

2016

Locating Gendered Resistance: Interethnic Conflict, Environmental Disaster, and Feminist Leadership in Sri Lanka

Allison A. Donine
Pitzer College

Recommended Citation

Donine, Allison A., "Locating Gendered Resistance: Interethnic Conflict, Environmental Disaster, and Feminist Leadership in Sri Lanka" (2016). *Pitzer Senior Theses*. Paper 74.
http://scholarship.claremont.edu/pitzer_theses/74

This Open Access Senior Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Pitzer Student Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pitzer Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

**Locating Gendered Resistance:
Interethnic Conflict, Environmental Disaster, and
Feminist Leadership in Sri Lanka**

Allison Donine

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of a Bachelor of Arts Degree in
Environmental Analysis

Pitzer College, Claremont, California
April 27, 2016

Readers:
Professor Vivek Sharma
&
Professor Melinda Herrold-Menzies

Abstract

In geographically vulnerable and politically unstable regions such as Sri Lanka, I argue that linking natural hazards and climate-induced disasters to existing social issues is more pressing than ever. In the case of the 2004 *Boxing Day* tsunami, it was impossible to dissociate the two. Looking through the lens of distress, in conflict and environmental disaster, this thesis explores how women have transformed moments of victimization into opportunities for resistance and agency. This thesis examines the following questions: Within the geo-political context of Sri Lanka, how does social stress (human-made or environmental) produce conflict and resistance to patriarchal traditions along gender lines? What gaps do women-led groups and coalitions fill in responding to the needs of women in conflict and post-disaster landscapes? And how has the public participation of women in armed conflict and female-led coalitions provided space for transgressive agency to redefine traditional expectations? I argue that a greater understanding of the ways in which women are resisting their construction as partial citizens during sustained periods of crisis can provide insight to their organizational capacities and role in shaping female identities.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost thank you to my readers and mentors, Professor Vivek Sharma and Professor Melinda Herrold-Menzies, whose expertise and support have proved invaluable during this writing process. Thank you professor Melinda Herrold-Menzies for your support over the last four years and thank you Professor Vivek Sharma for providing me with the resources and guidance to publish my first academic work and present my findings at the International Scientific Forum in Rome this April. I am eternally grateful to my family, my friends, and all of those who have believed in me along this journey. I look forward to continuing this research in my future academic career.

Table of Contents

Acronyms	5
Introduction	6
Literature Review	10
• The State of Crisis Management in Sri Lanka	10
• Transcending Conceptions of Gender and Power	11
• Armed Conflict and Transforming Gender Relations	13
• Gendered Cultural Restraints: The War on Women’s Bodies	15
• Motherhood Culture and Politics	17
• Gender and Disaster: Multi-dimensional Vulnerability	19
• Anti-Nationalist Feminism	21
• Emergency Rule: Theory of Resistance	23
• Problematizing International Disaster Aid and Relief	24
Sri Lanka as a Case Study	26
• Ethnography of Political Violence	26
• The Recruitment of Female Combatants	28
• Disappearances and Killings: A Cause for Resistance	30
Feminist Cultures of Resistance	33
• Public Sacrifice: Women in the LTTE	34
• Female Suicide-Bombers: An Examination of Empowerment	38
• Backing Away from Binaries: Women in War	40
• Gendered Struggle and Public Resistance: The Rise of Women’s Groups	44
• The Mother’s Front: The Politics and Strategy of Motherhood.....	45
• Defying Nationalist Hegemony: Pluralist Tactics in a Separatist Conflict	47
When Waves Crash on a Broken Shore	48
• The Gendered Terrain of Disaster	48
• Pre-Existing Gender-Biased Policies: Socio-Economic Vulnerability	50
• Increased Ethnic Tensions	54
• Role of Women in Meeting Survivor Needs	55
• International Disaster Relief- Moving Forward from Sri Lanka	57
Conclusions	59
Implications	60
References	61

Acronyms

CATAW	Coalition for Assisting Tsunami Affected Women
DRM	Disaster Risk Management
GoSL	Government of Sri Lanka
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
IPKF	Indian Peace Keeping Force
IR	International Relations
JVP	Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front)
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Ealam
MDL	Mothers and Daughters of Lanka
WAC	Women's Action Committee

Introduction

In Sri Lanka, the civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) formed the background against which the 2004 *Boxing Day* tsunami occurred. Understanding Sri Lanka's geo-political past is crucial to ensure that gender mainstreaming and conflict sensitivity are prioritized in international disaster relief. Since Sri Lanka's independence from British Rule in 1948, interethnic conflict and violence between the GoSL and the LTTE has been relatively constant. Given Sri Lanka's history with both the civil war and major environmental disaster, the country presents an important case study to examine the experiences and organizational capacities of women in both contexts. When the tsunami occurred, the GoSL and the LTTE had only recently agreed to a mutual ceasefire in 2002.¹ However, in the aftermath of the disaster, the ethnic borders drawn previously during the civil war became more clearly defined by the disproportionate response and impacts endured.

