

Ambivalent Empowerment: *Women in Displacement, War and Peace*¹

Women have come out strong during the war... they have stood out as individuals or as small groups exposing the atrocities and violations of dignity... Women who in the midst of war pleaded and argued with the militants for their families and the whole nation...women's history does have a triumph. There is powerlessness disappointment and disillusion, but also hope. We have done it, a little bit".

*- Rajini Thiranagama
who was killed by
the LTTE in Jaffna on September 21, 1989*

South Asian women have greatness thrust upon them. They are rarely born great though they may be born of great families, and they rarely achieve greatness without great men. The phenomenon of women from powerful political dynasties becoming President or Prime Minister literally over the dead bodies of their husbands and fathers is a telling reflection and indictment of the gendered nature of political power and violence in the South Asian region. For, while post/colonial South Asia has had the highest regional concentration of women heads of State in the world – Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh, Sirimavo and Chandrika Bandaranaiyake in Sri Lanka, Indira and Sonia Gandhi in India, they are all widows and/or daughters of male Presidents and Prime Ministers. These women in power have rarely succeeded in stemming the violent trends in South Asian politics or in chalking out an alternative vision and course for their conflicted countries. By and large even women heads of State who had an alternative secular vision of communal and ethnic peace, such as Chandrika Bandaranaike, remain captive to the violent political forces, structures and processes that in the first instance thrust them to power.

Sri Lanka, with a 17 year old armed conflict and its lead on women's social indicators (literacy, health, education) in

the South Asian region, has had more widowed heads of State and widows contending for the post of head of State than any of its larger neighbours. Family, motherhood and widowhood have been the symbols that women who sought political power as well as women activists have mobilised in their struggles for and ascent to political power in a country ravaged by multiple political conflicts and violence. In Sri Lanka where widowhood bears a stigma in Hindu and to a lesser extent Buddhist culture, it has been powerfully reconfigured by the Bandaranaiques (mother and daughter), and other widows of presidents and or party leaders such as Mrs. Premadasa and Mrs. Gamini Dissanayake. Notably, it was Chandrika Bandaranaike who took the unprecedented step among politicians of distancing herself from playing ethnic politics and Sinhala majoritarian chauvinism by calling for peace with justice for the minorities as a means to end the armed conflict between successive Sri Lankan governments and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), fighting for a separate state. She has yet remained unable to fulfil that promise, caught up in the violent game of political survival and unable to transcend it – a metaphor for women’s ambivalent achievement in a period of social and political turmoil that has cast women in new roles in the sub-continent. Other widowed women such as Sarojini Yogeswaran of the moderate Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) who became the first elected women Mayor in 1998 in local government election in the northern capital Jaffna and was shot dead by militants at her residence have not survived the violence.

This paper considers the changing shape of women’s agency in the midst of armed conflict by exploring the new roles that women increasingly perform in their everyday activities in the north and east of the island where the armed conflict has been fought bitterly and has transformed social structures. Women from less politically powerful families than the Bandaranaiques have taken on many new and unaccustomed roles such as head of household and principal income generator mainly due to loss of male family members and displacement arising from the conflict. At the same time many women and girls have been rendered barely functional after suffering the violence of bombing, shelling, loss of family members, (extended) family fragmentation, and displacement. Moreover, due to the security situation and the

fact and perception that men are more likely to be “terrorists”, civilian women from families affected by the armed conflict in the north-eastern war zones of the island have begun to play new public roles. Increasingly women in the war zone deal with the authorities, from the Government Agent, to the military, to the humanitarian aid agencies. They file documents, plead their cases and implement decisions in public and private in the presence or absence of their men folk who are increasingly disempowered or disappeared.

Women’s agency/empowerment in war or peace is not a zero sum game, achieved at the expense of men. War places different burdens on men. For it is men and boys, who are mainly targeted to fight and defend their nation, community, family, and the honour of their women. Men are conscripted into paramilitaries to fight. Men and boys are more easily perceived as a security threat if they are of the wrong ethnic or religious community. They are also more likely to be killed. On the other hand, men who refuse to fight or who are forced to live off humanitarian aid in refugee camps suffer from feeling de-masculinated because they often cannot support their families and play the socially prescribed role of protector and breadwinner of the family. The result is low self-esteem and a sense of failure that might lead to suicidal tendencies among men and boys. Reports from those living in refugee camps indicate that alcoholism is high, as is increased domestic violence. Clearly, there is need for systematic study of the impact of war and ensuing social and gender transformation on boys, men and the cultural construction of masculinity. This is not however within the scope of this paper, which mainly focuses on women’s changing roles and lives in the armed conflict in the Tamil dominated north east of Sri Lanka.

Women’s agency, or to use a term more commonly found in development discourse, women’s “empowerment” is rarely unambivalent in war or peace. Likewise as Patricia Jeffery has argued “agency is not wholly encompassed by political activism” (1999). Yet it would appear that too many South Asian women’s initiatives have neglected the social structural transformations wrought by political violence. Rather the overwhelming emphasis by women’s groups as well as by women in relief and development continues to focus on bringing women into positions of political

leadership to foster women in governance and on legal reform beneficial to women. This has been the case despite the fact that ironically, the recent South Asian picture of women's advancement seems also to show that women's rights are often advanced within an ethno-nationalist framework as has happened with BJP women and the LTTE – an issue to which we will return.

This paper suggests that the changes that war has wrought on women's lives and the social and cultural fabric of family and communities in the conflict zones might give us clues towards developing a creative strategy to “empower” women and enhance their position and capacities for leadership and peace building in (post) conflict societies. Studies of women in conflict situations have only recently begun to address the deeper social and economic transformations that armed conflicts entail, and their implications for political empowerment. This paper then explores how conflict has opened up new spaces for women's agency and leadership within changing family and community structures, even as it has destroyed others, and placed a double burden on many. It is hence that I trace the transformations that the armed conflict in Sri Lanka has wrought on many civilian women in small but significant ways by thrusting them into positions of power and decision within their families and communities in war affected regions.

