atrocities committed by the Indian Peace Keeping (IPKF)<sup>24</sup> against the Tamil women. Dhanu, a human bomb blew herself killing the former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Since then it is common to see women Tigers carrying pictures of Dhanu for strength and protection. “The self-sacrifice of the female bomber is almost an extension of the idea of motherhood in Tamil Culture,” says Mangalika Silva, Coordinator of women for Peace in Colombo, Srilanka. <sup>25</sup> Women in the LTTE form half the estimated membership and fight shoulder to shoulder along side their male counterparts as part of the frontline troops against the Srilankan army in a conventional war. Women tigers are more efficient than their counterparts,

that is one of the reason they constitute the majority in the Black tiger, suicide squads. Once they are given the target they camouflage themselves till they finish the target even if it takes a few years.

Why do these women take a risk of losing their life and face such hardship in the battlefield? How can they transform from being traditionally confined to the kitchen to taking up arms? How can they wear battle attire from their traditional saree? How can they bare the harsh training which include climbing, living in jungles, trenches, starvation and living along with men? How can they suppress their femininity and sexuality as they are disallowed to marry till they turn 25 years of age? These are some pertinent questions asked by any observer of the women tigers. Women made up a third of the fighting force of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which experts estimate to be 15,000, and have undertaken suicide bombings<sup>26</sup>.

### **Violence in the form of different Survival mechanisms**

#### *As a mechanism against the state structure*

The atrocities committed by the Srilankan State forces act as a natural stimulant to the young girls to join the ranks of LTTE. The frequent rapes and killing of women, disappearances of young girls, molestation, and eve-teasing at security check points, frequent house raids instill a sense of fear in the minds of the young girls have who also seen their siblings being taken away, tortured or killed. This had happened even to their parents. The state sponsored economic embargo and restriction of movement helps them in making a decision to fight against the unjust state structure.

#### *As a curative mechanism*

The insecure feeling of being targeted by the state drives them to join the “freedom struggle.” Wearing a uniform and cyanide capsule around their neck gives them and gives them a sense of pride, protection, invincibility, and a cause to live or die. One of the healing processes identified by these women is to target the enemies as they have experienced violence on themselves, their families, and community. Targeting their enemies gave them a sense of satisfaction and cures their deep wounds. It brought a healing and soothing effect when they were successful in accomplishing their mission.

#### *As a defensive mechanism*

The LTTE discourse usually depicts Tamil women as either victims of oppression by the Sinhala state, or they are fighting against it, wearing a uniform, with a gun in hand and a cyanide capsule around the neck. Female fighters of the LTTE are cast as a symbol of the emancipated Tamil woman, who has taken her place in the trenches alongside men as an equal in the war for the liberation of the Tamil state. In doing so, it is symbolic of breaking free from oppressive social customs against women in Tamil society, which to this day practices the custom of superiority of men over women, assigning the women a place in the kitchen. They see the better treatment and opportunities provided to their brothers by the parents, dowry harassment is common, it is here they feel that one of the methods of asserting equality with the men is by joining the LTTE. By doing this she is able to give a befitting answer to the State sponsored violence as well as the unjust society.

A glimmer of hope had dawned the island in the form of a structured ceasefire and the most happy people were the women who possess a never say die spirit in facing the new realities. They have been compelled to take up arms once again. Though they know violence is evil, it is another technique mastered by these women for their survival. It is they who have experienced violence on themselves and they know how to cope up with it. Yet they appeal to all the human beings around the world to prevail upon the fighting forces to conclude the war and give peace a chance.

Even if peace returns one group, which would suffer the most is the women warriors. In the burgeoning peace process, female combatants have particular security and humanitarian needs.

<sup>1</sup><http://www.wluml.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml>. Retrieved on 8/06/2009

<sup>2</sup><http://www.wluml.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml>. Retrieved on 8/06/2009

<sup>1</sup>SRI LANKA: Pregnant women at greater risk in conflict <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=83804> VAVUNIYA, 6 April 2009

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.apwld.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> Exclusion from society for four months

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.apwld.org/>.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.apwld.org/>.