LTTE controlled coastal areas in the north and east, where the majority of Tamil people lived, experienced the greatest devastation when the waves struck. Three eastern districts alone made up almost 40 percent of all tsunami casualties in Sri Lanka. In addition to this, the North accounted for about 16 percent of the death toll, even though the southern portion of the country was more densely populated.² In a fateful few minutes, it is estimated that over 30,000 people were killed, thousands went missing, and over half a million people were displaced throughout Sri Lanka. However, the tsunami did not occur in a vacuum; during the civil war in Sri Lanka, it is estimated that over

¹ Bandarage, 2010

² Thurnheer, 2014

100,000 lives were lost between 1983 and 2009.³ In this paper I examine the ways that women have responded to crisis.

The women's movement in Sri Lanka gained initial traction in the 1980s, during the *Reign of Terror*, a period in which thousands of primarily male youth were murdered or 'disappeared' across the island.⁴ Anyone the state suspected to be a 'subversive' (i.e. a left-wing activists, playwrights, lawyers, and journalists who were monitoring human rights violations) was targeted during this time.⁵ In opposition to trauma caused by the state, the Mother's Front and the Women's Action Committee (WAC) were created.⁶ These coalitions, and others like them, allowed new space for women to develop interethnic and inter-class linkages with one another across political borders to address mounting disappearances and human rights violations. Through such pluralist tactics, women defied the homogenization of the nationalist movement. In July 1984, the first Mother's Front was formed in the northern district of Jaffna. Six years later during in July of 1990, the first southern branch of the Mother's Front was formed in Matara, a district affected severely by disappearances.⁷ In just six months, the Mother's Front had spread to ten other districts.

While geographic barriers limited the extent to which women's groups were able to diversify across ethnic dimensions, their missions were mutual and drew in women from all classes and castes to participate.⁸ In the south alone, by 1992 the Mother's Front had acquired over 25,000 members representative of mostly rural and underprivileged

³ Mahr, 2013

⁴ De Mel, 2001

⁵ De Alwis, 1998

⁶ De Mel, 2001

⁷ De Alwis, 1998

⁸ Bandarage, 2010

families.⁹ Conversely, the president of the National Committee of the Mother's Front was Dr. Manorani Saravana-muttu, a Tamil woman from an elite background. After Saravana-muttu's own son was abducted and killed in 1990, she was compelled to bring women together across ethnicity and class to protest the actions of the state. In a speech to the Mother's Front, she stated:

It's not my son, it's all the sons and daughters, not in one part of Sri Lanka, but in every part of Sri Lanka, that are lost. If we mothers do not get up today, tomorrow and in the future and fight, maybe there won't be any children left . . . to live in our land, bring it back to life, bring it back to serenity and peace.¹⁰

As mothers, sisters, and wives—women came together and demanded that the state be held accountable for the lives of the disappeared. Together, women organized around a myriad of humanitarian issues and brought international attention to the atrocities caused by Sri Lankan state forces during the war. I argue that the development of such organizational capacities during the conflict years provided women with skills, experience, and resources to more effectively meet the needs of marginalized communities following the tsunami.

While a Ceasefire Agreement had previously been signed between the GoSL and LTTE in 2002, the disproportionate allocation of international aid following the tsunami resulted in increased tensions, furthering conflict between the Tamil and Sinhalese people. As international media increasingly politicized the tsunami, the landscape of war and violence in which the disaster occurred became normalized.¹¹ No dispersal of aid or development program is ever completely neutral in its intervention. In post-disaster landscapes around the world any influx of aid comes with the restructuring of power in

⁹ Bandarage, 2010

¹⁰ Bandarage, 2010, p. 660

¹¹ De Mel, 2008

society. This restructuring drives competition, which often results in violence, contrary to the expectations of the development and relief community in humanitarian response. This is clearly observable in the case of Sri Lanka, in which both a lack of understanding and sensitivity towards existing socio-political issues, resulted in foreign interventions that re-sewed aid into the fabric of political violence in the country. Incoming aid led to structural concerns over authority in which the LTTE and GoSL once again found themselves in competition with one another. In this thesis I argue that in the case of Sri Lanka, but also universally, the recognition of women's organizational capacities to respond during periods of social stress should be prioritized and incorporated into future crisis management and global politics.

This Thesis maps the forms of resistance women have used during periods of emergency and how this contributed to their collective organizational capacity following the tsunami. I argue that together women have strategically deployed the image of motherhood to advance their political position, reinvent tradition, and redefine their roles in Sri Lankan society. As both perpetrators of violence and upholders of peace, women have bridged the private and public binary by elevating their struggles to the political forefront.

Literature Review:

The State of Crisis Management in Sri Lanka

While significant research has investigated gender dynamics within the context of conflict;¹² it was not until the 2004 *Boxing Day* tsunami that scholars began to draw parallels between women's experiences in war with those of women following disaster.¹³ In the aftermath of the tsunami, it became impossible to dissociate pre-existing interethnic tension or gender relations. However, aside from the recent work of scholars in Sri Lanka, the overwhelming majority of disaster research has yet to thoroughly examine gendered impacts with the added stratum of conflict. Greater cross-pollination between scholars in the fields of gender, conflict, and disaster social science is critical. Communication and collaboration among scholars in these areas is needed to ensure the needs of diverse communities in complex socio-economic contexts are identified and met during periods of crisis. Disasters are inherently interdisciplinary and the literature should reflect this.