I start from the premise that conflict affects women differently, depending on religion, caste, class, ethnicity, location, political affiliation, etc. But conflict also reveals a certain commonality in women's experience. Women experience particularly gendered forms of violence, such as rape and the fear of rape, body searches and the fear of sexual violence, as well as the social stigmas which dog women who have been raped. Moreover the fear of sexual violence that the situation of insecurity in armed conflict entails limits and inhibits most women's mobility and hence their livelihoods, choices and realities. At the same time, women react differently to nationalist armed violence: some like the women cadres of the LTTE, or the women cadres of the Sri Lanka Army and Air Force, have been radicalised and taken up guns and weaponry for their respective nationalist struggles. Others have become political and social activists

for peace, seeking to build alliances across ethnic, cultural and regional borders (Mother's Front, Mothers and daughters of Lanka, Mothers of the Disappeared, Women for Peace, and Women's Coalition for Peace).

The Gender Status Quo in War and Peace

The argument that sixteen years of armed conflict might have resulted in the unintended empowerment of women (sometimes at the expense of their men folk), is dangerous and disturbing for those of us who believe in and advocate the peaceful resolution of conflicts arising from social injustice. Peace we still conceptualise as a return to things the way they used to be and this also includes, in the case of Tamil women, caste structures that buttresses the (gender) status quo. For, after all the gender hierarchy is one of the old established institutions of society, and as Partha Chatterjee noted of women in the colonial period, they are frequently constructed as the central purveyors of a communities "culture" and "tradition", ironically precisely at a time that their lives and social roles might be undergoing great transformations. Chatterjee's argument pertained to the colonial and Indian nationalist construction of women. Moreover as numerous feminist analyses have pointed out in periods of violent nationalist conflict women often are constructed as the bearers of a threatened national culture, values and tradition. Hence often a return to peace is indexed in the return to the traditional gender status quo – and even women revolutionaries are pushed back into the kitchen.

Social scientists, development workers, and activists have hesitated to address the issue of how social structural transformations wrought by long term armed conflicts might have also brought desirable changes to entrenched social hierarchies and inequalities such as caste and gender, among people exposed to it. We have been weary of analysing the unintended transformations brought by war, of seeing positives in violence, lest we be branded "war-mongers". Yet for many women who have lost family members peace can never be a simple return to the past. Rather, peace necessarily constitutes a creative remaking of cultural meanings and agency - a third space between a familiar, often romanticised, past and the traumatic present.

Failure to conceptualise and assist the dynamic of social transformation in conflict and peace building, might also impede recovery from traumatic experiences, particularly since women (and men), who have to take on new non-traditional roles due to the conflict might suffer secondary victimisation arising from the new roles that they perform. This is particularly the case with a growing number of young Tamil women who have been widowed in the course of the armed conflict, and are challenging conventional Hindu constructions of the “good woman” as one who is married and auspicious (*samangali*). Increasingly many young widows who have to go out to work to sustain young families are redefining the perception of widows (and to a lesser extent unmarried women), as inauspicious beings (*amangali*), by refusing to be socially and culturally marginalized and ostracised because they have lost husbands. Yet very few of these women seem to have found a culturally appropriate language to articulate the transformations that they have experienced, and many feel ashamed, guilty and/or traumatised by their changed circumstances and gender roles arising from conflict.

This paper also attempts to trace languages and patterns of empowerment in the generally tragic story of displaced Tamil women’s lives towards recognising and promoting positive changes to women's roles and lives wrought in conflict. The new spaces of cultural or ideological struggle opened by the social structural transformations engendered by long-term armed conflict also enable the agents and ideologues of violence, and recently invented nationalist “tradition”, often oppressive to women. Sometimes for strategic reasons those of us who advocate peace have tended to exaggerate the violence, and seen it as an all-encompassing thing. Analysis has been the victim of such an approach to the study of violence, gendered violence in war and peace. It is hence that this paper attempts to rethink some of the gender dynamics of a return to peace by analysing the women’s new roles and the cultural frameworks that enable or disable them. For unless the cultural frameworks that denigrate (widowed) women are challenged and transformed women and men who are coping and trying to recover from the wounds of war will carry a double burden - rather than be empowered in the new roles thrust upon them. The paper then seeks to chart the

shifting terrain of women's ambivalent agency in armed conflict, the new spaces opened and the old spaces closed and the changing structure of gender relations, in the war affected north east of Sri Lanka.

The paper then examines 1) women engaged in peace and human rights work 2) women who have had to take on new roles as head of household². Hence the second part of the paper assesses the implications of women's transformed roles for humanitarian interventions and development work in war and peacetime. The paper also attempts to map militant and civilian women's agency in moments of violent social transformation and cultural change, to configure a more complex picture of women's agency, as well as their languages of resistance and empowerment in conflict. It also takes a critical look at how the construct of the Sri Lankan women as a double "victim": of war, as well as caste, culture, and society in peacetime might obscure and indeed impede women's agency and empowerment in conflicts.

I draw from ethnographic field research conducted during several field work stints over a number of years (1996-2000) among communities in the "border areas" (both cleared and uncleared areas as they have come to be termed in the media and popular culture). This border constitutes the shifting "forward defence line", that demarcates land held by the Sri Lanka military and the LTTE. Land held by the military is referred to as "cleared areas" while land controlled by the LTTE is termed "uncleared". Roughly, the border runs from the main eastern town of Batticaloe in the East, to Vavuniya at the centre, to Mannar in the West. It encompasses most of the eastern and north central provinces of the island which have experienced cycles of violent armed conflict, including repeated bombing and shelling of civilian populations.

