

## Inside Camps, Outside Battlefields: Security and Survival for Tamil Women

NIMMI GOWRINATHAN

### ABSTRACT

In May of 2009, images of displaced Tamil people trapped behind the barbed wire of internment camps flashed across the world. “Everybody wanted to get out of those camps, but they were too scared to discuss their rights”, one priest recalls.<sup>1</sup> The Government of Sri Lanka had just declared a military victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), an insurgent group that waged a thirty-year war for a separate state for ethnic Tamils living among other minorities and the Sinhalese majority on the island. On the front lines of this resistance movement, Tamil women were in constant motion. Displaced, resettled, and recruited, these women are part of a growing number of female combatants in rebel groups whose experiences, motivations, and politics continue to complicate our understandings of warfare.<sup>2</sup>

---

### *Introduction*

Among the many reasons why women take the risks associated with armed rebellion, the impact of lived experiences with displacement and gender-based violence has not been seriously examined. Existing scholarship finds that prior movement activism, biological availability, emotional trauma, social ties to the movement, and contextual pressures can all play a role in a woman’s decision to take up arms.<sup>3</sup> Within these, state repression is identified as one of the contextual pressures responsible for the emergence and continued violence of armed insurgencies for both men and women.<sup>4</sup>

When looking specifically at female combatants, scholars identify state repression as a catalyst acting either independently or in conjunction with multiple factors<sup>5</sup> enabling women to be independent “ideo-

---

Nimmi Gowrinathan, “Inside Camps, Outside Battlefields: Security and Survival for Tamil Women,” *St Antony’s International Review* 9, no. 1 (2013): 11-32.

logues” and active revolutionaries.<sup>6</sup> An overemphasis on women’s emotional responses,<sup>7</sup> coupled with a tendency to cast women as victims, has limited existing research, and has robbed women of agency in their social and political beings.<sup>8</sup> Where experiences with displacement and other forms of state repression are considered in their ability to shape and motivate female fighters, they are often addressed only in a very broad sense as a contextual background to participation, or are confined to considerations of psychosocial trauma.<sup>9</sup>

This study pulls experiences with displacement and gender-based violence out from ambiguous categorizations of trauma or contextual pressures, locating them as indirect and direct forms of state repression. Looking at the case of Sri Lanka, this paper examines the distinct impact of both on the formation of Tamil women’s political identities. These identities can then be mobilized through violent and nonviolent forms of organizing.

Displacement is often seen as an inevitable by-product of warfare rather than a calculated political act within it, and is therefore ignored as a form of state repression. While some of the more obvious forms of state repression (exclusion from government jobs, targeted violence against ethnic Tamils) existed throughout the conflict in Sri Lanka,<sup>10</sup> displacement is a less direct form of repression that has had a disproportionate impact on Tamil women.<sup>11</sup> Created and prolonged by an intractable political conflict, experiences within the context of displacement can have a formative impact on women’s political selves. Among these, increased levels of gender-based violence in particular will inform new perspectives on social justice and equality. The process of being unsettled and later resettled due to ongoing violence has, and continues to have, a profound impact on social structures and particularly on women captured within a specific context.<sup>12</sup> As political actions, displacement and gender-based violence will have a political impact.

Looking at the position of Tamil women in Sri Lanka, I argue that the context of displacement and experiences with gender-based violence are acts of state repression which play a significant role in forming political identities activated through violent forms of resistance. This argument requires a new approach that moves beyond established binaries for female fighters of “victim vs. agent”,<sup>13</sup> disaggregates forms of state repression, and focuses on individual experiences framed in a collective struggle. By so doing, we can better understand the specific political impact of displacement and gender-based violence, elevating the role of state repression as a motivating factor for female fighters. The arguments made here rely on a unique set of direct interviews with former fighters conducted in Sri Lanka during and after the war. In addition, extensive conversations

with members of Sri Lankan civil society and victims of gender-based violence, as well as humanitarian reports contribute to the analysis.

Addressing the need for “culturally specific knowledge informed by the experiences of people themselves”,<sup>14</sup> this study combines an analysis of secondary literature with extensive field interviews to understand the impact of displacement upon individual women’s lives.<sup>15</sup> In this paper, I draw on three distinct data sets. Trust built within the Tamil community over a decade enabled me access to these populations during challenging periods of ongoing violence. The first is a set of in-depth interviews with former female fighters and civilians conducted between 2000 and 2010 for academic research. The second is a detailed analysis of humanitarian and human rights reports (both public and private) from ten organizations that look at humanitarian crises in Sri Lanka occurring from 2000 to 2010.<sup>16</sup> Using these reports, I track the reporting of conditions in displaced camps. The categories created were developed to follow the key issues that arose in direct interviews.<sup>17</sup> The final data set was compiled through policy research done for the International Crisis Group from 2009 to 2011.<sup>18</sup> It relies on seventy-five direct interviews conducted in India, Sri Lanka, and London with members of civil society, lawyers, physicians, and survivors in order to understand the prevalence and impact of gender-based violence in resettled areas of the North and East.<sup>19</sup>

### *A Context of Constant Motion: Displacement in Sri Lanka (2000-2010)*

Within the broader context of conflict, one of the most significant social processes resulting from prolonged conflict in Sri Lanka has been multiple cycles of displacement and resettlement. This process has resituated Tamil women. In the absence of solid doors and permanent shelters, their lives were largely lived in a forcibly public space.<sup>20</sup> This section examines the lived experience of Tamil women in camps from 2000 to 2010.

Over the course of the war, the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) has fluctuated between half a million and 1.2 million for a total population estimated at around twenty million,<sup>21</sup> eighty per cent of whom are ethnically Tamil, including Muslims.<sup>22</sup> Amongst this population, a significant number were displaced multiple times due to the conflict and recurring national disasters.<sup>23</sup> Causes of displacement were recorded as real or perceived conflict-related violence, with some IDPs only travelling into safer territories for the night.<sup>24</sup> The sections below highlight four basic daily challenges facing women in these sprawling camps.

