

# Women and Peace

## in Sri Lanka: Some observations

by Sunila Abeysekera

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is one of the world's forgotten wars. It has dragged on for over 15 years, causing the deaths of tens of thousands of people and the destruction of precious natural resources. It has also created tens of thousands of refugees and internally displaced people. The conflict has seen the long-term engagement of the security forces of the Sri Lankan government with members of armed Tamil militant groups, as well as brutal massacres, ethnic riots and large-scale attacks on civilian populations living away from conflict zones with bombings happening in public places and in public transport, for example.

The root causes of the conflict in Sri Lanka is embedded in the majoritarian democratic system that Sri Lanka inherited from the British after it gained independence in 1948. The most critical issues around which the conflict has grown include discrimination against the Tamils—the largest minority group who constitute a little over 18 percent of the population—in state-sponsored development in Tamil areas; discrimination in terms of access to public sector employment and education; and the denial of the right to use the

Tamil language in official and procedural matters. Since 1948, tensions between successive Sinhala-dominated governments and representatives of the Tamils have led to the creation of various solutions for sharing power and control over resources. However, these offers have never formed the basis of any serious attempts to resolve the conflict.

Over the years of conflict, there have been several waves of movements of people out of the northern and eastern parts of the island, where the majority of Tamils have lived historically. Hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankans—most of them Tamils—have fled from the island to other countries around the world. Many of them live in exile and seek asylum in the receiving country. While the economic and social condition of many of these exiles is not to be envied, their circumstances are still somewhat better than those who stayed behind.

During this period, the conflict has caused the displacement of tens of thousands of Sri Lankans. Each time a situation occurs where people from a particular area are displaced, they move into welfare

centres set up by the state in schools, places of worship and other public buildings. They are deprived of their means of livelihood and their dependence on the munificence of the state and of humanitarian agencies robs them of their dignity. Their situation renders them extremely vulnerable to all forms of abuse, violence and exploitation. After some time, these people are “re-settled,” sometimes against their will, sometimes in their places of origin and, at other times, in new locations. The process of “re-settlement” is often arbitrary, with very little consultation with the persons most directly concerned with the issues, that is, the displaced people themselves. The state makes provision for a minimal “resettlement” allowance, and out of this already small amount of money, the displaced people have to pay bribes and commissions to state officials and others who help them with the paperwork needed to claim the allowance.

The traditional occupations of the people of these areas have been farming (mostly paddy agriculture), fishing (in the sea and in freshwater reservoirs), and gathering firewood, cane, honey and other

natural produce from the forests. All of these means of livelihood are restricted due to the ongoing conflict. The seas are the sites of battles between the Sri Lankan Navy and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Security forces determine the hours when fishermen may go out to fish and the places where they may fish. Often, there are reports of the hazards faced by fishermen in this situation. They are caught in the crossfire between the two contending parties. Sometimes, the LTTE abducts the fishermen and destroys their boats; sometimes, the Navy mistakes the fishermen for the LTTE and shoots them on the beach or at sea.

Farmers face similar problems. In the dry zone, the paddy fields are located outside the village, and there are large extents of paddy land in areas that, for example, constitute the border between the eastern and northern provinces. Thus, it is prohibited to go to these areas. Sometimes, after petitioning the army, farmers are allowed to go to work on their paddy fields under military surveillance. There have been occasions when the LTTE attacked the army at such a moment, and farmers have either died or been abducted in the ensuing melee. Entry into the forests, most of which are in areas under LTTE control, is prohibited.

What makes the Sri Lankan situation specific is that many of those who are displaced have been living in this cycle of displacement for over 10 years now. They have had to flee their homes several times in this period. They have had everything they possessed destroyed several times within

one lifetime. They have had family members killed, arrested, and disappeared. There are adolescents who live in the north and east of Sri Lanka today who have never known a stable home or family life, who have no sense of commu-

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nity and whose only sense of the “other” community is that they constitute the “enemy.”

The situation of women within this context of ongoing conflict is always fraught with dangers and hazards. In the case of Sri Lanka, because of the nature of the conflict, we also need to be able to deconstruct the term “woman” into the separate ethnic, religious and linguistic communities that are involved in the conflict in order to decipher the totality of a woman’s experience.

The shared experience of all women living in areas directly caught in the conflict in the north and east of the island is that of being deprived of their right to life and livelihood. Most of the women in these communities who are poor and face many economic hardships work outside their homes, in their own fields and in the fields of others to augment their family’s income. In the east, for example, women tradi-

tionally weave mats and baskets out of cane and a particular kind of reed that grows along the edges of bodies of fresh water. The conflict has taken away the possibility to do this kind of work from women, since their sources of raw material had become inaccessible due to the conflict. Incomes have also dropped drastically, and many of the women who are not displaced complain of even more severe hardships than before. The fact that the men too are deprived of their livelihood leads to a great deal of frustration, and this often results in violence against the women and children in the home.