My observations on displaced women are drawn from interviews conducted with women living in three different settings of displacement:

- 1) Welfare centres or refugee camps where people are housed in sheds, schools or structures constructed by UNHCR and other relief agencies working with the government.

2) Residents of border villages who have been displaced many times by the fighting, shelling and bombing, but chose to return to their villages rather than remain in refugee camps. These people live in constant fear of attack and displacement again, but since the majority are farmers they choose to return to their land.

3) New settlements in the border areas of the Vanni where the Sri Lanka Government settles land less displaced families from the same province in a new plot of land. These new settlements are part of the rehabilitation and reconstruction program in Vavuniya. In particular, I draw from interviews with young women heads of households in Siddambarapuram Camp, which is located just outside the town of Vavunia in the north central province. This particular camp received a large number of displaced persons and families from Jaffna and the Vanni who had fled to India in the early nineties and were subsequently repatriated. I also draw from interviews conducted with women heads of households in the new settlement scheme adjacent to Siddambarapuram camp.

Women as “Victims” of War, Caste, Culture

The tendency to view women as “victims” in the armed conflict has been fueled by a number of popular and specialist discourses, concerning several brutal rapes committed by the Sri Lanka Army, as well as the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) when they controlled the conflict zones. Human rights discourse and humanitarian interventions have also significantly contributed to the tendency to view women as “victims”. For the various and systematic forms of violence that civilian women experience at the hands of armed combatants, whether state armies or paramilitary personnel, in situations of armed conflict and displacement was extensively documented and highlighted in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and other parts of Africa and Asia. This process culminated in the UN resolution that established rape as a war crime and saw the appointment of Sri Lankan lawyer, Radhika Coomaraswamy as the first UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women in 1994³. Highlighting gross violations of women's bodies and lives in situations of conflict and displacement has been part of an

important intervention by feminists and activists to promote women's rights as human right internationally.

The focus on women as "victims" of war and patriarchal culture has also arguably resulted in the elision of how long term social upheaval might have also transformed women's often subordinate gender roles, lives and position in non-obvious ways. At the same time, in secular feminist analysis women's political violence is often the uncomfortable black hole wherein women's agency, because violent, becomes a male patriarchal project. The claim is often made that women who enter new spaces as militants in nationalist armed struggle such as the LTTE women remain finally pawns and victims in the discourse of nationalist patriarchy, and it is hence that they are pushed back into the kitchen after the revolution/war. Likewise, it is argued that civilian women who take on new roles such as head of household, principal income generator and decision-makers in the absence of their men folk are really merely carrying a double burden. While there is little doubt that women in a war's interregnum carry a double burden, viewing women as merely victims of their culture, war and patriarchy elides women's agency in violence. Positioning women as victims might also mean that they are subject to secondary victimisation since victim hood also often entails carrying a burden of a social stigma. Women who are widowed and or raped are particularly vulnerable to the double complex of stigmatised victim.

But the construct of the Sri Lankan Tamil woman as "victim" also draws from another genealogy. Anthropological, sociological and literary ethnography has tended to represent Tamil women as living within a highly patriarchal caste ridden Hindu cultural ethos, particularly in comparison to Sinhala women whose lives are seen to be less circumscribed by caste ideologies and purity/pollution concepts and practices. The troubling figure of the LTTE woman soldier – the armed virgin – stands as one of the few highly problematic exceptions to the representation of Tamil women as victims.

Of course the representation of Tamil woman in relation to caste and family is not entirely monochrome in the anthropological literature which is split on the subject. For many anthropologists have also emphasised strong

matrilineal tendencies in Sri Lankan Tamil society, where women inherit property in the maternal line according to customary *Thesawalamai* law and enjoy claims on natal families, in contrast to the rigidly patriarchal cultures of North India where patrilineal descent and inheritance is the norm (cf. Wadley: 1991). Feminist ethnography, on the other hand, has emphasised the subordinate status of Tamil women in the Hindu caste structure, while frequently noting the split between the ideology of *Shakti* or female power as the primary generative force of the universe (also associated with the pantheon of powerful Hindu goddesses) and the reality of women's apparent powerlessness in everyday life (Thiruchandran: 1997). Both schools however emphasise the generally restrictive nature of the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu caste system on women and often tend to see caste and gender relations as culturally rather than historically determined. By and large however women have rarely been centred in debates on caste, and when they have been, they are more often than not constructed as victims rather than agents of culture⁴.

More recently anthropologists have argued that colonialism permeated by British Victorian patriarchal culture eroded the status of women in the South Indian societies that follow the matrilineal Dravidian kinship pattern, where property is passed in the women's line, from mother to daughter – a practice which usually indicates the relatively high status of women in society. Rather, they highlight how colonial legal systems might have eroded the rights and freedoms that women had under customary law, particularly in matrilineal societies, while emphasising the historically changing circumstances of family, kinship, caste and gender relations. In this vein, this paper explores how seventeen years of armed conflict, displacement and humanitarian-relief- development interventions might have altered the structure of the family, caste, land rights and the gender *status quo* among communities in the border areas affected by the conflict.

The Structure of Armed conflict and Women as Nationalist Fighters and Victims

The figure of the LTTE woman soldier, the armed virgin, and the nationalist mother and or queen of Sinhala legend who craved the blood of Tamils, and women in the armed forces stand, as some of the few problematic exceptions to the representation of women as victims of war and their culture. LTTE women have been portrayed by Adele Ann, wife of the LTTE spokesman, and Peter Shalk as “liberated” and by Radhika Coomaraswamy as “cogs in the wheel” of the male leadership of the LTTE. The reality of LTTE women is probably somewhere in between. For while they may have broken out of the confines of their allotted domesticity and taken on new roles as fighters, it is indeed arguable that they are captive both to the patriarchal nationalist project of the LTTE leader Prabhakaran and the history and experience of oppression by the Sri Lankan military. However to deny these Tamil nationalist women their agency because they are nationalist is to once again position them within the “victim” complex, where the militant woman is denied her agency and perceived to be acting out a patriarchal plot.