The first challenge was the severe shortages of food for displaced populations that came largely after 2005, but which have been an ongoing concern.<sup>25</sup> Over two thirds of the direct interviews conducted with members of civil society in 2010 and 2011 cite food shortages as critical, leaving women in a desperate situation. Women often felt this scarcity most acutely as they gave their own rations to their children and had to wait for hours in the sun to receive their food packets.<sup>26</sup> “We were given one packet of food every few days. The UN left a few utensils, and some clothes. By evening most of the children went hungry.”<sup>27</sup> In some camps, water was allocated at a rate of roughly ten litres per family for all uses, and with large numbers of female-headed households, women were left with the task of collecting additional water. The wells were often dry; pumps were too difficult for women to work, and long walks left women vulnerable to sexual assault.<sup>28</sup> “The lack of food often led to women exchanging sexual favours for outside goods,” commented one aid worker.<sup>29</sup>

### *Shelter and Sanitation*

The second practical issue centred around “temporary” shelters hastily erected in safe spaces. The primary concerns cited consistently in these camps were the flimsy nature of tent material, overcrowding, hygiene, and lack of privacy.<sup>30</sup> Several unrelated families were often in the same tent, thereby exposing women to men living in the same temporary structure.<sup>31</sup> “With everyone in the same tent, we wouldn’t even want to change our clothes,” one IDP noted.<sup>32</sup> Women often left camps, the absence of proper latrines forcing them to wander in surrounding meadows, increasing their vulnerability to sexual assault.<sup>33</sup> Explaining the dangers of bathing, one woman describes the situation. “There was no water to bathe, so the soldiers watched us bathe in the streams.”<sup>34</sup> Two separate IDP women drew an image depicting how close the women’s bathing area was to the adjacent army camp to highlight the lack of privacy.

### *Security*

Security among displaced populations ranked high on the priorities for both advocacy and operational international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) operating in these areas. The list of serious concerns includes detention without charge, abductions, land mines, forced recruitment, sexual assault, intimidation, and lack of freedom of move-

ment.<sup>35</sup> One community organizer explains, “[i]n the process of looking for the LTTE, the army isolates young people. In a militarized society, young women are further isolated and placed at risk”.<sup>36</sup> Four separate female IDP interviewees recount that before reaching the camps, they were asked to strip naked and walk a long stretch while army personnel inspected them.<sup>37</sup> In an INGO session to commemorate UN Resolution 1325,<sup>38</sup> protection issues ranked highest on the list of concerns among women who were in camps or resettlement villages in the North-East.<sup>39</sup> Within the camps, women felt vulnerable to sexual assault among other forms of abuse and also feared the backlash of reporting such incidents.<sup>40</sup> “I have seen nearly every woman in the camp sexually harassed in some form by the soldiers,” recounts one survivor of sexual violence.<sup>41</sup>

### *Health and Trauma*

Mental and physical health concerns for displaced persons deepened the trauma of life in the camps. The few medical doctors that continued to practice under adverse conditions also became the only available professionals to assess and deal with mental health concerns. One physician claims, “I saw people who could have been saved, the injured, lying beside the dead and I knew they would die.”<sup>42</sup> Physicians were limited in their ability to deal with reproductive health due to government fears of the release of information about sexual assault.<sup>43</sup> Several of the asylum cases reviewed in London cited forced sterilization during their time in the camps, with some women being told that the foetus had been exposed to chemicals in the warzone.<sup>44</sup> Large-scale psychosocial trauma due to continued displacement led to a sharp increase in young women at risk of suicide.<sup>45</sup>

Focusing on women’s experiences of vulnerability in a militarized context of displacement, this study does not imply that the impact on them is more significant or noteworthy than on other demographic groups. The emphasis on women’s experiences of displacement is, however, crucial to understanding the formation of their political identities, new forms of resistance, and their shifting position within Tamil society. This emphasis on women is often seen in the funding priorities of intervening organizations, whose program objectives ignore the political impact of traumatic events.

Some scholars highlight the flaws in these “gender-sensitive” trends in the INGO sector’s work with displaced populations as partially responsible for persistent issues affecting women.<sup>46</sup> In Sri Lanka, local NGOs or community-based organizations more attuned to effective responses to gender-specific concerns are often subsumed by donor interests.<sup>47</sup> Town-

hall style “awareness” sessions are poorly attended and can further ostracize women in displaced or resettled communities.<sup>48</sup> These women find themselves robbed of whatever agency a conservative society may have left them when they enter these spaces, becoming “victims to be pitied” rather than “survivors of adversity who often demonstrate unimaginable strength and dignity in the most adverse circumstances.”<sup>49</sup>

The daily life struggles faced in camps should not further cast women into the role of victim. Rather they can be used to highlight that state repression presents itself and impacts women in less obvious ways than the measures previously used to understand its significance.<sup>50</sup> Both the conflict and multiple forms of overarching framings from the outside can make it challenging to identify any agency amongst this population of women, and even more difficult to discern the formation of nascent political identities.

### *How Women Rebelled: Displacement as State Repression (2000-2010)*

Experiences with multiple forms of state repression shaped women’s agency in ways that formed the basis of emerging political identities.<sup>51</sup> In Sri Lanka, myth and memory of moments of political repression are central to framing political identities.<sup>52</sup> Applying this specifically to women, Jocelyn Viterna creates the concept of women’s “participation identities,” where multiple identities are competing for salience, offering important insights into variations in both the nature of state repression and its constantly shifting significance.<sup>53</sup>

Representations of state repression are often exaggerated in political propaganda, which is then completely dismissed in existing analyses.<sup>54</sup> While “myth” plays a role in LTTE propaganda<sup>55</sup> interviews point to the superseding significance of *actual* memories of state repression for Tamil women. These memories resonated with the recruitment language of the movement but remained grounded in real experiences. Recruiting videos, statements, and indoctrination processes would have been largely ineffective in mobilizing Tamil women to take the risks required to revolt without a familiarity derived from personal experience. Among a variety of grievances, experiences with displacement were significant enough to raise the fundamental questions of justice, power, and inequality that would later inform their political activism.