<sup>7</sup> Women and Media collective, Women's Rights Watch 1998, Colombo 1999, p. 33

<sup>2</sup><http://www.wluml.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml>.

<sup>3</sup> Women against Rape, oral intervention by Ms. Deirde McConell during the 57<sup>th</sup> session of the UN Commission on Human Rights, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2001

<sup>4</sup> [http://srilanka.ahrchk.net/legal\\_reform/mainfile.php](http://srilanka.ahrchk.net/legal_reform/mainfile.php).

<sup>5</sup> [http://srilanka.ahrchk.net/legal\\_reform/mainfile.php](http://srilanka.ahrchk.net/legal_reform/mainfile.php)

<sup>6</sup> Economic and Social Council. Integration of the Human Rights of Women and the Gender Perspective. 27 February 2003. <http://www.womenwarpeace.org/angola/docs/srvaw27feb03.doc>

<sup>7</sup> Displacement in Srilanka-USCR Report 1997

<sup>8</sup> IBID

<sup>9</sup> Displacement in Srilanka-USCR Report 1997

<sup>10</sup> War and its Impact on women in Srilanka – Kate de Rivero Refugee Watch, June 2000

<sup>11</sup> Human Rights in Srilanka, Human Right Watch 2000 annual report

<sup>12</sup> Sexual Violence against Tamil Women in Srilanka- D.B.S.Jeyaraj, Sunday Times Jan 2002

<sup>13</sup> Brutal Gang-Rape and Murder of Young Woman by Sri Lankan Navy.

<http://www.tamilcanadian.com/eelam/hrights/html/article/su001021114204N206.html>

<sup>14</sup> Srilanka- Rape in Custody, Amnesty International online report ASA 37/001/2002

See Amnesty International report, Sri Lanka: Torture in custody (AI Index: ASA 37/10/99) of June 1999 for more details on key aspects of torture, including rape and deaths in custody. The paper comments on the legal, institutional and political factors that allow these human rights violations to happen and impede victims and their relatives from obtaining redress. The current report should be read in conjunction with the above-mentioned report.

<sup>15</sup> These observations are based on the author's field visits to Srilanka's cleared, uncleared areas as well as the government hospitals in Mannar town and Vavuniya. The uncleared areas refer to land controlled by the LTTE. The cleared areas are controlled by the government troops.

<sup>16</sup> South Asia Partnership Canada. <http://www.sapcanada.org/Cross.rtf>

<sup>17</sup> Small Arms Survey, <http://www.smallarm.smallarmssurvey.org/Ops/OP11SriLanka.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> International Alert. UNSC Resolution 1325. South Asian Women's Perspectives. June 2003. <http://www.international-alert.org/women/publications/Asianpaper.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Human Rights Violations in Srilanka, Preventing Internal Flight Options – Paul Newman JRS South Asia Publ, Bangalore. 1999

<sup>20</sup> Chitra (name changed), a woman fighter of the LTTE

<sup>21</sup> The Indian Peace Keeping Force was sent to Srilanka as part of the Indo-Srilankan Peace Accord of 1987, concluded between the Indian Prime Minister Mr. Rajiv Gandhi and the Srilankan President Mr. J.R. Jeyawardane.

<sup>22</sup> Nirupama Subramaniam, Women Tiger: How enabled are they? The Hindu, March 10, 2002.

<sup>23</sup> Tigers in Breaking with Tradition, Women Flocking to Ranks. 21 February 2000. [http://www.spur.asn.au/Los Angeles Times 20000221 Tigers in Breaking with Tradition.htm](http://www.spur.asn.au/Los%20Angels%20Times%20000221%20Tigers%20in%20Breaking%20with%20Tradition.htm)