Arguably, the LTTE line on the women question might have evolved beyond the first phase of the nationalist struggle when LTTE women seemed unable and unwilling to raise the question of gender inequality lest they be accused of fostering division in the Eelam nationalist cause. In the second phase of armed struggle in the nineties when the LTTE maintained a quasi-state in the “uncleared areas”, non-combatant women played new roles, albeit in a highly war traumatized and transformed society. For in 1987 during an interview with Dhanu (who subsequently assassinated Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi in a suicide attack) and Akhila (a senior woman cadre), at the LTTE headquarters in Jaffna, they told me that the most important liberation struggle was the struggle for Eelam and the liberation of the Tamil people. The woman problem would detract from focusing on the cause and could hence only be sorted out later. Subsequently, almost 12 years later in January 1999 on a visit to the LTTE held “uncleared area” near the north-eastern town of Trincomalee, I learned of the existence of a de facto LTTE policy on domestic violence. During a conversation with

several members from a local CBO one young woman said that women who suffer domestic violence and are physically abused by their spouses now complain to the LTTE cadres who take appropriate action. At the first complaint, the abusive spouse is given a warning, on the second he is fined, and if there is a third complaint he might end up in the LTTE jail. There are also reports that women now sit at LTTE local courts and arbitrate local disputes in the “uncleared areas”. What this suggests is that after the war, given the demographic as well as social changes that have occurred, if women are expected to return to the kitchen, rather than make policy on rehabilitation and reconstruction of the community, they might not do so willingly.

Since 1983 when Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict transmuted into a dirty war perpetrated by a number of armed forces and groups, civilian men and women in the border areas have lived amidst overlapping regimes of terrifying security. Between the major contenders in the war - the Sri Lanka government's military regime of passes and check points and the LTTE's parallel security regime - civilian men and women also have to contend with the sub regimes of several other armed groups - the Eelam People’s Revolutionary Front (EPRLF - East coast) and Rafik group, People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE - Vanni), Eelam People’s Democratic Party (EPDP) – Jaffna. Fifteen years of war has generated a number of armed paramilitary groups who seem intent only on retaining the power they wield at gun point. Many of these paramilitary groups which are bank rolled by the Sri Lanka government and work with the Army to combat the LTTE maintain regimes of terror and torture in the areas they control. All these groups, mainly youth, carry guns.

The paramilitary remains outside the authority and discipline structure of the Government's armed forces, which are marginally better trained and better aware of humanitarian law. Thus, the paramilitary cadre tend to have a relatively freer reign than government forces to terrorise civilians, torture them, and extort money at gun point. At the national level, several leaders of paramilitary groups are installed as members of Parliament and support the ruling government.⁵ These groups have also developed systems of taxation of civilians by virtue of their control over the main transport

routes, and the movement of persons and goods through an economy of terror, scarcity and fear. In the Sri Lankan conflict, the LTTE pioneered this system of taxation on the movement of goods and trafficking in persons. Since then, the Army has resorted to similar practices. Where the army issues passes and identification papers, there is a high degree of corruption. Residents of high security areas complain of being asked to pay large sums of money to army personnel before they are issued with these papers.

Violence against women in this context is the stuff of rape, trauma and disappeared persons, torture, assassination, and the gendered politics of body searches at check points usually conducted by armed youth who have been trained in the arts of terror, torture, and the degradation of their victims. Several instances of check point rape by the Sri Lankan Government's security forces have occurred, though rape has not been practised as a systematic policy for ethnic cleansing by any groups in the conflict, unlike in Bosnia. Women suffer particularly from the poor security situation in the border areas. Their mobility and thus ability to go out to work is severely curtailed due to fear of body searches and check point rape, not to mention anxiety about being caught in cross fire. Mothers are often fearful for their daughter's safety and sexual vulnerability and tend to confine them to the home or refugee camp. Simultaneously, a sexual service industry has developed in Anuradhapura area where soldiers return from the conflict areas, with many homeless and displaced women engaging in prostitution.

The fear of checkpoint rape is a constraint on women's ability to move around and venture out of their immediate locale for work or any other purpose. Conditions are considerably worse for displaced women who are forced to live in refugee camps where privacy is minimal if non-existent and levels of generalised violence, alcoholism and domestic violence is high.

Displacement and Spaces of Empowerment: Displacing Gender and Caste Hierarchies

Since the armed conflict commenced in Sri Lanka, the population of displaced people has fluctuated from half a

million to 1.2 million, or between a tenth and a fifth of the country's population at various points in the conflict. At the end of December 1995, the Ministry of Rehabilitation and Reconstruction in Sri Lanka estimated that there were 1,017,181 internally displaced people in Sri Lanka while 140,000 were displaced overseas (some of the latter have sought asylum status). Figures of displaced persons are however controversial. The University Teachers for Human Rights, Jaffna (1993) estimates that half a million Tamils have become refugees overseas. The decennial census of Sri Lanka scheduled for 1991 was not taken due to the conflict. Estimates are that 78% of the internally displaced are ethnically Tamils, 13% are Muslims, and 8% are Sinhalese (Gomez, 1994). Many displaced people, Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese alike, fled Sri Lanka Army and LTTE brutalities.

Displacement and camp life had also provided spaces for empowerment for several Tamil women who had taken on the role of head of household for various reasons. In this section I outline some of the process of transformation in young single and widowed women's lives, which women I met at the Siddambarapuram camp and adjacent new settlement scheme described. Siddambarapuram was located a few miles outside Vavuniya, the largest town in the north Central Vanni region. It had received a large influx of refugees from the north. In many ways the facilities, location and environmental/climatic conditions at that camp and the adjoining new settlements were exceptionally propitious. The relative prosperity of the locale and its residents was evident in the fact that the market in the camp was a vibrant and happening place that had become a shopping centre for nearby old (purana) villagers as well. At Siddambarapuram the sense of independence, empowerment and mobility of many women heads of household was tangible and remarkable in contrast to other women I met in camps in less propitious settings. This is explainable in terms of the camp's location close to the larger town of Vavuniya where women could find employment, particularly in the service sector. This is of course not an option for displaced women in other less conveniently located camps.