Even against the backdrop of a constantly shifting and insecure physical space, an increasingly conservative Tamil society, and the restricted operational space available to women within the LTTE, women

found ways to exercise various forms of agency. Agency existed in multiple forms and at multiple levels that challenge any attempt to frame these women within an “agent” or “victim” binary.

As one form of oppositional agency, Tamil women challenged what was expected of them to confront multiple forms of state repression through their participation in armed movements.<sup>56</sup> Throughout the existence of the LTTE the total numbers of women varied, with estimates ranging from thirty per cent of combatants to unconfirmed rumours in the early 1990s that the number of female fighters had reached 50 per cent.<sup>57</sup> The most reliable estimates generally appear to be between fifteen and thirty per cent consistent participation of female fighters across the lifespan of the movement.<sup>58</sup>

So what pushed these women to risk their lives and depart from culturally accepted roles to join the LTTE? The under-examined answer is indirect experiences with state repression, an answer that eight out of ten fighters referenced. These women highlight the process of displacement as contributing to their understandings of marginalization, repression, and social justice.

Referring to the struggle for food, Thava, who endured multiple displacements, comments: “Our family never had enough to eat, so studying didn’t seem that important to me.” She joined the LTTE initially because they offered her food three times a week.<sup>59</sup> Lavanya had been twice displaced from the tsunami and the conflict and had spent most of her days in camps feeling despondent about her possibilities for the future. “We would sit for hours in the hot sun, waiting for food, not knowing what we should do,” she says. When she had nightmares from the tsunami she was told she was “disturbed,” and felt like an outcast with mental illness. This is the reason she joined the LTTE to be accepted: “I thought in the LTTE, people would stop treating me as if I am crazy.”<sup>60</sup>

Jeeva was finishing medical school when she was displaced. In the camps so many people lacked medical attention, she was able to help with basic medical knowledge: “I think through the movement I will better use my own skills, and also learn new ones.”<sup>61</sup> Prema describes the inadequacies of shelter and the struggles of her large family. With seven brothers and sisters, her entire family lived in one tent in an IDP camp. She met the rebels who explained the situation of the Tamils and told her of other freedom struggles that had been successful. She says, “Things seemed like they were always unfair for Tamils, and in other places things had changed.”<sup>62</sup>

As with the INGO reports, the most often noted concern and formative experiences were those with the lack of protection in the camps. For Yalini, “The IPKE [Indian Peacekeeping Force] came to search the

tent, and an ‘incident’ [rape] happened at that time. At least in the movement you are doing something for change.” Sri was abducted into the LTTE when walking to school. Referring to her time in the camps she said, “Someone was always dying or getting killed. I never really understood why.” She had not earlier thought of joining the movement, but was happy for the opportunity to do the same things as boys. “I never thought I would be a fighter, but when I had to go, I felt OK after a little while.”<sup>63</sup> Gaya was at the University of Jaffna and joined a group of women who intellectually related to the nationalist cause, believing in the need for a separate state. Her family was displaced once during the fighting, but was able to return to their home. “My whole life they have been everywhere, the army.”<sup>64</sup>

Sujanthi joined as a young girl with the hope that she would have the opportunity to do something meaningful with her life. She watched her mother struggle as a widow in the camps, and the treatment she received from the community. Sujanthi felt that “[w]omen should learn to be stronger, even without men. This [joining the LTTE] was my opportunity to do something outside of this village,” she says.<sup>65</sup> While the reasons for joining are multiple and varied, in a majority of cases within this small sample size, experiences with displacement figured prominently in their own narratives.

### *Replaced and Unsettled: Gender-Based Political Violence (2009-2011)*

Following the mass internment of civilians in the final war to wipe out the LTTE, communities were slowly returned to their place of origin or resettled in temporary shelters elsewhere. The experiences with this new context of an “open prison,”<sup>66</sup> in many ways mimicked concerns within the IDP camps. However, what was highlighted through direct interviews was the lack of protection and subsequent increased prevalence, and fear, of gender-based violence. As noted elsewhere, in post-conflict periods in Sri Lanka, the female body has been a site for violence, from both community members and at the hands of a militarized state.<sup>67</sup>

Gender-based violence is something that is generally difficult to document,<sup>68</sup> but in Sri Lanka this has been increasingly so, with successive administrations clamping down on local and international organizations’ ability to address the issue.<sup>69</sup> My own interviews are supported by evidence and witness statements that point to higher levels of sexual assault, harassment and humiliation of women in conflict zones reported elsewhere.<sup>70</sup> Gender-based violence against Tamil women constitutes a

more direct form of state repression, an act of political violence more likely to reveal itself in a bracketed and finite period of time or moment leaving an indelible mark on Tamil women's emotional, social, and political beings.

### *When the State is Suspect*

The most immediate physical concern for women was the lack of doors built on temporary shelters, exposing most of the estimated 89,000 women-headed households to a clear security threat.<sup>71</sup> Military camps were located across the street from most "re-settlement villages," creating opportunities for abuse. Older women reported soldiers bringing food to their home, and expecting repayment in the form of sexual favours. "The soldiers observe the widows, they know if a male relative is leaving the house. Soldiers then enter the re-settled homes."<sup>72</sup> Looting for gold jewellery is also reported as a gateway to rape.<sup>73</sup>

Coercion is most clearly evident in the stark power differential between an army soldier and a young girl. Several interviews report young girls being given cell phones, taken to lodges, or transported to garment factories; events that led to various forms of sexual abuse. One church official reports, "[t]he lodge owner came to me, saddened in his inability to do anything. He had seen thirty young Tamil girls checked into his rooms, accompanied by soldiers."<sup>74</sup> Large numbers of young women "missing" from hospitals and checkpoints were assumed to have been raped or killed. One activist suggested that to understand the increase in sexual violence in the absence of clear data one has to only "check the hospital registers for the number of underage pregnancies and abortions reported."<sup>75</sup>