A significant gap exists in our understanding of how women and marginalized groups are disproportionality impacted by environmental disaster as well as how disasters intersect with existing social problems.¹⁴ Environmental sociologist Kathleen Tierney (2007) argues that scholarly discourse on disasters has been largely resistant to changes in the social dimensions of hazards and disasters, including natural and human-induced extreme events. Tierney believes that this field of study is unlikely to progress if scholars

¹² Manchanda, 2001; Argenti, 2003; Bandarage, 2010; Rajasingham-Senanyake, 2004; Parashar, 2009; Giles, De Alwis, Klein, & Silva, 2003; Samuel, 2003; Alison, 2003; Ruwanpura, 2006

¹³ Siapno, 2009; Thurnheer, 2014; De Mel, 2008; De Alwis & Hedman, 2009; Le Billon & Waizenegger, 2007

¹⁴ Enarson & Chakrabarti, 2009

do not make significant strides towards interdisciplinarity. Disaster sociology should be linked with relevant fields of risk, including those that deal with sociological concerns related to inequality, diversity, and social change.¹⁵ Overwhelmingly, the field of disaster sociology is limited to scholars who become involved as a result of disasters that have affected the geographic areas in which they work.¹⁶ As the field moves forward, future research will need to be less circumstantial and more holistic in its framework. It is important that scholars to not only react to disasters in their work, but advocate, recommend, and propel further research in this area. I agree with the pioneering disaster sociologist Enrico Quarantelli that, “We will do better disaster studies when we become better sociologists.”¹⁷

Transcending Conceptions of Gender and Power

Carla Risseuw (1991) is a renowned scholar who has made significant contributions in the fields of feminism, power, and resistance in Sri Lanka. Drawing from Bourdieu’s theories, Risseuw emphasizes that the transformation of gender constructions is a process, one that is observed over long periods of time and often involves more subtle changes in gender relations. While Risseuw’s analysis is confined to the experiences of Sri Lankan women during the British Colonial era, her findings are relevant to the analysis of women’s transformative roles in postcolonial Sri Lanka within armed conflict and peace activism. Bourdieu’s work, *Towards a Theory of Practice* (1977), examines the limitations of structuralist analysis when referring to agency and freedom. He states that this form of analysis, using ‘structures’ and ‘models,’

¹⁵ Tierney, 2007

¹⁶ Tierney, 2007

¹⁷ Tierney, 2007, p. 20

“misrepresent the full process taking place at the agent level.”¹⁸ This is especially true in the case of women’s public participation in post-colonial Sri Lanka. It is important to acknowledge how (rather than at the institutional level) transformation of gender norms has taken place at the community and individual level. Risseeuw (1991) draws upon Bourdieu’s concepts of ‘orthodoxy’, ‘heterodoxy’, and ‘doxa’ in her analysis. *Doxa* refers to consensus (for instance the legitimization of classification systems based on sex, etc.), *orthodoxy* represents the “dominant articulated position”, and *Heterodoxy* refers to “discourse as opposition.”¹⁹ Risseeuw (1991) argues that these concepts can be applied to the strategies women employed to enact social change as they navigated different levels of adherence to the social order²⁰. Bourdieu (1977) further explains that it is the operative of the dominant class to limit the extent to which subordinate groups are able to build consensus and dissent. During the civil war in Sri Lanka, women took action publically to display their resistance to the state and combat its actions. Such demonstrations of power challenged the government and employed Bourdieu’s three levels of resistance: (1) reaching consensus over the disappearances loved ones by state forces, (2) articulating the dominant position, and (3) elevating collective oppositional discourse to the public sphere.

Unfortunately, because the qualities associated with femininity have been traditionally viewed as inferior, “gender stereotypes exist and persist in a world where women are often invisible and frequently ignored across the global political arena, and their roles often downplayed or understudied,” this is largely the case regarding the role

¹⁸ Risseeuw, 1991, p. 164

¹⁹ Risseeuw, 1991, p. 167

²⁰ Risseeuw, 1991

of women in violence and activism.²¹ Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg (2015) make clear in their book, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, that international relations analysis moving forward must recognize gendered constraints on women and expand itself to include “‘multi-locational perspectives on patriarchal forces’ which are capable of identifying ‘people as actors, the system as multiple hierarchies, and as characterized by multiple relations.’”²² In this way the actions and thoughts of women can begin to be valued in the international political arena in the same way that men’s are.

Armed Conflict and Transforming Gender Relations

Literature examining the role of women in war deals overwhelmingly with the question of whether or not women are victimized or provided space for agency.²³ In Miranda Alison’s foundational work, *Cogs in the Wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam*, she includes interviews with female LTTE combatants and ex-combatants.²⁴ Alison (2003) maintains that while there may be various reasons for why women have chosen to join the armed force, some being similar to men’s, others are gender-specific and deserve further investigation. Most scholars agree that moving beyond the binary framework of ‘victimhood’ and ‘agency’ is necessary in order to more fully capture the complex roles women play during periods of conflict.²⁵ Rajasingham-Senanyake (2004) expands this binary framework by arguing that regardless whether women are perceived as victims or agents, their involvement alone has irreversibly transformed how women are seen in Sri Lanka society. There can be no return to the status quo. In regards to women’s participation in violence, Gentry and Sjoberg (2015)

²¹ Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015, p. 7

²² Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015, p. 29

²³ Rajasingham-Senanyake, 2004; Parashar, 2009; Alison, 2003; Jordan & Denov, 2007

²⁴ Alison, 2003

²⁵ Rajasingham-Senanyake, 2004; Parashar, 2009; Alison, 2003

suggest using Nancy Hirschmann's (1989) conception of relational autonomy to better understand women's 'choices' in conflict. According to Hirschmann, relational autonomy "suggests that consent is not always voluntary, and is complicate even when voluntary" and it is important to recognize that "freedom of action is defined and limited by social relationships."²⁶ Hirschmann's theory of relational autonomy offers an important theoretical framework from which to examine the complexities of women's agency in violence.