The conflict also leads to an intensification of security measures in the country as a whole. Sri Lanka has been governed under the Emergency Regulations and the Prevention of Terrorism Act for almost all of the past 20 years. The situation has heightened mistrust against the Tamil people who are often detained “on suspicion.” Over the past years, there have also been instances when the army has retaliated for an LTTE attack on their cadre through indiscriminate shooting in villages. In such situations, women and children are among the dead. In addition, the military in the north and east has been known to abduct and kill suspicious young men and women. Sexual abuse and violence against women by members of the armed forces have been one of the main issues on which there has been a great deal of campaigning by women’s groups throughout Sri Lanka. The most notorious of these cases and one of the few that went to trial was that of the rape and

murder of 16-year old school-girl Krishanthy Kumarasamy in Jaffna in 1997. In areas outside the north and east, there is the issue of harassment of women—especially Tamil women—at security checkpoints.

In situations where communities are displaced and live in the welfare centres tempo-

ing of identity-based consciousness has also led to an increase in all forms of racism and religious fundamentalism that in turn emphasise the role of women as bearers of the community's honour and traditions. In order to protect their community's honour, women should remain in their homes since violating the honour of

we both have a woman Prime Minister and a woman President. There are many assumptions that this fact in itself should make a difference in the situation. Unfortunately, this is not so. Once these women became leaders and power-brokers, as has been the case in other countries, they became agents of particular groups and party interests rather than promoters of women's interests. Although President Kumaratunga came to power in 1994 with the understanding that she would negotiate a settlement of the conflict, she has been unable to do so and the war has taken a heavier toll on lives in the five years that she has been in power than in the previous 10 years.

Another critical feature of the conflict in Sri Lanka has been the increasing participation of women on both sides in the actual conflict as soldiers. In the early years, women recruited into the Sri Lankan security forces were always in auxiliary positions. However, this began to change in the 1990s, and in recent years women members of the security forces have been involved in action on the battlefield. The LTTE too has its own women fighters and a squad of women suicide killers as well. The assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by a woman suicide killer of the LTTE in 1991 brought them to the attention of the international media, and challenged many existing assumptions about the role of women in war.

In addition to being directly involved in the conflict, Sri Lankan women have also been active in lobbying and campaigning for an end to the war, for respect of the rights of all



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Tamil Eelam police on parade

rarily set up by the state to meet the emergency situation, once again you find that women become especially vulnerable to sexual exploitation and violence. In many cases, the displacement puts additional burden on women since they have to expend a great deal of energy just to feed the family. Not only are they exposed to violence in the hands of the men in their families, they are also sometimes forced to submit to the will of other men who wield some authority in the camp.

The conflict has also led to a general state of militarisation in the country as a whole which intensifies the violence in society, particularly violence against women. The heighten-

ing of identity-based consciousness has also led to an increase in all forms of racism and religious fundamentalism that in turn emphasise the role of women as bearers of the community's honour and traditions. In order to protect their community's honour, women should remain in their homes since violating the honour of

the women in the "other" community constitutes an almost inevitable part of identity-based conflict all over the world. In addition, women are urged to reproduce to replace the population decimated by the conflict. This conservatism leads to the imposition of dress codes for women, restrictions on women's mobility, and reinforcement of women's traditional roles within the home and the family. This reaffirmation of traditional roles for women is also reflected in the media, in the cinema, and in television serials.

The issue of violence against women, especially in the context of armed conflict, is further complicated in the Sri Lankan case by the fact that

communities but especially of the rights of minority communities, and for a peaceful and negotiated settlement to the ethnic conflict. Given the tensions between the communities and the increasingly brutal and inhuman face of the war, it became inevitable that Sri Lankan women who stood for a process of democratisation would have to formulate a specific response to the situation. Mere rhetorical commitments to the vague term “peace” would no longer suffice.

In 1983, shortly before the anti-Tamil riots of July that year, a group of women’s organisations from different parts of the country came together as the Women’s Action Committee (WAC). Their principal slogan was the acceptance of the principle of self-determination and calling for an end to the war and a repeal of repressive legislation. In each celebration of the International Women’s Day from 1983 to 1987, there was always a Tamil woman speaker and the banner on the screen behind the speakers always read: “Respect the right to self-determination of the Tamil people.” The leaflets of the organisation always made reference to the conflict and made a call for peace. In WAC’s activities, the conflict and women’s role within it as peace-builders in particular has a major focus. WAC consists of Sinhala and Tamil women, and reached out to other organisations in solidarity and in collaboration on a wide range of actions and activities against the war.