### *Prostitution: The Line Between Coercion and Rape<sup>76</sup>*

Prostitution has consistently represented a gray area in our understanding of gender-based violence. One activist comments unequivocally, "prostitution in the Sri Lankan context is a form of sexual violence."<sup>77</sup> Observers and local residents reported that after six in the evening, the former conflict zones became a different territory. Some noticed the same soldier hovering outside a widow's home. Others worked with prostitutes who may have contracted infectious diseases. Still others noticed certain women having an easier time obtaining rations and basic supplies. Prostitution is increasingly widespread in these districts, yet never discussed for fear of both political retribution and cultural shame.<sup>78</sup>

Those interviewed found the act of prostitution between Tamil women and members of the military to be a necessary act of survival, occupation, or exchange for protection purposes. One priest remarked, perhaps overly romanticizing life under the LTTE, that “[t]he LTTE is gone, now our girls have to sell themselves.”<sup>79</sup> Several interviewees had difficulty with the labels available to understand this new phenomenon: “It is hard to say whether it is rape or prostitution, as women may give in to advances in exchange for something.”<sup>80</sup>

While the practice of prostitution or sexual exchange is largely informal, some reports indicate that local “middlemen” and police officers have begun to take advantage of an emerging underground market in sex work.<sup>81</sup> In three distinct accounts from church and aid workers, women in awareness meetings have stood up to say, “He pays me 1000 Rupees a day, where else can I make that money for my family?”<sup>82</sup> Despite the murky definitional space that sexual exchange exists within, what is clear is that between 2009 and 2011 there was a significant increase in prostitution and coercive gender-based violence.

### *Gender-Based Violence: A Direct Form of State Repression (2009-2011)*

Though perhaps outside the scope of this study, the language used to describe gender-based violence is important to mention as a part of understanding the impact of traumatic events.<sup>83</sup> The words used to describe events that are traumatic or difficult to discuss often provide some distance from the events they describe, euphemizing them. In the same way that “conflict” is often referred to as “the problems” (pirachachanaikal), rape was often discussed as being “hit” (adi) or “the incident” (sam-pavam). Although these are small discrepancies in language, they do provide insight into how these events are processed and understood by both women and the larger Tamil society.<sup>84</sup>

In all of the twenty-two cases of rape and sexual assault that I examined during this time period, where the Sri Lankan armed forces or their affiliates were the alleged perpetrators of violence, the political power dynamic was clearly skewed.<sup>85</sup> A general sense of triumphalism was pervasive in the extensive military apparatus now governing these areas.<sup>86</sup> Acts of gender-based violence occurring within this environment can be seen as political in nature where ethnic Tamil civilians are targeted, and even more distinctly in acts of gender-based violence against ex-LTTE cadres. Among the reasons for the prevalence of gender-based violence in warzones,<sup>87</sup> most members of the community and local civil society

felt that there were political undertones to most acts of gender-based violence, and that the opportunities for it to take place were created by a specific political context.<sup>88</sup>

The open-ended style of interviewing, with specific follow-up questions, also revealed that the women chose to tell those aspects of their life history that were most disrupted by acts of gender-based violence. A life of poverty was highlighted in the sudden inability to get married and relieve the financial burden of elders. Academic achievements were referenced where the opportunity to excel had been interrupted. They would mention the number of younger siblings when they became suddenly conscious that their personal trauma would bring shame to the entire family.

Earlier interviews with women in the LTTE found that six out of ten women mentioned an experience with sexual assault, or the fear of sexual abuse, as a part of their decision to take up arms. “With a gun, you know you can protect yourself, even from terrible crimes like rape,” said Gaya.<sup>89</sup> The option of joining the LTTE did not exist for these women, but similar signs of a budding political consciousness could be seen. In almost all of the cases, the act itself marked a significant departure from their expected life paths, and they began to think about, if not act upon, questions of injustice, inequality, and revenge.

### *Why Tamil Women Rebel: The Context of Repression*

Existing theories on pathways to participation seem less relevant for the case of women in the LTTE.<sup>90</sup> My research takes a more incisive look at the role of contextual pressures and finds that frustrations with cultural restrictions alongside experiences with both direct and indirect forms of state repression figure most prominently in the narrative of causality.<sup>91</sup> Between the two, state repression emerges as the most significant.

In cases where women had heard or been exposed to recruitment language that incorporated the notion of women’s liberation, it increased the appeal but was never the sole or primary reason for participation. Immediate, experience-based concerns dominated their thinking in their decision (when not forced) to join the movement over ideological engagements except in the case of a select few. In these participants, political identities were still formed at a similar nexus of recruitment, motivation, and experience, though higher levels of education allowed for experiences to be situated within a particular political platform. This has been labelled by other scholars as a “participation” identity. However, in the case of Tamil women’s participation in the LTTE, the partially forced nature of participation makes it more useful to understand the formation

of women's broader political identities.<sup>92</sup> This study provides an insight into state repression that reveals the ways in which women's positioning through processes like displacement and gender-based violence can inform women's political identities in violent and nonviolent ways.

While less common, some of the non-fighter women interviewed, as well as several women drawn from the data set of women affected by gender-based violence, expressed forms of oppositional agency in non-violent ways. Such non-violent options were less immediately and obviously available to women, with only a few community groups working towards creating safe spaces for discussion and action.<sup>93</sup> The three interviewees who volunteered or participated in the activities of these groups felt that their experiences had created in them a desire to take action towards social change, yet they were unable or unwilling to take the risks required of joining the insurgency movement.

The constant across women who acted to change their individual situation or the collective position of Tamil society was a shift in their own self-perception. The act of taking control of even the smallest aspect of their existence did inform a new sense of identity as Tamil women, one that challenged their own belief in their capacity to act.<sup>94</sup>

### *Re-resisting: The Potential for Women's Political Activism*

Within the broad category of contextual pressures, cultural restrictions have been identified as weighing on some female combatants, increasing the "liberatory" draw of joining the LTTE.<sup>95</sup> While it is not possible within the scope of this piece to fully address the role of cultural norms, in research I conducted from 2000 to 2010, the conservative expectations of women did emerge as a relevant factor in the life histories of female combatants in the LTTE. Research carried out in 2010-2011 finds that shifts in Tamil culture due to prolonged displacement and militarization have had a distinct impact on women, which is examined here in order to paint a more complete picture of the evolving context within which Tamil women are situated.

