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BETWEEN REALITY AND REPRESENTATION

Women's Agency in War and Post-Conflict Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

During two decades of armed conflict in north east Sri Lanka, women have carved new spaces of agency and new roles as armed combatants, principal income generators or heads of household in the absence of men folk. Will they be pushed back 'into the kitchen' with a return to peace, also often indexed as a return to the pre-war gender status quo? This article focuses on women's agency in post-conflict Sri Lanka, where a peace process has been ongoing for two years, and asks if and how a return of peace may affect women's empowerment. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and analysis of the political economy of armed conflict, the article suggests that, contrary to nationalist imaginaries, the structure of the 'new war' in Sri Lanka may not permit a return to a pre-war gender status quo.

Key Words ◇ agency ◇ displacement ◇ post-conflict society ◇ Sri Lanka ◇ war ◇ women

We are in a no war, no peace, process. Much has changed and yet nothing has changed. People are not dying, that is good, and we can move about now, but the conditions are the same. Displaced people still can't go home because of high security zones, and military occupation . . . You ask about women's roles. How have they changed after the ceasefire? They have not because . . . because we do not have real peace in any case. They say there is the peace process and all the international community has promised funds for reconstruction, but nothing has changed, we are doing the same things. (A woman activist in Jaffna, northern Sri Lanka, August 2003, 18 months after the ceasefire)

Images of child soldiers, women suicide bombers and women in battle fatigues carrying guns have become signifiers of how 'new wars' in the global south blur gender roles as well as conventional distinctions between military and civilian actors. However, women living in conflict situations in

South Asia continue to be represented, if not explicitly, then implicitly, as doubly victimized. Not only are women living in conflict situations in the region victims of patriarchal structures that are found in most societies in the world, but patriarchy is seen to be exacerbated by caste and religious practices that are peculiar to the subcontinent. Additionally, after several decades of silence, an important and growing feminist literature on partition has traced the extent to which women and girls were the targets of rape, communal mutilation and humiliation in nationalist violence in South Asia (Butalia, 1998; Menon and Bhasin, 1998).¹ It is perhaps because of this focus on women's suffering at the hands of their ethnonational communities that, despite women's active role as armed combatants in post-colonial armed conflicts in Sri Lanka and Nepal, the double victim image of women in South Asia's war zones remains compelling. By and large, feminist analysis has had difficulty coming to terms with nationalist women's agency in situations of conflict and peace.

The argument that women's agency cannot be realized within the parameters of nationalist projects (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, LTTE, or Bharatiya Janata Party, BJP) resonates with an older debate between Marxist and radical feminists. For radical feminists, Marxism rather than enabling of women's liberation was an obstacle to feminist transformation. Socialist feminism was the compromise. In my view, post-structuralist and postcolonial critique (e.g. Spivak, 1988) has rendered the issue of women's liberation far more complex by pointing to the ambivalent and contradictory constitution of agency and its interpretation, disallowing the presumption of linear progress towards a solid state of liberation or transcendental reason. As such, the issue of whether women can achieve greater autonomy within nationalist discourse is a moot point. This case disrupts the political correctness of liberal humanism as well as feminism.

Women political leaders seem to have had little success in bringing about significant improvement in the lives of women in the South Asian region or in building bridges across ethnoreligious lines. Women heads of state have, however, moderated the more extreme misogynist cultural practices in a region where honour killings of women by their family members for defying the rules of whom 'she may or may not love', as Roy (1998) put it so evocatively, have been practised. This was arguably the case with Pakistan under Benazir Bhutto, where the more negative interpretations of Sharia law were not practised against women to the same extent as under many male rulers.

In reality and representation South Asian women have 'greatness' thrust upon them. South Asian women 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 also a telling reflection and indictment of the gendered realities of political power and violence in the subcontinent. For, while post-colonial South Asia has had the highest regional concentration of women heads of state in the world—Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Kalida Zia and Sheikh Hassina in Bangladesh, Sirimavo and Chandrika Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka, Indira Gandhi in India, they are all widows and/or bereaved 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 once had an alternative secular vision of communal and ethnic peace, such as President Chandrika Bandaranaike, remain captive to the violent political forces, structures and processes that in the first instance thrust them to power—a metaphor of women's ambivalent agency. In short, even powerful South Asian women rarely appear to be agents of their destinies—in war or in peacetime. In the few cases where they hold formal power they appear to do so by virtue of dynastic tendencies in South Asian political processes and the legitimacy of party political lineage.