The term 'double victim' appears often in the literature on women in conflict zones. This term refers not only to the vulnerability of women in wartime and conflict, but also that which women face as a result of one's caste, culture, and class.²⁷ Swati Parashar (2009) and Darini Rajasingham-Senanyake (2004), propose a more nuanced approach in their analysis of women's victimization. Parashar (2009) recommends using a postmodern feminist relations lens to investigate the more complex roles women play in material and ideological contributions to the military and political violence. Parashar sheds light on the feminist's dilemma with regards to the intersection of gender and conflict and argues that those feminists who claim a "special affinity" with women and peace are rejecting the possibility that women could be empowered in "men's war."²⁸ This single-minded approach places undue restrictions on women's agency and aids in their subordination. Asoka Bandarage (2010) agrees with Parashar that during periods of armed conflict the roles and responsibilities of women are multifaceted. Women who engage in violent actions are often described as demonstrating irrational behavior and

²⁶ Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015, p. 44

²⁷ Rajasingham-Senanyake, 2004

²⁸ Parashar, 2009, p.237

looked at as mothers who have gone awry.²⁹ This narrative, as compared with men's, discounts women's personal and political motivations for violence rather than recognizes their intellectual capacity for agency.

During the Sri Lankan civil war women faded in-between peacemaking activism, perpetrators of violence, victimization, and human rights advocacy work. Bandarage (2010) discusses explicitly the varying perceptions of Sri Lankan women in armed conflict as well as their changing role in activism. Bandarage is cautious to use binary categories in reference to war and peace, and instead focuses on the change in societal and familial dynamics as a direct result of their participation in these spaces. I argue that the roles of women in separatist armed conflict have resulted in a great transformation, not only in regards to how women view themselves, but how society interprets their actions.³⁰ Among scholars there is general consensus that at least on the individual level, agency and self-confidence were experienced and gender roles were transformed among women in the LTTE.³¹

Gendered Cultural Restraints: The War on Women's Bodies

Teresa de Lauretis (1987) is a prominent theorist who has contributed a wealth of knowledge over the last several decades to the field of feminist studies, specifically with regards to the construction of gender. In Lauretis's work, *Technologies of Gender*, she explains that "The term gender is, actually, the representation of a relation, that of belonging to a class, a group, a category... Gender constructs a relation between one entity and other entities."³² For this thesis it is important to understand how gender has

²⁹ Gentry & Sjoberg, 1998, p. 12

³⁰ Bandarage, 2010; Rajasingham-Senanyake, 2004; Parashar, 2009

³¹ Coomaraswamy & Perera-Rajasingham, 2009; De Mel, 2001; Rajasingham Senanayake, 2004

³² Lauretis, 1987, p. 4

historically been constructed in Sri Lanka as well as how women's roles in the public sphere have aided in its deconstruction.

In the broader literature on gender and difference, feminist scholar Catherine Mackinnon (2001) uses what she terms the 'difference' approach to explain the construction of gender binaries—the story goes as follows:

On the first day, difference was; on the second day, a division was created upon it; on the third day, occasional dominance arose. Division may be rational or irrational. Dominance either seems or is justified. Difference *is*.³³

Mackinnon's main point is that while it is important to recognize that difference is inherent, how difference is constructed and by who needs to be more critically investigated. Carole Pateman (1988), whose scholarship has inspired much of the literature in this area, including Mackinnon's work, explains in her book, *The Sexual Contract*: "The patriarchal construction of the difference between masculinity and femininity is the political difference between freedom and subjection."³⁴ In Mackinnon's analysis of gender and dominance, she emphasizes that "The problem is not that differences are not valued; the problem is that they are defined by power."³⁵ In the case of Sri Lanka, women have re-defined and shifted gender relations through their involvement in armed conflict and activism—challenging permanently the balance of power between men and women.

In the nationalist framework of Sri Lanka women are socialized and viewed as the bearers of ethnic tradition, cultural values, and the nation's identity. This is strengthened as war is fought over the control of women's bodies.³⁶ In Sri Lanka, but also in most

³³ Mackinnon, 2001

³⁴ Pateman, 1988, p. 207

³⁵ Mackinnon, 2001, p. 233

³⁶ Parashar, 2009; De Mel, 2001

parts of the world, men are recognized as the protectors of the feminized nation. Protecting the nation then becomes about protecting the cultural values inscribed on women's bodies and carried forward by women themselves.³⁷ Examples of the mechanisms women have used to resist feminized ideals and their construction as partial citizens can be found in much of the literature on gender and conflict.³⁸ In the LTTE, women have taken a role in the armed conflict as active combatants. In the environment of conflict, women become both perpetrators of violence and upholders of peace. Participation in this setting has greatly shaped society's perceptions on the collective strength of women.³⁹