Some studies rely on assumptions of social and cultural norms as being relatively static and uniformly applied across time and space with some variation allowed for peacetime ("normal" vs. conflict). Within the conflict zones of the North and East that were alternately under the control of state and non-state actors, these norms are often suspended, reframed, or ignored all together. In 2010 and 2011, nearly every interview with members of civil society alluded to the "destruction of the

social fabric of Tamil society<sup>96</sup> through overlapping processes of militarization, displacement, and resettlement.<sup>97</sup>

Whereas under the LTTE strict codes of behaviour prevented the disintegration of moral values, the period following the cessation of hostilities saw large increases in early marriages, domestic violence, alcoholism, and low levels of school attendance. Pervasive levels of depression among the general population question the permanence of these patterns of behaviour, or their impact on the erosion of “traditional” Tamil society. One activist frames the shifts as “an outcome of suppressed trauma and a disintegrated social structure.”<sup>98</sup> As Tamil society in districts across the North and East remain under the controlled supervision of the Sri Lankan army, the state of Tamil culture as it would function in a free society is difficult to ascertain. It is perhaps most useful to see it as existing in a reactive state of suspension. Within this temporary space where Tamil culture is both changing and threatened, women bear the brunt of what most people see as a disturbing re-entrenchment into traditionalism.<sup>99</sup>

With widespread gender-based violence in the public realm, the mobility of women is strictly limited. Yet the culture refuses to soften its reception of survivors of gender-based violence. One woman who was raped stayed in the church home until she “lost some of the baby weight” to avoid the harsh censure of community gossip. Women who were involved in the movement “who before were seen as heroes, will now be seen as stupid.”<sup>100</sup> People will say: “You see this is what happens when girls get involved in politics.”<sup>101</sup> These women, who have already gone through combat training and have experienced fleeting feelings of freedom, gender equality, and shifting self-perceptions, are now forced to adapt, or “reintegrate” into an even more conservative social space.

While the tendency of INGOs on the outside is to condemn “cultural” obstacles for women, it is important to note that for Tamils the symbolic threat to their identity creates a tight fist around tradition. The practical implications of more liberal behavioural patterns may have dire implications in a highly militarized environment. In its transient form, Tamil culture appears to be wrapped around security and survival, rather than rooted in traditionalism.

As culture and context begin once again to move towards extreme points of pressure on Tamil women, the future potential of political activism is in question. The first, most obvious, distinction from earlier political trajectories is the absence of the LTTE, which both addressed and capitalized upon women’s grievances to create and sustain a nationalist identity.<sup>102</sup> Immediately following the war, large segments of the population were suspicious if not opposed to the LTTE due to the behaviour of members in the final weeks of fighting.<sup>103</sup> However, by 2011, there was

a discernible shift as civil society members and IDPs alike began to see violence as the only viable option to combat state repression. Despite their flaws, one community member mused, “at least they fought for the rights of Tamils, rights that are still being denied.”<sup>104</sup>

Without the umbrella of an established insurgent movement, the risks for women’s political activism are higher than they have ever been.<sup>105</sup> In the context of pervasive militarization,<sup>106</sup> the physical risks of challenging the state are so high that imaginings of an armed response has largely dissipated.<sup>107</sup> Women activists in Colombo and elsewhere continue to mobilize and raise awareness on behalf of Tamil women in the North and East,<sup>108</sup> but an authentic representative voice for the concerns of Tamil women is now--and perhaps always has been--absent. Although Tamil women currently exist in a highly repressive context, a more nuanced understanding of the impact of repression on their political identities provides insight into the sustainability of the current peace, and has wide-ranging policy implications for our understanding of female participation in political violence. ■

Nimmi Gowrinathan received her PhD in Political Science from UCLA in 2012, has worked extensively as a humanitarian and human rights professional, and is currently working on a book on female fighters in Sri Lanka.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Civil Society 6, Personal Interview, June 2011, Mannar: Sri Lanka.

<sup>2</sup> Jocelyn Viterna, “Pulled, Pushed, and Persuaded: Explaining Women’s Mobilization into the Salvadoran Guerilla Army”, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 112, No.1 (July 2006):1-45. Adele Balasingham, *The Will to Freedom: An Inside View of Tamil Resistance* (London: Fairmax Publishing, 2001). Neloufer De Mel, “Agent or Victim: The Sri Lankan Woman Militant in the Interregnum”, *Women and the Nation’s Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka*. (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2001). Karla Cunningham, “Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 26 (May-June 2003): 171-195.

<sup>3</sup> Viterna, *Women’s Mobilization*. Balasingham, *Freedom*. Cunningham, *Female Terrorism*. Miranda Alison, “Cogs in the Wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam”, *Civil Wars* 6 (Winter 2003): 37-54. Linda M. Labao, “Women in Revolutionary Movements: Changing Patterns of Latin American Guerilla Struggle” in *Women and Revolution: Global Expressions* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishing, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy Weinstein, “Handling and Manhandling Civilian in Civil War: Determinants of the Strategies of Warring Factions.” *American*

*Political Science Review* (August 2006): 429-447. Stathis Kalyvas, "The Ontology of 'Political Violence': Action and Identity in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol.1, No.3 (September 2003): 475-494. Jason Lyall, "Does Indiscriminate Violence Incite Insurgent Attacks? Evidence from Chechnya", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 53:3 (June 2009): 331-362. Robert Justin Goldstein, *Political Repression in Modern America: from 1870 to the Present* (Cambridge: MA: Schenkman Books, 1978). Christian Davenport, "State Repression and Political Order", *Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (June 2007): 1-23. "Repression involves the actual or threatened use of physical sanctions against an individual or organization, within the territorial jurisdiction of the state, for the purpose of imposing a cost on the target as well as deterring specific activities and/or beliefs perceived to be challenging to government personnel, practices or institutions" (Goldstein, *Political Repression*, xxvii). The actual activities involved in state repression include "harassment, surveillance/spying, bans, arrests, torture, and mass killings by government agents and/or affiliates within their territorial jurisdiction" (Davenport, *State Repression*, 1).