During the war years, Sri Lanka, with its lead on women's social indicators² in the South Asian region, 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 were the symbols mobilized by women who sought political power as well as women activists in their struggles for and ascent to political power in a country ravaged by multiple political conflicts and violence. In Sri Lanka widowhood, which bears a stigma in Hindu and to a lesser extent Buddhist culture, has been powerfully reconfigured by the Bandaranaiques (mother and daughter), and other widows of presidents and 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 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 the ambivalent achievement of women in a period of social and political turmoil that has cast women in new roles in the subcontinent. As in the case of Sarojini Yogeswaran of the moderate Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), who became the first elected woman mayor in 1998 in the northern capital Jaffna's local government election and was shot dead by militants at her residence, other widowed women in these new roles have frequently not survived the violence.

Given the significant role of women in the LTTE, the lack of women at the track 1 level of peace negotiations between the Government of Sri

Lanka (GoSL) and the LTTE facilitated by Norwegian diplomats during the two-year-old peace process in Sri Lanka has been conspicuous. The only woman at the negotiating table was the Australian wife of the LTTE spokesman, who has also been a driving force in the articulation of Tamil nationalist feminism, while the Sri Lankan woman president was sidelined by the government. Ann Adele is however not representative of most Tamil women. After lobbying by women's groups in the south and upon the insistence of the international donor community that had pledged \$4.5 billion for post-conflict reconstruction, it was agreed that a women's subcommittee would be set up to enable women from the two sides to exchange views and insert women's issues into the formal peace process. This has effectively meant the ghettoization of women's concerns and a limited conceptualization of what a truly gendered peace and post-conflict reconstruction process may mean, largely due to flaws in the structure of the Sri Lanka peace process itself.

Both the Indian and the Sri Lankan records show that incorporating women in leadership positions without fundamental cultural and structural changes in society and polity rarely results in the advancement of women. It is why South Asian women activists now advocate at least 33 percent 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 ethnonationalist 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, in some cases with their lives.³

This article focuses on the lives of far less prominent women and their roles in the conflict–peace continuum in Sri Lanka, where a peace process has been ongoing for two years. It explores new spaces of women's agency in the two-decade-long conflict in the north and east of the country and asks if and how the return of peace may affect women's agency and empowerment. During the war years in the island a number of women took on new roles as principal income generator and head of household, but the question remains: will they be pushed back into the kitchen with the return to peace? A generation of feminist analyses of women in conflict has suggested that return to peace is often signified as a return to the pre-war gender status

quo.⁴ That analysis was, however, based on study of an older generation of conventional inter-state wars between militaries in Europe, as well as decolonization struggles and revolutions in Asia (for instance, in Vietnam and China). Rather, I suggest that the ‘new war’ in Sri Lanka, sustained and subsidized by a network of local–global actors—developmental, humanitarian, criminal, and diasporic—has thrust women into new roles, enabling them to subtly and creatively craft their identities and destinies. This has often entailed manipulating the ‘victim’ identity assigned to them in the humanitarian and post-conflict policy discourse as they are displaced or widowed.

I suggest that the conflict that generated its own internal political economy and restructured society has subtly but irreversibly transformed gender roles and identities. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in the north-east conflict zones of Sri Lanka as well as analysis of the political economy of the armed conflict that began in 1983, and the current two-year-old peace process between the GoSL and the LTTE in the north-east of the island (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 1999, 2002, 2003), this article suggests that the structure of the ‘new war’ of international engagement and large-scale population displacement is such that a return to a pre-war gender status quo may not be possible—contrary to nationalist imaginaries and a significant literature on women in war.