The Siddambarapuram Camp was initially constructed as a transit camp by UNHCR for refugees returning to Jaffna

from India in 1991, who were subsequently stranded when the conflict started again in what is known as the second Eelam War. Many of the people in the camp had been resident for more than five years. One of the oldest refugee camps in Vavuniya, in many respects the camp was exceptionally well located and serviced. Several young Tamil widows I interviewed in the camp and the adjoining new settlement noted that while they had initially had a hard time adjusting to displacement, camp life and the burdens of caring for their young families, they also had gained freedom to work outside the house hold and increasingly enjoyed the role of being the head of the household and its principle decision maker.

Many women said that they had little desire to remarry, mainly due to anxiety that their children might not be well cared for by a second husband. Several women commented that previously their husbands would not permit them to work outside the household, even if they had done so prior to marriage. Of course one of the principle reasons for these women's newly found sense of control was the fact that they were able to and had found employment outside the household and the camp. Women in the service sector or in the NGO sectors had done best.

It is arguable that the erosion of caste ideology and practice particularly among the younger generation in the camps had contributed to women's mobility and sense of empowerment. For except for the highly westernised urban Tamil women professionals, caste has historically provided the mainstay of the Hindu Tamil gender *status quo* since caste belonging often determines women's mobility, and seclusion particularly among the high castes is a sign of high status. Unlike in Jaffna where village settlement was caste and region based, in the camp it was difficult to maintain social and spatial segregation, caste hierarchies, and purity pollution taboos for a number of reasons. This is particularly true for members of the younger generation who simply refused to adhere to caste inhibitions.

As one mother speaking about the disruption of caste hierarchies in displacement observed: "because we are poor here as displaced people we only have two glasses to drink from so when a visitor from another caste comes we have to

use the same glass. Now my daughter refuses to observe the separate utensils and she is friendly with boys we wouldn't consider at home. Everything is changing with the younger generation because they are growing up all mixed up because we are displaced and living on top of each other in a camp..." This mother went on to detail how it was difficult to keep girls and boys separate in the camp situation. She thought that the freer mingling of youth meant that there would be more inter-caste marriages and hence and erosion of caste. Presumably this also means that girls had more choice over who might be their partners.

The reconstitution of displaced families around women who had lost male kin curiously resonates with an older gender *status quo*: that of the pre-colonial Darvidian matrilineal family and kinship system where women remain with their natal families after marriage, and were customarily entitled to lay claim on the resources of the matri-clan, and hence enjoyed a relatively higher status, in comparison with strictly patrilineal societies. For as Binna Agarawal has pointed out in "A Field of One's Own" (1996), the existence of matrilineal systems where matrilineal descent, matrilocal residence, and/or bi-lateral inheritance is practised is usually an indicator of the relatively higher status of women when compared to the status of women in patrilineal groups. Similar observations concerning the status of women in matrilineal communities have been made by anthropologists who have studied the Nayars of Kerala as well as the Sinhala, Tamils and Muslims of the East coast of Sri Lanka where matrilineal inheritance is the norm (Yalman). These are also societies where social indicators have been consistently good, with high levels of female literacy, education and health care in South Asia.

During the colonial period in Sri Lanka there was however a general erosion of the matrilineal inheritance and bi-lateral descent practice, despite general provision being made for customary common law for indigenous communities (Thesavallamai, Tamil customary law, Kandian Sinhala law as well as Muslim Personal law). In the same period the modernising tendency to the nuclear family enshrined in secular European, Dutch and British law, also privileged male inheritance, thereby reducing the power of women within their families.

The switch from matrilineal, matrilocal, to virilocal forms of residence and inheritance, where women take only movable property to their affinal household might also be traced to various post/colonial land distribution schemes wherein title deeds for land were invested in male heads of household, with the injunction against the further division of land due to land fragmentation, which set a precedent for male inheritance of the entirety of the family's land. The result has been the tendency towards male primogeniture - with the eldest son inheriting the land and daughters being disinherited from land ownership. Unfortunately the similar pattern of title deeds being invested in male heads of households is still evident in the new settlement and land distribution schemes for less displaced populations which are taking place in Vavuniya under the rehabilitation and reconstruction project. In these projects it is only where the male head of household is presumed dead that title deeds are invested in women. Women whose husbands have left them or whose location/cannot be ascertained is not deemed eligible for land grants. Clearly in the case of Tamil inheritance patterns customary practices are more liberal than that of post/colonial development practice.

What all of this indicates is that cultural practice structure and direction of changes in women's roles in situations of armed conflict. For while Tamil women have begun to play various unaccustomed public roles, the evidence from the war zones also suggests that conflict has diminished Muslim women's mobility in conflict zones and in the areas in which they have been displaced.