<sup>5</sup> Viterna, *Women's Mobilization*.

<sup>6</sup> Cunningham, *Female Terrorism*, 186.

<sup>7</sup> Miranda Alison, "Women as Agents of Political Violence", *Security Dialogue* 35 (December 2004): 447-463.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Harrell-Bond, "Can Humanitarian Work With Refugees be Humane", *Human Rights Quarterly* 24 (November 2002): 51-85.

<sup>9</sup> Viterna, *Women's Mobilization*. Cunningham, *Female Terrorism*.

<sup>10</sup> Dierdre McConnell, "The Tamil People's Right to Self-Determination", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Volume 2.1 (March 2008).

<sup>11</sup> This study looks at Tamil women living in the Northern and Eastern Districts of the island, which have consistently been the areas directly affected by conflict, as well as the base of the Tamil resistance movement.

<sup>12</sup> De Mel, *Agent/Victim*. Joke Schrijvers, "Fighters, Victims and Survivors: Constructions of Ethnicity, Gender and Refugeeess Among Tamils in Sri Lanka", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (1999). Jennifer Hyndman and Malathi De Alwis, "Beyond Gender: Towards a Feminist Analysis of Humanitarianism and Development in Sri Lanka", *Women's Studies Quarterly* 31 (Fall-Winter 2003): 212-226. Deniz Gokalp, "A Gendered Analysis of Violence, Justice, and Citizenship: Kurdish Women Facing War and Displacement in Turkey", *Women's Studies International Forum* (Volume 33: Issue 6, 2010), 561-569.

<sup>13</sup> De Mel, *Agent/Victim*.

<sup>14</sup> Schrijvers, *Refugeeness*, 307.

<sup>15</sup> Some studies around displacement rely solely on humanitarian data due to the challenges of obtaining direct interviews (Elisabeth Jean Wood, "Variation in Sexual Violence During War", *Politics and Society* 34 (March 2009) :307.)

<sup>16</sup> While pursuing my doctorate, I directed humanitarian operations for a disaster relief organization in Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan also representing the organization at the United Nations and directing the Sri Lanka Working Group of INGOs. In this capacity, I had access to periodic assessments and humanitarian reports that provide a detailed picture of the broader physical spaces and policy debates which defined life for all Tamil civilians. Human rights and humanitarian reports highlight issues of specific concern to women and challenges faced by women impacted by overlapping processes of conflict, militarization, and displacement.

<sup>17</sup> These categories are: Food, Shelter, Security, Health and Trauma, with a specific focus on the impact on women.

<sup>18</sup> The views and analysis presented here do not represent the views of the International Crisis Group.

<sup>19</sup> The names of all individuals are changed, or referred to by interview number due to ongoing security concerns.

<sup>20</sup> "The way gender operates in society, the public is typically the domain of the male, and the home or inner space is represented by women." (Partha Chatterjee, *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989, 239.) As the public space in the North and East became increasingly militarized throughout the conflict, the physical absence of women became more pronounced. These societal norms create a public (political)/private (apolitical) distinction, casting women as "politically invisible beings" ( Spike Peterson, "Review: Women and Gender in Power/Politics, Nationalism and Revolution", *The Journal of Politics* Vol.58, No. 3 (August 1996): 870-878), contributing to women's exclusion in general from various analyses of political processes.

<sup>21</sup> Over the time period looked at in this study, various humanitarian and rights groups report the numbers of displaced civilians in the conflict-affected districts as between 300,000 and 550,000 from 2000-2010, with a spike in numbers in 2005 after the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami (Human Rights Watch. *Besieged, Displaced, and Detained: The Plight of Civilians in Sri Lanka's Vanni Region* (December 2008); Norwegian Refugee Council. *Civilians in the Way of Conflict: Displaced People in Sri Lanka* (September 2007)).

<sup>22</sup> Schrijvers, *Refugeeness*, 309.

<sup>23</sup> Norwegian Refugee Council. *Civilians in the Way of Conflict: Displaced People in Sri Lanka* (September 2007).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Human Rights Watch. *Besieged, Displaced, and Detained: The Plight of Civilians in Sri Lanka's Vanni Region* (December 2008). NRC, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> "I", Personal Interview, March 2011, London: UK.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Church staff, Personal Interview, October 2010, Mannar: Sri Lanka.

<sup>29</sup> Civil Society 5, Personal Interview, October 2010, Colombo: Sri Lanka. This issue reached a critical point in September 2008, when the GOSL kicked all INGOs out of the conflict zone, a policy which "drastically worsened the plight of the civilian population, significantly reducing prospects that essential food, water, sanitation and health care would reach the population" (NRC 2007). The following year, in 2009, UNICEF, the World Food Program and others warned of severe food shortages for children and other vulnerable populations in displaced camps.

<sup>30</sup> HRW, 2008. NRC, 2007.

<sup>31</sup> "L", Personal Interview, March 2011, London: UK.

<sup>32</sup> "P", Personal Interview, June 2011, Vavuniya: Sri Lanka.

<sup>33</sup> Local newspapers reported that a fourteen year old girl was raped as she searched for a more remote, shaded location to relieve herself; "Dr. P", Personal Interview, June 2011, Colombo: Sri Lanka; Anonymous Civilians, Personal Interviews, Batticaloa, July 2008.

<sup>34</sup> "L", Personal Interview, March 2011, London: UK.

<sup>35</sup> HRW, 2008. NRC, 2007. Global Tamil Forum, *Sri Lankan Internment Camp: International Community Helping Interned Communities Achieve Freedom of Movement and Self Sufficiency* (September 2009).

<sup>36</sup> Civil Society 11, Personal Interview, June 2011, Vavuniya, Sri Lanka.