In 1986, at a time when most of the men refused to come out in fear of a retaliatory attack, arrest or indefinite detention, it was Tamil women in

Jaffna who challenged the authorities. They called themselves the Mothers’ Front and marched in the first public demonstration in Jaffna for many

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years, demanding that the authorities tell them about the whereabouts of over 100 young men and boys who had been arrested by the army. In the south, there was an organisation called Women for Peace, which engaged in many public education campaigns for peace and ethnic harmony. In 1990, when there was a major repression of a southern-based insurgency by the state, and tens of thousands of young men disappeared, Sinhala women in the south of the country also organised themselves as a Mothers’ Front, demanding justice and acknowledgement of the whereabouts of their family members. It is perhaps a measure of the power and

success of both groups that their call was co-opted by mainstream political parties. In the elections of 1994, members of the Mothers’ Front featured prominently on opposition platforms, and the President identified herself as one of them (since her father and her husband had both been victims of political assassinations). In 1990, a broad network of women’s groups called Mothers and Daughters also came into prominence, organising a multi-religious meeting at a time when all public demonstrations were banned. This group was also representative of all ethnic and religious communities and had peace as one of their principal slogans.

In more recent years, other groups have emerged such as the Women’s Coalition for Peace, the Muslim Women’s Research and Action Front, the Sri Lanka Women’s NGO Forum and the North-East Forum for Women, all of which have a considerable focus on peace and democracy in their work. The most interesting feature of the work carried on by some of these groups has been attempting to engage in peace-building at the community level, especially in areas of the north and east as well as in the plantation communities where there are large numbers of Tamil women. The basis for this work is the understanding that even if the two warring factions were to sign a peace agreement, there would be a great deal of work remaining to be done to bring together the different communities that have been driven apart by the violence and mistrust in the past 15 years.

In the Eastern province for example, where there have

been Sinhala, Muslim and Tamil villages co-existing side by side for centuries, the ethnic conflict has divided them and separated them in a very far-reaching manner. In each of the villages, there are bitter experiences of being attacked by the other group, of seeing their families brutally murdered, their homes being burned down, their fields looted and destroyed. In this context, one cannot simply expect that the past would be forgotten and the villagers would go back to living side by side as they did previously. The hostilities run too deep for that. Faced with this dilemma, several of the women's groups representing different language and ethnic communities have come together to work at community-building exercises with women and children from different villages and different communities. Exchange visits and shared workshops in creativity are some of the strategies and methods being used to bring women together so they can talk about their experiences, share the bitterness and pain, and discuss ways and means of creating some sense of community among themselves.

The fact that the issue of women and armed conflict became a critical area of concern in the Platform of Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China in 1995 shows that this is an issue that affects women all over the world. At the Conference, women from all over the world came together to talk about how to create more spaces where women can be recognised and acknowledged as peace builders. Six strategic objectives were identified when the Platform for Action was

drafted:

1. Increase the participation of women in conflict resolution at decision-making levels and protect women living under foreign occupation or in situations of armed and other conflicts.
2. Reduce excessive military expenditure and control the availability of armaments.
3. Promote non-violent forms of conflict resolution and reduce the incidence of human rights abuse in conflict situations.
4. Promote women's contribution to fostering a culture of peace.
5. Provide protection, assistance and training to refugee women, internally displaced women, and other displaced women in need of international protection.
6. Provide assistance to women of the colonies and non-self governing territories.

The process of working for gender sensitivity in the statute of the International Criminal Court also provided another space in which those who share similar concerns regarding armed conflict could come together to draw on their own experiences to evolve a definition of rape and other forms of sexual violence that would be acceptable to the international community. Based on the experience of working with women victims of violence and abuse, women were also able to bring their particular concerns regarding testimonies and witness protection to the discussions on the statute.

Many women's groups all over the world are going to review the Beijing Platform for Action in 2000. In the Section on Armed Conflict, it seems that little has happened that

could change the situation of women in conflict situations, or encourage the international community to include more women in peace-building and peace negotiating activities. However, from the point of view of women deeply involved in this issue, it seems that much more clarity has developed regarding the concerns that need to be highlighted and focused on in the coming years.

The denial of civil and political rights to refugees and displaced persons, the lack of protection of the reproductive and sexual rights of refugee and displaced women, the continued use of "tradition" to justify various forms of aggression and violence against women, the continuation of forced prostitution and the sexual slavery of women in conflict situations, the inadequate representation of women in conflict-resolution activities at the decision-making levels and the failure of both state and non-state actors to adhere to the norms of international humanitarian law with regard to the treatment of civilians in conflict have now been highlighted as key issues to be focused on in the coming years.\*

\* See draft report of the Asia-Pacific Regional NGO Symposium for Beijing+5; Thailand; August/September 1999

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