Rethinking Displacement: the Changing Roles of Women in Conflict and the Humanitarian Challenge

Currently there is growing recognition among those involved in humanitarian relief and rehabilitation work that women frequently bear the material and psychological brunt of armed conflict, and hence there is a need for gender sensitive relief and rehabilitation work. Yet few programs have systematically explored how relief might aid recovery from individual trauma and social suffering, and facilitate women's empowerment in and through conflict. Thus many gender programs organised by the Government's relief and

rehabilitation authority and NGOs still remain within conventional development thinking rather than attempting to work out *culturally* appropriate and effective strategies for women's empowerment in the context of the social transformations that have occurred over years of armed conflict and displacement

Popular romanticizations of home as well as constructions of internally displaced people as victims (Sinhala term - *anathagatha kattiya* - literally means the abandoned people, while the Tamil term *Veedu attavargal* means people without a home), like the victim discourse concerning women in conflict in the human rights field often obscure the realities of living at home in conflict. There is growing evidence to suggest that despite the psycho-social traumas that displacement entails, long-term displacement has provided windows of opportunity for greater personal and group autonomy and experiments with identity and leadership for displaced people, particularly for women (Institute of Agriculture and Women in Development, 1995; Sachithanandam, 1995). Certainly this has been the case for many displaced Tamil women, many of whom have lost husbands and sons in the conflict. It is time now for humanitarian relief efforts to be conceptualized in terms of 1) sustainability; 2) maintaining local orders of ethnic coexistence and empowerment between displaced people and their local hosts, 3) empowerment of women within community and family structures dramatically different from the pre-conflict situation. In Sri Lanka this is particularly necessary if the ethnic conflict is not to spread to new areas where the displaced have found refuge and are often perceived to be in competition with poor local populations.

Many internally displaced women who have given up the dream of return are in the paradoxical position of being materially and psychologically displaced by the humanitarian interventions and human rights discourses, and practices that define them as victims who need to be returned to their original homelands for their protection and for the restoration of national and international order and peace⁶. The assumption of return is a fundamental premise of State, international and NGO policies vis-a-vis internally displaced people. The fact is that these policies might contribute to prolong the conflict and cause trauma for people who fled their home over five years ago. This is particularly true of

women for whom restrictions on mobility are difficult. Many of these women who wish to settle in the place where they have found refuge are being kept dependent on relief handouts rather than being assisted to build new lives and livelihoods. Thus, ironically, relief might be prolonging the trauma of the very people it is supposed to assist.

Under these circumstances, an approach which conceptualises humanitarian work as part of a development continuum with gender-sensitive post/conflict intervention is especially necessary in instances where armed conflicts have lasted for several years with communities experiencing cycles of war and peace and displacement. Ironically, for some women the conflict has provided windows of opportunity for greater personal and group autonomy and experiments with identity and leadership for others there is only trauma. Certainly this has been the case for many displaced Tamil women, many of whom have lost husbands and sons in the conflict⁷. It is hence important that relief aid should be conceptualised to sustain women's empowerment and leadership roles that initially arose as an effect of conflict within an altered family structure.

Clearly the process of a woman becoming head of household is not transparent, unambivalent, or free of guilt, and this was evident in many young widows uncertainty about whether they should return home if and when the conflict ended. For them displacement clearly constituted the space of ambivalence: a place of regeneration and the hope for a future unfettered by the past, loss and trauma. They were also concerned that return home would mean a return to the pre-war caste and gender *staus quo*... Of course, anxiety about return was also related to qualms about personal security and trauma. Anxiety about return was clearest among young women heads of households at Siddambarapuram, who had integrated to the local economy and among those who had previously been land less.

Languages of Empowerment: Recasting Widowhood and the Return to Matri-focal Families

A generation of young Tamil war widows who have been displaced to and in the border areas for many years seem

to be increasingly challenging conventional Hindu constructions of widow hood as a negative and polluting condition which bars their participation from many aspects of community life. Several young widows working in Vavunia town but resident in the camp displayed their sense of independence by wearing the red *pottu*, the auspicious mark reserved for the married Hindu women, despite being widows or women whose husbands had abandoned them. Likewise in Batticaloa several women who had lost husbands to death, displacement or family fragmentation in the course of armed conflict and flight from bombing and shelling, increasingly refused to erase the signs of *sumankali* (particularly the auspicious red pottu) they wore when married, and refuse to be socially and culturally marginalized and ostracised because they lack husbands and children. Displacement along with the fragmentation and reconstitution of families around women in a conflict where men frequently have had to flee to avoid being killed or inducted by the armed groups, appears to have provided a space to redefine traditional Hindu Tamil perceptions of widows and single women as inauspicious beings.

Of course the demographic fact of a large number of young widows who are unwilling to take on the role of the traditional Hindu widow, who may not participate in auspicious social rituals such as wedding ceremonies and who are generally socially ostracised facilitates the transformation of negative cultural patterns. Yet these young women's response to their changed circumstances marks the space for redefinition of what it means to be an unmarried or widowed woman in the more orthodox Hindu tradition. Consciously and unconsciously, they appear to be redefining conceptions of the "good woman" as one who lives within the traditional confines of caste, kin group and village. As they struggle with new gender roles and identities, many of these young widows also struggle to find a language and cultural idiom to speak of their changed roles. They refuse to wear the prescribed garb of widow hood and appear to break with the ideology of Kanaki (*Paththini*) the exemplary faithful wife and widow of Tamil mythology and ideology. Rather, they seem to evoke the sign of the *devadasi* – *Kanaki's*, alter ego - who transcended conventional gender roles; the professional woman married to immortality for her talent and skill, most

familiar to South Asian audiences in the name of the famed dancer and courtesan, Madhavi of the first century Tamil Hindu-Buddhist epic, *Sillapaddikaram*.

Yet with the exception of the young Tamil widows many women who have found more freedom in the conflict, women still seem to lack a language to articulate this process of transformation and regeneration and clearly feel guilty about expressing their new found confidence. But one woman directly told me “it is a relief now that he (her husband) is not with me. He used to drink and beat me up”. While she worries for her personal safety and that of her children in the absence of her husband, particularly at night she said that she any way had to support the children mainly on her own even when her husband was with her.

The victim ideology that pervades relief and rehabilitation as well as social health and trauma interventions for women in conflict situations needs to be problematised especially as it may be internalised by some women with - damaging consequences. Non-combatant women who have found spaces of empowerment in the conflict need sustained assistance to maintain their new found mobility and independence in the face of sometimes virulently nationalist assertions of patriarchal cultural tradition and practices during the conflict and in the period of post war reconstruction. The return to peace should not mean a return to the pre-war gender *status quo*. It follows that humanitarian and development interventions must creatively support and sustain positive changes to the status of civilian women living in conflict.