<sup>37</sup> Survivors 2, 3, 5, Personal Interviews, October 2011, Vavuniya, Sri Lanka.

<sup>38</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted unanimously on 31 October 2000. After recalling resolutions 1261 (1999), 1265 (1999), 1296 (2000) and 1314 (2000), the Council urged the adoption of a gender perspective that included the special needs of women and girls during repatriation and resettlement, rehabilitation, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction. United Nations, October 2000.

<sup>39</sup> Focus-sponsored meeting. Internal notes on the Implementation of UN Resolution 1325. (January 2011).

<sup>40</sup> Anonymous, civilian interviews, 2010, Vavuniya: Sri Lanka.

<sup>41</sup> "S", Personal Interview, March 2011, London: UK. Several women also reported that though UNHCR established a desk in refugee camps for women to report abuses, the hovering military personnel around the desk deterred most women from approaching or reporting any abuses. Those that did report any issues faced by women, or searched for missing young women, found themselves the subject of harassment or accusations of collaboration with the insurgent movement ("Dr. M", Physician, Personal Interview, October 2010, Vavuniya: Sri Lanka).

<sup>42</sup> Physician 1, Personal Interview, October 2010, Vavuniya: Sri Lanka.

<sup>43</sup> Anonymous Aid Worker, Personal Interview, October 2010, Colombo: Sri Lanka.

<sup>44</sup> Lawyer 2, Survivor 4, Personal Interviews, March 2011, London: UK.

<sup>45</sup> Civil Society 16, Personal Interview, June 2011, Vavuniya: Sri Lanka.

<sup>46</sup> Hyndman and De Alwis, *Beyond Gender*. Several local interviews mentioned programming interventions which significantly increased the vulnerability of women. Among these were a USAID funded apparel training center in a remote area, next to a large military camp as well as an INGO supported "Happiness Center" where toys and games were provided by military personnel to young children (including young women) to reduce the fear of the military amongst young people.

<sup>47</sup> Civil Society 17, Personal Interview, Vavuniya: Sri Lanka, June 2011.

<sup>48</sup> Civil Society 1, Personal Interview, Colombo: Sri Lanka, October 2010.

<sup>49</sup> Harrell-Bond, *Humane*, 52.

<sup>50</sup> Davenport, *State Repression*.

<sup>51</sup> When focusing on individual agency, it is more helpful to borrow from a discourse within Anthropology. Among those scholars who understand the "social nature of agency and the pervasive influence on human intentions, beliefs, and actions" (Laura Ahearn, "Language and Agency", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30 (October 2001): 109-137, 129) there are those who specifically highlight multiple forms of agency (oppositional agency being one of them) (Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005)).

<sup>52</sup> Valentine E. Daniels, *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropology of Violence*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). Bruce Kapferer, "Ethnic Nationalism and the Discourses of Violence in Sri Lanka", *Communal/Plural*, 4 (2001). Stanley J. Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia* (California: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>53</sup> Viterna, *Women's Mobilization*.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Schalk, "Women Fighters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamililam: The Martial Feminism of Atel Palcinkam", *South Asia Research* No. 14, (Autumn 1994): 163-83.

<sup>55</sup> Radhika Coomaraswamy, "LTTE Women—Is This Liberation", *The Sunday Times*, January 5, 1997.

<sup>56</sup> Women did participate in other armed groups, however the data from this study is drawn from the LTTE, eventually the largest and most dominant group.

<sup>57</sup> Schalk, *Women Fighters*. Balasingham, Freedom.

<sup>58</sup> Alison, Agents. After the induction of women into the LTTE in late 1983, the women formed a separate fighting unit, the Women's Military Wing, where everything from leadership to military training was done by women themselves (Balasingham 1993, 19). After initially informally engaging in battles in the Jaffna Peninsula, the male leadership felt the women should receive formal military training, and opened the first camp site in the Jaffna Peninsula on July 1, 1987. The rigors of the initial training period are often cited by former fighters—even years after their induction into the movement.

<sup>59</sup> "Thava", Personal Interview, August 2006, Batticaloa: Sri Lanka.

<sup>60</sup> "Lavanya", Personal Interview, June 2011, Vavuniya: Sri Lanka.

<sup>61</sup> "Jeeva", Personal Interview, July 2007, Jaffna: Sri Lanka.

<sup>62</sup> "Prema", Personal Interview, November 2008, Trincomalee: Sri Lanka.

<sup>63</sup> "Sri", Personal Interview, July 2004, Killinochi: Sri Lanka.

<sup>64</sup> "Gaya", Personal Interview, August 2006, Batticaloa: Sri Lanka.

<sup>65</sup> "Sujanathi", Personal Interview, November 2011, Batticaloa: Sri Lanka.

<sup>66</sup> Activist 1, Personal Interview, October 2011, Colombo: Sri Lanka.

<sup>67</sup> Anuradha M. Chenoy, *Militarism and Women in South Asia* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2002). Neloufer De Mel, *Militarizing Sri Lanka: Popular Culture, Memory and Narrative in the Armed Conflict*, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2007).

<sup>68</sup> Gender-based violence has been defined as acts of sexual humiliation, rape, forced sex, prostitution, sexual slavery, and sexual assault. (Article 8 (2)(e)(vi)-1 – (vi)-6, Elements of Crimes, Rome Statute). Gender-based violence is both a product of a broken social order as well as a systematic political tool deployed by both state and non-state actors (Panos Institute, 1995, p.8).

<sup>69</sup> Anonymous staff for Oxfam International, Personal Interview, 2009, New York: New York.

<sup>70</sup> John Lee Anderson, “Death of The Tiger: Sri Lanka’s Brutal Victory Over its Tamil Insurgents”, *The New Yorker* January 17, 2011. Center for Policy Alternatives, A Profile of Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues in the Vanni and Vavuniya, March 2009. International Crisis Group. Sri Lanka: Women’s Insecurity in the North and East. *Asia Report* No 217, December 2011.