Motherhood Culture and Politics

Under conditions of political instability in which the state is challenged, women's roles as guardians of cultural values and traditions are reinforced. However, even within the context of the civil war and competing nationalist interests, women have been successful in forging links with one another across ethnic and class divisions through their involvement in Mother's Fronts. Across Sri Lanka women have come together under the unifying symbol of "motherhood" and have used its construction to their strategic advantage as a means to elevate their concerns to the political sphere.⁴⁰ Many scholars agree that the tactic of motherhood has great political potential and should not be underestimated.⁴¹ As Asoka Bandarage (2010) argues, "The idea of the woman nurturer and mother has helped mobilize previously politically inactive women into the public

³⁷ De Mel, 2001

³⁸ De Mel, 2001; Parahsar, 2009

³⁹ Alison, 2003; De Mel, 2001; Bandarage, 2010

⁴⁰ Samuel, 2003; De Mel, 2001; Bandarage, 2010

⁴¹ Asoka, Bandarage, 2010; De Mel, 2001

sphere to campaign for peace.”⁴² After widespread disappearances in Sri Lanka women came together as mothers, sisters, and wives connected by the mutual loss of their sons and husbands.⁴³ Neloufer De Mel (2001) discusses the rise of ‘Mother Politics’ within the formation of Mother’s Fronts; emphasizing the importance such politics have played in generating unity and visibility among Sri Lankan women.⁴⁴ De Mel explains that, “In a culture where motherhood is valorized, the appeal to mother’s to come together as protectors of their sons, searching for the truth of their whereabouts, proved most compelling, as the numbers of the movement proved.”⁴⁵ I argue that through the deployment of motherhood as a tactic, women were able to reclaim this political space as their own.

Despite gains made by the Mother’s Front internally and politically, many scholars agree that even among Mother’s groups and warrior-mothers, pervasive notions of female identity proved difficult to transcend.⁴⁶ Rashika Coomaraswamy (1997), the United Nations Special Reporter on Violence Against Women and staunch advocate for women’s rights in Sri Lanka, firmly maintains that within the women cadres of the LTTE there can be no room for women’s empowerment or liberation. Coomaraswamy (1997) does not deny that transformation has taken place in Sri Lankan society, but questions the permanence of these changes. Samuel (2003) agrees with Coomaraswamy’s main idea, arguing that with regards to the Mother’s Front, “This approach may help to deal with crises in the short term and facilitate longer-term survival, but the construct of motherhood by itself, with no critique of its repercussions, has not been a sustainable

⁴² Bandarage, 2010, p. 659

⁴³ Bandarage, 2010

⁴⁴ De Mel, 2001

⁴⁵ De Mel, 2001, p. 250

⁴⁶ De Mel, 2001; Bandarage, 2010; Coomaraswamy, 1997; Samuel 2003

source of power for women.”⁴⁷ In contrast to both Coomaraswamy and Samuel, I argue that regardless of whether women effectively transcended these gendered constructions or not, their collective involvement in Mother’s Groups and the armed force opened new space to reclaim the symbol of motherhood and practice open resistance. Jim Scott (1990), an expert on the arts of domination and resistance, emphasizes that such acts of public defiance have an impact at the individual and collective level, which should not be overlooked or discounted. Scott argues that “Both the psychological release and the social meaning of breaking the silence deserve emphasis.”⁴⁸ In the case of the Sri Lankan Mother’s Fronts, women were not only able to come together and amplify their struggle but also to provide support and relief to one another in the process. The confidence and psychological benefits women gained from engaging in such acts of resistance cannot be understated.

Gender and Disaster: Multi-dimensional Vulnerability

While research on the intersection of gender and disaster has gained traction and recognition among regional and international level policymakers, further inquiry is needed in this area.⁴⁹ This thesis examines multidimensional vulnerability as it is exposed during periods of crisis, both human-made and environmental. In the case of Sri Lanka, a more complete understanding of gender in the context of war could have enhanced disaster risk management and response to be more effective in responding to the needs of impacted communities. Due to pervasive gendered taboos and cultural expectations, many women faced heightened vulnerability in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami. For instance a significant amount of women reported refusing to take off long dresses or

⁴⁷ Samuel, 2003, p. 177

⁴⁸ Scott, 1990, p.213

⁴⁹ Alston, 2013; Enarson, 2013

bulky clothing that made it difficult for them to swim, in fear of the embarrassment of being rescued naked, many of these women drowned as result.⁵⁰ Gendered cultural restraints such as this, as well as others, make it more difficult for women to respond in the immediate aftermath of disaster.

Israel and Sachs (2013) argue that if international aid agencies continue to operate under the guise of “partial knowledge” with regards to gendered impacts, they cannot adequately manage and respond to disasters. In order to prevent against the further marginalization of vulnerable communities, it is important that foreign aid interventions are able to locate differences and needs between social groups following an environmental disaster.⁵¹ Feminist scholars call for greater engagement with diverse stakeholders and vulnerable populations in disaster planning and relief decision-making.⁵² The adoption of gender quotas within NGOs and government committees is one proposed method of including the voice of women in disaster politics. However this is not necessarily the ‘fix-all’ solution. Scholars and activists are demanding greater commitment to engaging with women and other marginalized stakeholders to ensure their voices are heard in the policy decisions that shape their everyday lives.⁵³ This work is not women’s alone; it falls on the shoulders of men as well.⁵⁴ In a patriarchal world, the impacts of disasters are inherently gendered; international relations policies should recognize and be sensitive to this.