I trace how spaces of women’s agency and empowerment are configured by the macro structures and patterns of violence, as well as the local and international discourses (including human rights and humanitarian discourses) that respond to such violence, emergent in Sri Lanka and other ‘new wars’ in the global south. As such, I bring a political economic analysis of the armed conflict between the LTTE and GoSL in the north-east of Sri Lanka (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 1999, 2001a, 2001b), to bear on interpretation of women’s narratives that I recorded during nearly a decade of fieldwork in the conflict zones. The article reads women’s empowerment in the conflict and post-conflict situation as an effect of the acceptance of and legitimacy conferred by wider society upon the new roles that women have begun to perform during the conflict years. It deliberately sidesteps much of the tendentious debate regarding the interpretation of agency and subjectivity that has characterized postcolonial analysis of subaltern identity politics. Rather, it draws on political economic analyses of the ‘new wars’ in the global south and the work of Kaldor (1999), who has suggested that new or postmodern wars in the Balkans and Africa that involve the targeting and participation of large numbers of civilians, and extensive international engagement, present a fundamental challenge to how we may conceptualize war and peace. Violence is no longer merely the business of male combatants and trained militaries. One of the characteristics of modern wars in Asia, as in Africa, has been the targeting of civilians, who have become victims and perpetrators sometimes seemingly in equal

measure, as during the violence in Rwanda. Often the new wars have been fought not in battlefields but in multicultural urban or rural spaces and neighbourhoods between those of different ethnoreligious or linguistic communities who once were neighbours. As such, the new wars where civilians are deliberately targeted have entailed the radical disruption/displacement/destruction and transformation of historically multicultural societies (Mamdani, 2001; Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2001a, 2001b). The armed conflict in the north-east of Sri Lanka has resulted in the death of 65,000 people in the official version, and the displacement overseas and to other parts of the country of over a million people at various times in the two decades of conflict and *détente*. The conflict zones have also recorded a demographic change in male–female ratios due to male deaths and out-migration.

Yet changes that war has wrought on women's lives and the social and cultural fabric of family and communities in the conflict zones may give us clues towards developing creative strategies 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. In opening up new spaces for women's agency and leadership within changing family and community structures, this conflict has simultaneously destroyed previous spaces of agency, and placed a double burden on many women. I trace the transformations that the armed conflict in Sri Lanka has wrought on many civilian women in often subtle but significant ways by thrusting them into positions of power and decision within their families and communities in war-affected regions.

In this context, the argument that two decades of war and uncertain peace may result in the unintended empowerment of women (sometimes at the expense of their men folk) in Sri Lanka 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 conceptualize as a return to things the way they used to be and this also includes, in the case of Tamil women, caste structures that buttress the (gender) status quo. For, after all, the gender hierarchy is one of the old established institutions of society, and as Chatterjee (1989) noted of women in the colonial period, they are frequently constructed as the central purveyors of a community's '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 and tradition. Hence, often a return to peace is indexed by the return to the traditional gender status quo—and even

women revolutionaries are pushed back into the kitchen. In this context, the LTTE's attempt to straddle Tamil cultural puritanism with a radical disregard for traditional caste and gender hierarchies has provided contradictory spaces for women's agency in north-east Sri Lanka.

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 these changes. We have grown wary 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 romanticized, past and the traumatic present.

Failure to conceptualize 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 as a result of the conflict might suffer secondary victimization 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 who 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 ostracized because they have lost husbands. Contemporary language still lacks the vocabulary for women to articulate the transformations that they have experienced, and many feel ashamed, guilty and/or traumatized by their changed circumstances and gender roles arising from conflict.

The 'No War, No Peace Process'

As the woman quoted at the beginning of this essay noted, in north-east Sri Lanka (as in many parts of Africa and Asia where internationally brokered 'peace processes' and post-conflict reconstruction are ongoing), the reality is that of a 'neither war, nor peace' impasse. While since the Norwegian-brokered peace process in the island in March 2001, the combatants, the LTTE and the GoSL have observed a ceasefire, many of the structures of terror, taxation and displacement that sustained the political economy of war remain in place (see Rajasingham-Senanayake, 1999, 2001a, 2001b, for details and examples of this political economy). Moreover, in the Sri Lanka

peace process, overseen thus far by Norwegian mediators, men, despite the fact that the LTTE has a significant female fighting force, have dominated the track 1 negotiation between the GoSL and LTTE. Although a Gender Subcommittee was formed after lobbying by women's groups, women have not been present at the track 1 negotiation process. As a result, women's concerns have tended to be ghettoized and there has been little public discussion of how an adequately gendered peace may be achieved.

A 'real peace' or substantive peace contoured by the concerns and voices of the affected civilian communities remains elusive, even as the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) overseen and monitored by Scandinavian peace monitors enables a minimalist or formal peace. This article suggests the need to conceptualize a substantive peace that recognizes and legitimizes new spaces of civilian women's agency in conflict situations and post-conflict reconstruction. It also suggests women's agency in war or peace, or to use a term more commonly found in development discourse, women's 'empowerment', is complex, non-linear and ambivalent, and as such requires that we develop a new language to think about gender identities and roles in peacetime.