In the north and east of Sri Lanka the reality of war for women has been the loss of their men folk, physical safety, psychological insecurity and a struggle for survival and sustaining the family. In short, a double burden of keeping themselves and their families fed and sheltered while often assuming the sole responsibility for the vulnerable and weak, the children and the elderly and the disabled. As a result women have crossed the private/public barriers to contend with the military, to compete in the market, to survive economically. As they have done so many women who have been forced to take on various new roles within their families and communities, during the years of armed conflict have

also gained greater self-confidence and decision making power in the process. Over time women have gone through a process of transformation despite and because of the difficulty of taking on the added burden of traditionally male roles (head of household/ principal income generator), due to the loss of their men folk and displacement. Women have gained greater self-confidence, mobility and authority within their families and communities often at the expense of carrying a double burden. A backlash against women's changing roles and patterns of mobility is arguably one of the reasons for increased levels of violence against women.

Women in Political Conflict and Peace Building

To end then at the beginning: women political leaders seem to have had little success in bringing about significant improvement to lives and position of women in the South Asian region or in building bridges across ethno-religious lines. They have however moderated the more extreme misogynist cultural practices in a region where honour killings of women by their own family members for defying the rules of whom "she may or may not love" as Arundhathi Roy put it so evocatively, are increasing. This was arguably the case with Pakistan under Benazir Bhutto, where the more negative interpretations of Sharia law was not practised against women, but became commonplace under Prime Minister Sharif, notably when the banning of Honour killing of women was brought up in Parliament. On the other hand both the Indian and the Sri Lankan record shows that women in leadership positions without fundamental cultural and structural changes in society and polity rarely results in the advancement of the position of women. It is hence that South Asian women activists now advocate at least 33% reservations for women in parliament in order to begin to change gender imbalances in politics and society. At the same time the case of Hindu women activists of the BJP in India and women in the LTTE might indicate that for too long pro-peace secular feminist analysis has denied nationalist women their agency and their place in the sun. For, ironically it is arguable that the recent South Asian picture of women entering new public spaces in peacetime as well as due to war indicates that women's agency and rights might be more

effectively advanced within a nationalist framework due to the dominance of cultural nationalism in the region. In India and Sri Lanka it would appear that women's rights have been most systematically advanced within an ethno-nationalist framework. Of course the Hindu nationalist BJP women are calling for a uniform civil code to enhance the rights of Muslim women vis-à-vis Muslim men, in a clearly ideologically biased manner, while Tamil women who dissent from the LTTE project have paid heavily and in some cases with their lives⁸.

At the same time secular women leaders like Chandrika Bandranaiake who try to transcend ethno-religious divides fall pray less to patriarchal nationalism than the politics of survival in an increasingly violent political culture. Less high profile women have also had limited success reaching beyond their immediate circle and strike a common cord among the people at the national level, partly due to the absence of access to political party machinery which dominates national political processes. On the other hand many local women's organizations have done and continue to do important work to improve the condition of women and to build bridges across ethno-religious nationalist lines. Women's groups like the Suriya Women's Centre founded in Batticaloa, in the east of Sri Lanka in 1990 have been actively engaged in Human Rights work, advocacy and peace education. Several of the founder members of this group fled Jaffna after the LTTE killed one of the members, Rajini Thiranagama, also a senior Lecturer at the University of Jaffna for her outspoken stand on its Human Rights abuses. On the other hand, women's groups which had the potential to make an impact on national level politics such as the Mother's Front have been appropriated by traditional party politicians and armed militant groups, who have used women's contributions and support to achieve positions of power, but who have rarely invested women with political power in the political process (de Alwis, 1999).

Sixteen years of armed conflict and the culture of ethno-nationalist and political polarisation has also meant that activist women and secular women's groups have made little progress in peace building across ethnic lines. Though analyses of women's activism have sometimes privileged women's peace movements (Samuel: 1998), most women's

groups are mobilised by and large along ethnic lines with a few exceptions in Sri Lanka. The most powerful and oldest women's groups were anyway formed within a religious ethno-nationalist framework opposed to colonialism as for instance the – Young Women's Buddhist Association (YMBA). While such early women's organisations were anti-colonial rather than ethno-nationalist they have over the years become increasingly ethno-nationalist. Seva Vanitha that works for the bereaved families of Armed Forces personnel is explicitly nationalist.

When alliances across ethnic lines have been struck it was over particular issues, such as the Mothers' Front which came together to stop the disappearances of family members arising from military violence and state brutality. However these organisations have been subsequently co-opted by a political party. By and large it is arguable that this co-optation was largely due to the hostile ethno-nationalist climate in which secular women's groups operate and the reactive nature of the groups. For arguably the absence of a proactive vision for strategic action have made secular groups vulnerable to co-option. This was largely the case with the secular Colombo based group, Women for Peace, that convened in 1983 after the ethnic riots and dissolved in 1997, when it succumbed to the difficulties of working across ethnic lines in a time when the language of peace had been appropriated by a state intent of waging a "war for peace".

Clearly, there is a need to look elsewhere for women's agency, activism in armed conflict and peace building. Historically, women who took on various non-traditional gender roles in situations of social stress, conflict, war and revolution, have been "pushed back into the kitchen after the revolution" as part of a return to everyday life (Jayawardane: 1986, Enloe: 1983). Arguably, one of the primary reasons that the return to peace often meant a return to the gender *status quo* was the lack of social recognition and a culturally appropriate idiom to articulate, legitimate and support women's transformed roles and empowerment in the midst of conflict, trauma, and social disruption. The paper then has attempted to distinguish between the kinds of transformations that have occurred by exploring their long-term impact. For social transformation to be sustained there needs to be cultural transformation; acceptance of the legitimacy of

women performing their new roles. And it is hence arguable that the great threat and the greater challenge to the gender status quo come less from the women in fatigues who might be asked to do desk jobs after the conflict, and more from the women who refuse to erase the red *pottu*, the unsung civilian women who daily struggle to sustain their families and themselves.