<sup>71</sup> Civil Society 1, Personal Interview, October 2010, Colombo: Sri Lanka.

<sup>72</sup> Civil Society 15, Personal Interview, June 2011, Colombo: Sri Lanka.

<sup>73</sup> Civil Society 7, Personal Interview, June 2011, Colombo: Sri Lanka.

<sup>74</sup> Civil Society 5, Personal Interview, June 2011, Vavuniya: Sri Lanka.

<sup>75</sup> Civil Society 17, Personal Interview, June 2011, Mannar: Sri Lanka.

<sup>76</sup> Interviews that touch on the increase and prevalence of prostitution amongst the Tamil population of women were entirely from members of civil society or caretakers of young women because nobody in the society would admit to engaging in that sort of behaviour directly.

<sup>77</sup> Anonymous civil society worker, Personal Interview, October 2010, Colombo: Sri Lanka. (Multiple CS I-10). This section draws on anonymous interviews with civil society workers, carried out in October 2010 and June 2011.

<sup>78</sup> Civil Society 23, Personal Interview, June 2011, Colombo: Sri Lanka.

<sup>79</sup> Church staff, Personal Interview, October 2010, Mannar: Sri Lanka.

<sup>80</sup> Civil Society 4, 13, 16, Personal Interviews, June 2011, Colombo, Vavuniya: Sri Lanka.

<sup>81</sup> Civil Society 11, Personal Interview, June 2011, Vavuniya: Sri Lanka.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent Into The Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>84</sup> Across all of the interviews, the act of rape was difficult to discuss, women were uncomfortable, shy, or reticent to talk about the details. Some expressed their ability to discuss these issues with me, because I was “like them”.

<sup>85</sup> Partly due to the time period and the corresponding phase of the conflict, all of

the cases involved populations in territories recently taken away from the LTTE by GOSL forces.

<sup>86</sup> International Crisis Group, Sri Lanka's North II: Rebuilding Under the Military, *Asia Report* No 229, March 2012.

<sup>87</sup> Wood, *Sexual Violence*, 307.

<sup>88</sup> Discussing the rape of a 55 year old woman in his district, one pastor said "She was older, and very unattractive, which, you know, must mean this is an act of political violence. An act of war" (CS 6, 2010).

<sup>89</sup> "Gaya" Personal Interview, August 2006, Batticaloa: Sri Lanka.

<sup>90</sup> Partly due to the time period and the corresponding phase of the conflict, all of the cases involved populations in territories recently taken over by government forces away from the LTTE.

<sup>91</sup> "Our social setup, its restriction on creative expressions for women and the evils of the dowry system, are some of the social factors that led to their initial recruitment" (Rajini Thiranagama, "No More Tears Sister", *The Broken Palmyrah* . (Claremont, CA: Sri Lanka Studies Institute, 1990) 305-330, 325).

<sup>92</sup> Human rights reports, as well as direct interviews find that a significant percentage of female recruits to the LTTE were forcibly abducted or coerced into the movement.

<sup>93</sup> Suriya Women's Center/UTHR.

<sup>94</sup> Shifting self-perceptions for Tamil women were analyzed through in-depth, open-ended interviews.

<sup>95</sup> Thiranagama, *Tears. Adele Balasingham, Women Fighters of The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam* (Jaffna: LTTE International Secretariat, 1993).

<sup>96</sup> Anonymous, civil society worker, Personal Interview, October 2010, Colombo: Sri Lanka.

<sup>97</sup> The LTTE created a link between morality and the Tamil nation , and aimed to eliminate social ailments such as alcoholism, pornography, domestic violence, sexual violence (often correlated with the "impure" Sinhalese occupiers) from their territories. As a result severe punishments were meted out for any case of domestic abuse or sexual violence (Schalk 2005; Wood 2009).

<sup>98</sup> Anonymous, Personal Interview, June 2011: Colombo: Sri Lanka.

<sup>99</sup> International Crisis Group, 2011.

<sup>100</sup> Civil Society 6, Personal Interview, June 2011, Mannar: Sri Lanka.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> There is an extensive debate surrounding the capacity of nationalist movements to address and improve the status of women in society. One set of arguments expects that the inclusion of women in these movements will elevate the status of women in society (Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake “Ambivalent Empowerment: The Tragedy of Tamil Women in Conflict”, in *Women, War and Peace in South Asia* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001): 105-125). The second deconstructs this expectation, finding that the structurally subordinate position of women in society will lead to gender inequality in the movement (Laboa 1998; Djebar 1992; Coomeraswamy 1988; Schalk 1994). The LTTE, I find, is somewhere in between these two, with elements of their overall ideology that are practical and heavily rooted in reality, and those that are emphasized for instrumental purposes such as recruitment. The counter-militarization process that in itself created vulnerabilities for women is justified as part of a broader intention to improve the security of Tamil women in relation to the state. They also enacted several policies within controlled territories that improved the daily lives of women, leading some women nostalgically to comment: “We women had it good under the LTTE” (Crisis Group 2011).

<sup>103</sup> Credible reports find that the LTTE did use civilians as “human-shields” in the final phases of war. (UN Report 2011).

<sup>104</sup> Anonymous Civilian Interview, June 2011, Vavuniya: Sri Lanka.

<sup>105</sup> A recent interview in Colombo revealed that even peaceful protests by Mothers of The Disappeared in Batticaloa were interrupted by military riot police. Anonymous, Personal Interview, March 2013, Colombo: Sri Lanka.

<sup>106</sup> See an extensive discussion on state militarization in “How Women Rebel: Gender and Agency in Sri Lanka”, Gowrinathan, 2012.

<sup>107</sup> Women activists report being called to military headquarters to report on activities, military involvement in the selection of beneficiaries, and military presence at any meeting over five people.

<sup>108</sup> A recent women’s meeting in Girithale concluded: “It is important to broaden and strengthen the standard of governing protection and promotion of women’s human rights in the post war situation, especially with a society in transition, and to move away from a framework focusing solely on violence and the protection of women. This includes engaging in many ways to focus on political, cultural, and social changes.”