At the time that the 2004 tsunami occurred, women were already actively involved in issues related to displacement, the livelihood of widows, humanitarian aid

⁵⁰ Thurnheer, 2014

⁵¹ Bell, 2013

⁵² Enarson, 2013; Israel & Sachs, 2013

⁵³ Bell, 2013

⁵⁴ De Alwis, 2009; Enarson, 2013

distribution, and gendered violence. However, their wealth of knowledge and experience was largely ignored post-disaster recovery efforts.⁵⁵ Pre-disaster inequalities become unmasked following major environmental disaster, as was illustrated in the literature produced following the tsunami. In an increasingly complex and inter-connected world, disaster studies will need to balance hard science with social science to more effectively analyze and address the needs of those affected by human-made and climate-induced disasters.

Anti-Nationalist Feminism

For a long time scholars have had a contested relationship with nationalism and feminism. Does separatist nationalism in Sri Lanka open space for women's resistance? Or does it instead confine women to the boundaries of nationalist goals and projects, further reinforcing their roles as reproducers and bearers of cultural tradition? The argument adopted by many scholars is that while gendered restrictions exist within this framework, the social transformation of women's roles in armed conflict and activism cannot be denied in Sri Lankan society.⁵⁶ Greater examination of the moments where feminism and nationalism intersect can further this understanding. Especially within the LTTE movement, the transformation of women's roles and status has been widely commented on. In many ways the nationalist framework of the LTTE has allowed women the opportunity to not only participate in the war, but also become more active in their communities, providing space for personal autonomy and advancement. However the extent to which such nationalist movements have resulted in the liberation or

⁵⁵ De Mel, 2008

⁵⁶ Coomaraswamy & Perera-Rajasingham, 2009

emancipation of women is still highly debated among feminists.⁵⁷ Miranda Alison (2003) elaborates on feminist critiques of Tamil nationalist feminism and female combatants insisting that rather than getting caught up in the pros and cons of nationalist feminism, scholars should focus on the transformation female combatants undergo as a result of taking up various roles in the LTTE movement.

Some scholars claim the liberation of women via rejecting traditional gender norms,⁵⁸ while others have paid more attention to LTTE nationalist group's contradictory call for women's equality without thoroughly acknowledging the ways in which women are oppressed within the Tamil nationalist framework.⁵⁹ Sitrlega Maunaguru (1995) takes this one step further by acknowledging the contradictions as well as space such nationalist movements open for feminist debate on gender and oppression in conflict. Rajasingham-Senanyake (2004) adds that this 'new war' has created opportunities for women to engage with new roles and responsibilities, allowing them to re-shape their identities within the nationalist state. Rather than viewing women as agents or victims, oppressed or emancipated, Rajasingham-Senanyake (2004) moves beyond such naïve binaries and adds a nuanced perspective to the literature, which she has termed 'ambivalent empowerment.' She investigates the mechanisms women have used in Sri Lanka to create new spaces for feminist activism within ethnic politics, focusing more explicitly on the "ambiguous spaces of agency and empowerment" that women occupy.⁶⁰

Sri Lankan women have demonstrated their resistance to separatist nationalism by forging interethnic networks that span across internal borders of conflict, ethnicity, and

⁵⁷ Samuel, 2003; Coomaraswamy, 1997

⁵⁸ Samuel, 2003

⁵⁹ Coomaraswamy, 1997

⁶⁰ Rajasingham-Senanyake, 2004, p.164

religion.⁶¹ Together, women are resisting against dominant nationalist and separatist paradigms to create a new vision for Sri Lanka's future. In this thesis I argue that through an anti-nationalist feminist framework women have located opportunities to negotiate patriarchal structures in Sri Lanka to their strategic advantage.⁶² Women are leveraging their resistance, activism, and roles as mothers to redefine how they are seen and heard in Sri Lankan society, raising their private struggle to the public sphere.⁶³

Emergency Rule and A Theory of Resistance

Since conflict first arose between the LTTE and GoSL following independence from British rule, normalcy has been suspended within the country.⁶⁴ Intense conflict and sustained low-level violence has come to characterize the everyday lived experience of those in a war-torn country.⁶⁵ De Mel (2001) has contributed the term "Emergency Rule" to characterize Sri Lanka in the midst of the civil war.⁶⁶ De Mel argues that under such circumstances dissent manifests as internal violence and conflict stir up debate and contestation. Scholars have used the idea of 'emergency rule' to bring attention to the destabilizing nature that conflict and disasters have on shifting social and gender relations over long periods of time.⁶⁷ James Scott's (1990) work on resistance can also be applied under conditions of emergency rule, as he states, "It is in such sequestered settings where, in principle, a shared critique of domination may develop."⁶⁸ In the case of Sri Lanka I

⁶¹ De Mel, 2001

⁶² De Mel, 2001; De Alwis, 2003

⁶³ De Mel, 2001

⁶⁴ De Mel, 2001

⁶⁵ Argenti-Pillen, 2003

⁶⁶ De Mel, 2001, p. 13

⁶⁷ Hydman, 2008; Argenti-Pillen, 2003

⁶⁸ Scott, 1990, p. xi

argue that women came together as mothers during a period of emergency rule and developed a shared critique of the state, to which they publically resisted.