Unlike in Afghanistan where the situation of women has unambiguously deteriorated due to conflict and the victory of the Taliban, in Sri Lanka, the evidence suggests that despite many women's experience of traumatic violence and displacement, some changes to the gender *status quo* wrought by armed conflict might have empowered women whose freedom and mobility were restricted by patriarchal cultural mores, morality and convention in peace time. Several women who have faced the traumatic loss and scattering of family members due to displacement, conflict, and the break down of family structures have also assumed new roles which were thrust upon them as a result of the disruption of peacetime community organisation, social structures and patriarchal values. Yet I do not wish to suggest that this is a general story which might be told of women living in conflict and displacement. Rather this paper has attempted to focus on some women's agency at moments when they seem most victimised, to excavate some hidden moments and routes of women's agency in the situation of conflict.

It is hence that this paper has sought to develop an alternative framework for analysing women's agency and ambiguous empowerment in conflict situations while analysing changing gender relations. This has meant exploring gender relations outside the scripted frames of nationalist women's mobilisation as well as gender analyses of women in politics. For it seems to me that the arena of politics proper in South Asia is violent space and process, where women politicians are stripped and humiliated, as has repeatedly occurred at election time in Sri Lankan politics in the last decade. In Sri Lanka which celebrated 50 year of democracy and was considered a mature democracy with free fair and non-violent elections until recently, the crisis is acute.

I have argued elsewhere that nationalist women and women combatants in nationalist struggles waged by groups like the LTTE, or the nationalist women in Ireland or Palestine, are imbricated in ultra-conservative "nationalist constructions of women" and tend to subordinate their gender identities to the nationalist cause (Rajasingham 1995). Suicide bombing is but the extreme version of this phenomenon which might, in Durkheimian terms, be glossed as altruistic suicide, when individual autonomy and personal agency is completely subsumed in the national cause. The question might well be raised as to whether women would be more given than men to altruistic suicide, given their socialisation in patriarchal Asian cultures where girl children and women are more often than not taught to put themselves second, and their male folk, family, and community honour first. Clearly, non-combatant women are differently imbricated in nationalist discourses, and the return to peace time (which entails the reassertion of the gender (*status quo*)) is as problematic for them as it is for combatant women, but for different reasons.

A multiethnic women's politics that crosses ethnic lines might be the best and last bulwark against growing ethnic chauvinism that are being built up by democratic politicians, intent on shoring up vote banks and personal power at the cost of national peace. Moreover left liberal feminist positions that seek to transcend ethno-religious differences seem less likely to succeed in advancing women's rights than nationalist politics. Given that ethnic identity politics is increasingly coterminous with politics proper, it is arguable that women will have to forge new spaces for activism – outside the sphere of politics proper and by exploiting the social and cultural spaces that have thrust women into new roles. Violent deaths and armed conflict open up ambiguous spaces of agency and empowerment for women within their families and communities who have not been directly engaged in violence.

The notion that wars disrupt social, political and gender hierarchies in unexpected ways and benefit marginal groups and individuals while obvious is yet unexplored. This lacuna in the understanding of conflict and its effects has much to do with how we conceptualise peace – as a return to the (gender) status quo. Peace we still think constitutes a return to things

the way they used to be; the certain certainties of familiar, older, ways of being and doing. But to conceptualise peace thus, is another kind of (epistemic) violence. For women, wives and mothers who have lost a head of household or seen him “disappear” in the violence, there is no return to the old certainties of the nuclear family, headed by the father, the patriarch. For the war’s widows, for those who have lived intimately with war, the changes wrought by sixteen years of armed conflict in Sri Lanka are too deep, too complex, structural and fundamental. They force us to challenge our certain certainties about war and peace. In this context, peace is necessarily a third place divorced from the past, utopia perhaps, somewhere arguably between the old and the existing, the past and the present.

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Notes and References:

¹ A version of this paper appeared in *Women, Nation and Narration*, edited by Selvi Thiruchandran (1999).

² The social role of women: of holding the family together, of caring for children, the sick and the elderly makes women the worst sufferers during conflict.

³ Reports the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women.

⁴ Colonial evolutionary classifications of (primitive) societies presumed that fewer restrictions on women's freedom indicated a more primitive stage of civilizational advance.

⁵ Many paramilitants have been trained either by the State and have benefited from training in violence from various foreign sources including the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) as well as war experts from Israel and the U.S.

⁶ For those in the conflict regions, the right to set up residence in an area of one's choice and the right to movement is seriously restricted by the LTTE and the Government of Sri Lanka's security regimes. While the Sri Lanka government restricts the movement of Tamils displaced southward, the LTTE will not permit Sinhalas to move or settle in the North. In fact, both the LTTE and the Sri Lanka government have used displaced persons as security shields or buffers during military campaigns. The Sri Lanka Government's restrictions on the mobility of persons and their confinement to camps, have other implications for youth and children. Militant groups who infiltrate camps have very little difficulty in recruiting new carders from deeply frustrated and resentful youth, men and women, girls and boys.

⁷ Among internally displaced Muslim women, however, the pattern is slightly different. Depending on the location of camps and the resources that families had, some women feel they have gained autonomy in their new situations while others complain of greater segregation.

⁸ In Sri Lanka the debate over secular and personal law as it applies to women is somewhat different and it is arguable that customary law in the case of Tamil Thesawalame and Kandian Sinhala Law is more favourable to women than is secular law on many matters. However this is not entirely the case for Muslim personal law in Sri Lanka.

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