The restructuring of war and peace challenges our conceptions of women's agency, or to use a term more commonly found in development discourse, women's 'empowerment', which is rarely unambivalent—in war or peace. Likewise, as Jeffery has argued, 'agency is not wholly encompassed by political activism' (1998: 222). Yet it would appear that too many South Asian women's initiatives have neglected the social structural transformations to pre-existing family, kin group and caste hierarchies wrought by political violence. The overwhelming emphasis by women's groups as well as by women in relief and development programmes continues to be upon seeing women as victims who need to be brought into peace processes or positions of political leadership in order to foster women's participation in governance and in legal reforms 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 ethnonationalist framework, an issue to which I will return.

This article considers the changing shape of women's agency in the midst of armed conflict and its aftermath 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 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,

fragmentation of extended family 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 while simultaneously negotiating the duress brought on by these factors. Women in the former war zones 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 have either disappeared or are increasingly disempowered.

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 men and boys are the ones mainly targeted to fight and defend their nation, community, family and the honour of their women. It is largely men who are conscripted into paramilitaries to fight. Thus it follows that it is also men and boys who are more easily perceived as a security threat, particularly if they are of the 'wrong' ethnic or religious community. And they are the ones 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 emasculation because they cannot fulfil the socially prescribed role of protector and breadwinner of the family. The result is low self-esteem and a sense of failure that can lead to suicidal tendencies among men and boys. The psychological ramifications of this are supported by reports from those living in refugee camps: 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 among boys, men and the cultural construction of masculinity, although this is not within the scope of this article.

I start from the premise that conflict affects women differently, depending on religion, caste, class, ethnicity, location, political affiliation and a variety of overlapping factors. But conflict also reveals a certain commonality in women's experience. Women experience the particularly gendered forms of violence, of rape, the fear of rape, of body searches and the persistent threat of other sexual violence, as well as the social stigmas that afflict women who have been the targets of sexual violence. 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 radicalized and taken up guns and weaponry for their respective nationalist struggles (see De Mel, 2001). 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 article examines (1) women who have had to take on new roles as head of household⁵ and (2) women engaged in peace and human rights work. Hence the second part assesses the implications of women's transformed roles for humanitarian interventions and development work in war and peacetime. The article 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 wartime conflict, as well as of caste, culture and society in peacetime, might obscure and indeed impede an understanding of 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 Batticaloa 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 that 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 shelters 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 landless 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 Vavuniya 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 1990s and were subsequently repatriated. I also draw from interviews conducted with women heads of households in the new settlement scheme adjacent to Siddambarapuram camp.

The Victim and her Masks

The tendency to view women as ‘victims’ in the armed conflict has been fuelled by a number of popular and specialist discourses, concerning several brutal rapes committed by members of the Sri Lanka Army, as well as the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) when they controlled the conflict zones.⁶ Human rights discourse and humanitarian interventions have also significantly contributed to the tendency to view women as ‘victims’. 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, have been 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 1997 (see Coomaraswamy, 1997a). 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 rights 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 additionally 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 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, or of war and patriarchy, elides women’s agency in violence. Positioning women as victims might also mean that they are subject to secondary victimization, since victimhood 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 stigmatized victim unless their suffering is recognized and treated sympathetically in the wider society, and recompense and restitution enabled by existing health and legal institutions.

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 (see Daniel, 1997; Silva, 2003). 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 emphasized the strong matrilineal and matrilocal tendencies in Sri Lankan Tamil society (see McGilvray, 1989), 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 are the norm (Wadley, 1991). Feminist ethnography, on the other hand, has emphasized 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, emphasize 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. Nonetheless, by and large, 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 culture.⁷

More recently, historians have argued that colonialism permeated by British Victorian patriarchal culture (and, later, the enforcement of Brahminical north Indian imagination of state) eroded the status of women in the south Indian societies that follow a 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, despite male structures of control. They have highlighted how colonial legal systems might have eroded the rights and freedoms that women had under customary law, particularly in matrilineal societies, while emphasizing the historically changing circumstances of family, kinship, caste and gender relations (see Arunima, 2003; Nair, 1996). In this vein, this article looks at how 17 years of armed conflict, displacement and humanitarian-relief and 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