Problematizing International Disaster Aid and Relief

Among many feminist scholars, it is agreed that western methods of providing rehabilitation services, trauma counseling, and addressing the needs of local people, often amount in more harm than good. In post-tsunami Sri Lanka, international relief agencies and NGOs lacked a comprehensive understanding of pre-existing interethnic tensions, local traditional coping mechanisms for trauma, or the gendered consequences of disaster.⁶⁹ Following the disaster, NGOs and humanitarian organizations tended to reinforce women's dependency on men and international aid rather than invest in long-term sustainable solutions that allowed for the economic independence of women or promoted actual political change.⁷⁰ De Alwis & Hedman (2009) warn that if humanitarian aid does not take seriously the geo-political context and history of the countries in which they operate, they risk ingraining themselves into "the fabric of political violence".⁷¹ Because of inadequate planning and unequal aid distribution by foreign aid professionals, interethnic tensions were sparked, causing conflict in the aftermath of the tsunami.⁷²

Even with the help of NGOs in providing services in education, health care, and economic empowerment, many still represented "Neo-Orientalism" to some extent, reinforcing hierarchal structures between the "western donors" and the "native

⁶⁹ Argenti-Pillen, 2003; Bandarage, 2010; Rajasingham-Senanyake, 2004; Thurnheer, 2014; De Mel, 2008

⁷⁰ De Mel, 2001; Thurnheer, 2014; De Alwis & Hedman, 2009

⁷¹ Hyndman, 2009, p. 57

⁷² De Mel, 2008; Thurnheer, 2014; Tierney, 2007; De Alwis & Hedman, 2009, p.57

subjects.”⁷³ In addition to the hierarchal structures of such agencies, the narrative of ‘victimhood’ is highly pervasive in international relief, making it difficult to foster the inclusion of women within political leadership.⁷⁴ Rajasingham-Senanyake (2004) advocates that women’s empowerment will not be achieved at the expense of men and that NGOs must recognize this in their planning and implementation of projects.⁷⁵

Bandarage (2010) is critical of the mechanisms through which gender has been effectively (or not so effectively) mainstreamed in Sri Lankan NGOs, especially during the 2002 peace process. It is not only important to have women present in decision making, but to ensure that the opinions and needs of women from diverse castes, ethnic groups, and economic backgrounds are represented and prioritized in the process. This is especially important with regards to post-crisis reconciliation and development. Scholars warn against the “secondary victimization” of women and the social stigma this carries in post-disaster and post-conflict settings.⁷⁶ Rajasingham-Senanyake (2004) expresses the need to move beyond the representation of women as victims and towards a better understanding of their agency and strength during periods of social stress.

With regards to crisis prevention and management, linking scholars across disciplines is both relevant and pressing. As the literature reflects, there is a need for better communication and collaboration among scholars regarding conflict studies, disaster sociology, gender studies, and international relations. Interdisciplinary analysis is crucial to furthering our collective understanding of disaster in the context of pre-existing conflict and gender relations.

⁷³ Bandarage, 2010, p. 656

⁷⁴ Rajasingham-Senanyake, 2004

⁷⁵ Rajasingham-Senanyake, 2004

⁷⁶ Bandarage, 2010; Rajasingham-Senanyake, 2004, p.151

Sri Lanka as a Case Study

There is an assumption in the literature that violence caused by weapons and violence caused by waves will result in different outcomes—as the case study of Sri Lanka proves, this is incorrect. In the overwhelming majority of large-scale climate-induced disasters, social disparities are magnified and tensions are exacerbated. Sustained crisis in Sri Lanka has generated opportunities for women to enter the public sphere and disrupt traditional gender norms. This thesis examines the strategies women have used to navigate these complex spaces and build social resiliency. Examining the active role of women in coalition building and context sensitive community engagement during the war and after the tsunami, can provide important information and insight to practitioners in the fields of disaster, conflict and crisis management. Looking towards the future, this thesis argues that women must be incorporated in the planning and implementation of humanitarian projects, not only as recipients of aid but as administrators also.

Ethnography of Political Violence

To better contextualize the impact of the 2004 tsunami, I first present an overview of Sri Lanka's history with political violence. After receiving independence from British rule in 1948, competing nationalist interests and armed conflict have been maintained between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam (LTTE). During the pogrom of 1983, also known as “Black July”, the conflict took a brutal turn as 3,000 Tamil people were massacred and thousands more were deported to the North and East of the country by the UNP government and state forces.⁷⁷ From this moment forward violence has been relatively sustained in Sri Lanka,

⁷⁷ *July 1983 Remembered*, 2015

concentrated most in the northern and eastern LTTE controlled regions. In 2002, with the assistance of Norwegian officials, the GoSL and the LTTE agreed upon a “formal but fragile” ceasefire.⁷⁸ The GoSL was still in the midst of peace talk negotiations with the LTTE when the 2004 Tsunami struck, interrupting the process and resulting in increased tensions. As concerns were raised over the distribution of foreign aid and proposed plans for post-disaster development, cease-fire violations escalated and conflict was resumed between the two groups. In August of 2006 undeclared war broke out, but it was not until January 2008 that the Sri Lankan government officially declared the Cease-Fire Agreement void.⁷⁹ On May 18, 2009, after taking control of the entire island and killing Velupillai Prabhakaran, the leader of the LTTE, the GoSL declared a formal end to the twenty-five year long civil war.⁸⁰ In his victory address to parliament, Mahinda Rajapaksa, the Sri Lankan president, declared that the country had finally been ‘liberated’ from terrorism.⁸¹ Unfortunately because no political agreement could be reached, the government took a militarized approach to ending the war. It is estimated that over 7,000 ethnic Tamil civilians were killed between January and May of 2009 in the final and brutal attacks by Sri Lankan government forces.⁸² Following the end to the war, the European United Nations called for an independent investigation into the killings of Sri Lankan civilians, investigating war crimes on both the GoSL and LTTE sides of the conflict.

