

Sri Lanka: Women are not willing to go back to pre-war status quo

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‘Women are not just victims of war, as some aspects of their experiences are empowering and can be used as a resource for healing and transformation’.

War is a gendered process. Post war is no different. It may be a cliché to say that in Sri Lanka as elsewhere in the world, the most visible and harmful impact of 30 years of war has been on women, but that is the reality. As men joined militant groups or the armed forces, were arrested, abducted, disappeared, or took flight to safer locations outside the community or the country, women were left behind to cope with fractured families and communities; multiple displacement, transition in alien spaces such as camps for the displaced; or resettlement in distant and unfamiliar regions. Untold numbers of women, mostly Tamil, (but including a significant number of Muslim and Sinhala women living in conflict affected areas) became de facto and de jure heads of household and were thrust into new roles both within and outside the private domain. They became responsible for the physical and economic security and survival of their families and had to battle the cultural constraints that challenged this conflict-imposed transition. While the violence of war and attendant militarism also contributed to increase the nature and levels of violence against women, ranging from sexual harassment to rape and sexual torture they were never merely victims of the war and violence.

Women took up arms, fighting alongside male combatants both within the LTTE and the SL Armed forces. As suicide bombers of the LTTE Tamil women broke every conceivable stereotype of the ‘good Tamil woman’. But women were also frontline human rights defenders engaging with political and military institutions on behalf of detained, tortured, raped, disappeared or executed loved ones. They were peacemakers in their villages mediating mutual co-existence with hostile neighbours. At the national level they became part of movements, such as the Mothers Fronts, demanding to know the whereabouts of fathers, brothers and sons who had disappeared. They also campaigned for an end to the fighting, calling for a politically negotiated settlement to the conflict, engaged with processes of constitutional reform and in 2002 demanded the inclusion of women and gender concerns in the peace process. In fact the government of the day responded by appointing the Sub Committee on Gender Issues with a mandate to include gender concerns in the peace process. Although the Committee could not continue its work when the peace process collapsed, it remains a significant landmark in women’s activism in Sri Lanka.

The conflict has touched and transformed the lives of myriad women. Take the story of Jenzila Majeed. In 1990, at the age of 20, Jenzila, together with the entire Muslim population living in Mullaitivu was evicted by the LTTE. She says she was most probably destined to become a teacher. As an internally displaced person living in Puttalam, she found it impossible to ignore the plight of those displaced with her and in a less fortunate situation Together with five other Muslim men she set up the Community Trust Fund in 1992. Since then she has worked tirelessly to highlight the plight of displaced Muslims and Tamils, focusing particularly on livelihoods, health issues and women’s empowerment. Her work was internationally recognized this year when she became one of 10 recipients of the International Woman of Courage Award given by the US State Department. At home in Sri Lanka, she however remains almost unknown.

Or take the story of Saila who is the Secretary of the Taraka Widows Assistance Center, in Chavatkadu, Jaffna. She lost her father to the war at 8 years and her mother struggled to provide for her five children. Saila was married at 17 and widowed at 19 with a year old daughter. Unable to deal with the ostracisation of widows, she rarely left her home in the next 5 years before meeting psychosocial workers from Shanthiham. Saila then trained as a psychosocial worker and began to play a leadership role at the Taraka Widows Assistance Centre. Gaining both economic independence and respect in the community, the group of 90 widows has been able to challenge social bias and transform their lives. They attend weddings, auspicious religious ceremonies, dress in bright coloured clothes, engage in public enterprise and deal with male officials and businessmen on equal terms.

Conflicts inevitably produce structural transformations for some women opening up new social, economic and political opportunities which challenge and reframe gender hierarchies and roles. But how does one sustain these positive gender shifts in the aftermath of war? Oftentimes the end of war signals a return to the pre war gender regime and valiant efforts to “reconstruct gender” in the old way.

One way to contribute to the consolidation of positive gains of women during war in its aftermath is to ensure women’s participation and representation in post war decision making processes. The experience of South Africa, Rwanda, and Liberia provide compelling evidence of how policy and legal reforms can contribute to women’s empowerment in post war contexts building on the diverse experiences of women during times of war. In Sri Lanka, however women remain unrecognized and invisible in post war reconstruction and reconciliation processes. The 19 member Presidential Task Force on Northern Development appointed in May 2009 does not have a single woman. The recently appointed Commission on Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation does not have a single woman. This is compounded by the abysmal representation of women in formal political institutions and the continuing lack of political will to enact affirmative action to increase representation. Given the absence of women in these high level decision making processes we wonder about the content of rehabilitation programmes for ex women /girl combatants in various rehabilitation centers around the country. Are they now being re-educated to become good Tamil women again? We wonder about the livelihood programmes being proposed for widows and female heads of households? To what extent do these programmes offer non traditional livelihoods / vocational training options for women, do policy makers recognize women as primary income earners? or do they continue to reinforce gender biases and stereotypes?

While official government policy maybe taking a protectionist and welfarist approach to women in the post war context, many women who experienced the war first hand may not be willing to go back to their kitchens and resume their pre war gender roles. As demonstrated at the Jaffna Municipal Council Elections held in August last year, women in the war affected areas in this county are ready to take up the challenge of rebuilding their communities in the aftermath of war.

From a total of 174 candidates who ran for the 23 seats in the Jaffna Municipal Council, 10 were women. They had obtained nominations from various political parties. Three of the women won; a high 30% of those who contested. These statistics defy the national norm, where no more than 2% women get nominations at local level. Anthonypillai Mariamma, a widow who contested from the TNA and who was among the winning candidates had this to say:

‘I am contesting for the Municipal elections because I think people in Jaffna must come forward after all these years to claim their democratic rights. I am also contesting to ensure that widows are not marginalised and are treated without discrimination. I was asked if I was not afraid of the violence of politics and I said, the only way to challenge the violence is for women to stand for elections and prove that violence can be eliminated from our politics’.

Ensuring gender justice in the aftermath of war does not happen in isolation. It is more often than not part of a wider process which addresses root causes of the conflict and which attempts to negotiate a new post war social order in which all people irrespective ethnic, gender, religious or other differences are ensured equality and social justice. Post war reconstruction and reconciliation in Sri Lanka is however almost exclusively government led without the benefit of such a process. This is what we desperately need - an inclusive process in which all of us, men and women, can re-imagine and renegotiate the fundamental contours of this nation state in a way that the rights of all identity groups are recognized and respected.

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