A friend and I met and interviewed Dhanu and her deputy Akhila in Jaffna at the headquarters of the LTTE in July 1987, soon after a peace accord was negotiated by the Indian government, and the Indian peacekeeping forces (IPKF) were arriving in north Sri Lanka. A few months later the LTTE rejected the Indian-brokered peace accord and commenced fighting with the IPKF and GoSL. Dhanu was then commander of the women's wing of the LTTE. Our meeting took place two years before she assassinated former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in a suicide attack. When I met her she was the highest-ranking woman officer in the LTTE, and a front-line fighter, with many battle honours. We interviewed her in the LTTE headquarters, soon after Gandhi had dispatched Indian peacekeeping troops to bolster a ceasefire in Sri Lanka in 1987. In the course of our two-hour meeting, Dhanu, a highly intelligent and articulate woman, listed an account of violence committed by the state and the Sri Lankan military against her community. She insisted that she was fighting for the honour and liberation of her people. I had gone to interview her regarding the position of women in the LTTE. She told me that women's liberation was necessary but could only be achieved after the war for Eelam (the homeland of the Tamil people) was won. The woman problem would detract from focusing on the cause and could hence only be sorted out later.

The figure of the LTTE woman soldier, the armed virgin, 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 the wife of an LTTE spokesman as enlightened (Adele, 1993; Coomaraswamy, 1997b; Schalk, 1992) functionaries 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. The minutely calculated and coordinated actions of Dhanu, who passed prime ministerial level security on her death march to Gandhi in Madras India in

1989, cannot be explained in terms of false consciousness or economic rationality. Rather, Dhanu was a modern political agent fighting for a nation state and the right of her community's self-determination, in the language of the modern nation state, albeit an ethnically coded nation state. But then, what modern nation state is not ethnically coded?

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 1990s, 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.

Almost 12 years after my meeting with Dhanu and Akhila, 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'. The respect that women LTTE cadres command in the wider Tamil society constitutes an alternative if militarized role model for young women in north-east Sri Lanka. The possibility of violence that the militant woman represents facilitates wider society's regard of women through a slightly altered cultural lens. What this suggests is that, even if women may not sit at the track 1 negotiations, they would still be actively involved in post-conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction of the community. Moreover, given the demographic as well as social changes that have occurred, it is more likely that some women would be involved in the post-conflict policy process, even as others return to the kitchen. Finally, it is arguable that the numbers of women in the LTTE and the position accorded to them in the organization are a principal reason that rape has not been practised by the parties in the armed conflict in Sri Lanka—where the parameters of dirty war violence have been largely set by the LTTE.

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), estimated that half a million Tamils had become refugees overseas. The decennial census of Sri Lanka scheduled for 1991 was not taken due to the conflict. Estimates cite that 78 percent of the internally displaced are ethnic Tamils, 13 percent Muslims and 8 percent Sinhalese (Gomez, 1994). Many displaced people, Tamils, Muslims⁸ and Sinhalese alike, fled Sri Lanka Army and LTTE brutalities.

Displacement and camp life also provided spaces of 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 processes of transformation in the lives of young and single as well as widowed women whom I met at the Siddambarapuram camp and adjacent new settlement scheme. 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 favourable settings. Thulasi, a resident of the camp, told me:

I used to work as a seamstress but after I was married I stopped work because my husband did not wish me to go out to work and I got pregnant, now that he is no more I have started to go to work in a tailor shop in Vavuniya town and it is with that money and the dry rations that I can bring up my children . . . There are so many of us who have lost our husbands, many now do not follow the old ways, where widows were not supposed to dress nicely and go about. We wear the pottu [auspicious mark] and do what we need to do for our children and families. Sometimes come home very late after work.

Such narratives are 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.

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 residents 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 household, and increasingly enjoyed the role of being the head of the household and its principal decision maker.

Several mothers with young children 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 principal reasons for these women's newly found sense of control was the fact that they were able to secure employment outside the household and the camp. Women in the service and the NGO sectors had the best success.

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. With the exception of the highly westernized 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 there would be more inter-caste marriages and, hence, an erosion of caste. Presumably this also meant 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 Dravidian matrilineal family and kinship system where women would remain with their natal families after marriage, and were customarily entitled to lay claim on the resources of the matri-clan, enjoying a relatively

higher status in comparison with women in strictly patrilineal societies. As Agarwal (1994) has pointed out, the existence of matrilineal systems where matrilineal descent, matrilineal 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 Nayers of Kerala as well as the Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims of the east coast of Sri Lanka, where bi-lateral and matrilineal forms of inheritance are the norm (see Menon, 1994; Yalman, 1967). 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 matrilineal and bi-lateral descent practices, despite general provision being made for customary common law for indigenous communities (for example, Thesavallamai, Tamil customary law, Kandian Sinhala law and Muslim personal law). In the same period, the modernizing tendency towards 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, matrilineal, to virilocal forms of residence and inheritance, where women take only movable property to their affinal household, might also be traced to various postcolonial 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, a similar pattern of title deeds being invested in male heads of households is still evident in the new settlement and land distribution schemes for landless, displaced populations that 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 either left them or whose location cannot be ascertained are not deemed eligible for land grants. Clearly, in the case of Tamil inheritance patterns, customary practices are more liberal than that of postcolonial development practice.

What all of this indicates is that there are changes in cultural practices and structures impacting women's roles in situations of armed conflict. However, these changes do not manifest themselves in the same degree or even in the same way among all women. For while Tamil women have begun to play various unaccustomed public roles, the evidence from the war zones also suggests that conflict has restricted the mobility of Muslim women in conflict zones and in the areas in which they have been displaced.

Rethinking Displacement: 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 programmes 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 programmes organized 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 (the 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 psychosocial traumas that displacement entails, long-term displacement has provided windows of opportunity for greater personal and group autonomy as well as experiments with identity and leadership for displaced people, particularly for women (see the work of the Institute of Agriculture and Women in Development, a Sri Lanka NGO). 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 and (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 peace.⁹ The assumption of return is a fundamental premise of state, international and NGO policies vis-à-vis internally displaced people. The fact is that these policies might be contributing to prolonging the conflict as well as causing 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 drawing out and perpetuating the trauma of the very people it is supposed to assist.

Under these circumstances, an approach which conceptualizes 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, peace and displacement. While for some women there has only been trauma, for others the conflict has provided windows of opportunity for greater personal and group autonomy as well as experiments with identity and leadership. Certainly this has been the case for many displaced Tamil women, many of whom have lost husbands and sons in the conflict.¹⁰ It is, therefore, important that relief aid should be conceptualized 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 a space of such ambivalence: the place that marked the distress of dislocation concurrently represented 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 status 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 into the local economy, and among those who had previously been landless.

Languages of Empowerment: Recasting Widowhood

A generation of young Tamil war widows who have been displaced to the border areas and have been living there for many years seem to be increasingly challenging conventional Hindu constructions of widowhood as a negative, polluting and inauspicious condition (*amangali*) that bars their participation in many aspects of community life. Several young widows working in Vavuniya 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 ostracized simply 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 (*amangali*) 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 is generally socially ostracized, 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 widowhood 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 *devadas*:¹¹—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 Tamil Hindu–Buddhist epic, *Sillapaddikaram*.¹²

Yet with the exception of the young Tamil widows who have found more freedom in the conflict, women still seem to lack a language to articulate this process of transformation 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 had to support the children mainly on her own anyway, 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 problematized, especially as it may be internalized 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, threats to their physical safety, psychological insecurity and a struggle for survival and to sustain the family. In short, they have had 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, 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. 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). A backlash against women's changing roles and patterns of mobility is arguably one of the reasons for increased levels of violence against women.

Beyond Nationalism? Women's Role in Political Conflict and Peace Building

Almost two decades of armed conflict and the culture of ethnonationalist and political polarization have 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 mobilized 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 ethnonationalist framework opposed to colonialism, such as the Young Women's Buddhist Association (YMBA). While these early women's organizations were anti-colonial rather than ethnonationalist, they have over the years become increasingly ethnonationalist. *Seva Vanitha*, the army unit that works for the bereaved families of armed forces personnel, is explicitly nationalist.

At the same time, secular women leaders like Chandrika Bandaranaike, who try to transcend ethnoreligious divides, fall prey less to patriarchal nationalism than to 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 striking a common chord among the people at the national level, partly due to the lack 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 ethnic-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 founding 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 the LTTE's abuses of human rights. On the other hand, women's groups which had the potential to make an impact on national level politics, such as the Mothers' 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 process.

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 organizations have been subsequently co-opted by various political parties. By and large, it is arguable that this co-option was primarily due to the hostile ethnonationalist climate in which secular women's groups operate, and made possible based on the reactive nature of the groups. Arguably, the absence of a proactive vision for strategic action has 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 on waging a 'war for peace'.

Clearly, there is a need to look elsewhere for women's agency and 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 (Enloe, 1983; Jayawardena, 1986). 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. This article 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, contingent on the acceptance of the legitimacy of women performing their new roles. And it is consequently 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 peacetime. Several women who have faced the traumatic loss and scattering of family members due to displacement, conflict and the breakdown of family structures have also assumed new roles which were thrust upon them as a result of the disruption of peacetime community organization, social structures and patriarchal values. I do not wish to suggest that this is a general story that might be told of women living in conflict and displacement. Rather this article has focused on some women's agency at moments when they seem most victimized, to excavate some hidden moments and routes of women's agency in the situation of conflict.

This article 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 mobilization as well as gender analyses of women in politics. For it seems to me that the arena of politics proper in South Asia is a violent one, resulting in the stripping and humiliation of women politicians, as has repeatedly occurred at election time in Sri Lankan politics in the last decade. In Sri Lanka, which celebrated 50 years 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 are 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 socialization 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 peacetime, 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 women's politics that crosses ethnic lines might be the best and last bulwark against growing ethnic chauvinism that is 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 ethnoreligious 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.

Thus, this article has also attempted to trace languages and patterns of empowerment in the generally tragic story of displaced women's lives towards recognizing and promoting positive changes 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 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 gendered violence in war and peace. It is hence that this article has tried to rethink some of the gender dynamics of a return to peace by analysing 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 article has charted the shifting terrain of women's ambivalent agency in armed conflict and peace building, the new spaces opened, the old spaces closed, and the changing structure of gender relations, in the war-affected north-east of Sri Lanka.

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 conceptualize 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 certainties of familiar, older, ways of being and doing. But, to conceptualize 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 almost two decades of armed conflict and uncertain peace in Sri Lanka are too deep, too complex, structural and fundamental. They force us to challenge our 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.

NOTES

A version of this article appeared in Thiruchandran (1999), and in Manchanda (2001).

1. Butalia notes, 'if colonialism provided Indian men the rationale for constructing and reconstructing the identity of the Hindu woman as a "bhadramahila" . . . Independence and its dark "other" Partition provided the rationale for making women into symbols of the nation's honour' (1998: 192).
2. In literacy, health, education. See UNDP Human Development Reports.
3. 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 Thesavallamai 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.
4. Recently this picture has changed as the role of girls and women combatants is recognized and women are being pressed to take a role in peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction.
5. The social role of women, of holding the family together, of caring for children, tending the sick and the elderly, makes women the worst sufferers during conflict.
6. There are exceptions to the perspective of women as victims in activist and academic scholarship. Recent literature that centres precisely on the question of women, agency, and war includes Manchanda (2001) who takes up the issue in the context of South Asia, as well as Moser and Clark (2001) who have a global focus. As early as 1998, several articles in Lorentzen and Turpin (1998) addressed the uncomfortable issue of women in armed combat. However, the general trend in donor-driven research and reports compiled for humanitarian agencies continue to position women as victims. See, for instance, Rehn and Sirleaf (2002) and Mertus (2000), who despite taking into account contextual differences in women's lives, present a monolithic image of women victimized by violence.
7. Colonial evolutionary classifications of (primitive) societies presumed that fewer restrictions on women's freedom indicated a more primitive stage of civilizational advance.
8. While most Muslims are Tami-speaking, they do not necessarily identify as Tamils.

9. For those in the conflict regions, the right to set up residence in an area of one's choice and the right to movement are seriously restricted by the LTTE and the GoSL's security regimes. While the Sri Lanka government restricts the movement of Tamils displaced southward, the LTTE will not permit Sinhals 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 cadres from deeply frustrated and resentful youth, men and women, girls and boys.
10. 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.
11. The *devadasi* (lit. Slave of the Lord) was typically a young girl dedicated to the temple as a dancer who entertained upper caste patrons. See Nair (1994).
12. The text is dated anywhere between the second and ninth centuries.

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