⁷⁸ *Timeline: History of the Conflict in Sri Lanka*

⁷⁹ De Alwis & Hedman, 2009

⁸⁰ Weaver & Chamberlain, 2009

⁸¹ Weaver & Chamberlain, 2009

⁸² Weaver & Chamberlain, 2009

The Recruitment of Female Combatants

To understand the current status of women in Sri Lanka, it is necessary to observe their contributions and roles in both war and peace activism. Beginning in the 1980s, the LTTE began the recruitment and training of Tamil female-combatants to aid in the fight against the separatist Sinhala-Buddhist state.⁸³ The participation of Tamil women in the LTTE provided unmapped terrain for women to publically display their sacrifice for the Tamil people and their resistance to gendered and ethnic oppression by the state. The founder and leader of the LTTE, Velupillai Prabhakaran, is known especially for having taken a vested interest to increase the number of women included in the military groups training program.⁸⁴ Eventually, LTTE forces consisted of about one-fifth women; this was unprecedented for the time and defied the gendered tradition of war.⁸⁵ In a number of cases, female combatants reported leaving their homes to join the war without the approval of their parents, further defying traditions of patriarchal controls.⁸⁶ Within the LTTE, Women played an active role both behind the scenes and on the frontlines of the civil war, including logistical activities and carrying out suicide bombings.

The transition of women from the private sphere of the home into military training camps and eventually the front lines of combat, has had an indelible impact on the perception of women's capabilities, bravery, and strength. Through engaging in traditionally 'masculine' activities, and confronting patriarchal gendered norms, women have transcended prescribed socio-cultural roles.⁸⁷ As Miranda Alison (2013)

⁸³ Parashar, 2009

⁸⁴ Parashar, 2009

⁸⁵ Parashar, 2009

⁸⁶ Parashar, 2009

⁸⁷ De Mel, 2001

emphasizes, women do not lack agency in this space.⁸⁸ However, while Alison (2013) and Parashar (2009) have chosen to draw attention to the ambivalent spaces of empowerment that open up for women in periods of conflict, other scholars maintain that in this context the availability of choice can be an illusion. For example, Bandarage (2010) argues that while it has been agreed between feminist researchers and activists that women's participation in militant separatist struggle has brought forth a transformation in women's roles, they disagree that women have been able to achieve meaningful empowerment within the male-dominated and controlled LTTE forces.⁸⁹ However, I argue that to measure the significance of women's agency based solely on their ability to achieve full empowerment is impossible. In this case, neither liberation, emancipation, or empowerment are the end goal, rather each are processes and movements that are continuously ongoing.

It is impossible to discuss the recruitment of female combatants without also discussing issues related to choice. Many of the women recruited by the LTTE were younger, in their teens, less educated, and came from poor Dalit (the 'untouchable' class) families.⁹⁰ In Parashar's interviews with ex-female-combatants in Batticaloa, many of them mentioned that joining the LTTE was not completely their decision; it was their only option.⁹¹ Forced conscription was one of the LTTE's primary recruitment tactics. As such, during the insurgency each Tamil family was mandated to send one child to serve in the Tamil cause.⁹² Because sons are more valued than daughters in Sri Lankan society, many families chose to send their daughters to fight. In addition the LTTE provided

⁸⁸ Alison, 2013

⁸⁹ Bandarage, 2010

⁹⁰ Bandarage, 2010

⁹¹ Parashar, 2009

⁹² Bandarage, 2010

incentives, such as food rations tied to military training, forcing many parents to send their children to war than to school.⁹³ Poverty was also a major factor in the level of autonomy some women and young girls had in choosing to enter the ranks of the LTTE.

While it is important to be critical of women's relational autonomy and agency in the context of the LTTE, the symbolic significance and impact of their involvement should not be overlooked. For example through the women's wing of the LTTE, the Freedom Birds, female combatants played a crucial role in the armed force during the war.⁹⁴ The national image of women as peaceful, docile, and weak was quickly ripped away as women became involved in the LTTE fight. As Bandarage reports, "The young women cadres were known for their harsh treatment not only of the ethnic and gender other—the Sinhala males—but also non-LTTE Tamil women, especially women from rival militant organizations."⁹⁵ These women were brutal, unforgiving, and committed to the Tamil cause. In such examples it is clear how women in Sri Lanka have used their agency in periods of crisis to chip away at the base of gender constructions and patriarchal infrastructures. In Sri Lanka the involvement of women in war, a highly gendered space, has aided in this deconstruction.

Disappearances and Killings: A Cause for Resistance

Between the years 1987 to 1991, Sri Lanka experienced an uprising from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a group of Sinhala nationalist youth in opposition to

⁹³ Bandarage, 2010

⁹⁴ Bandarage, 2010

⁹⁵ Bandarage, 2010, p. 658

the actions taken by the Sri Lankan Government.⁹⁶ JVP militants terrorized and murdered anyone who criticized their group or that they suspected of collaborating with the state. In response to the uprising, the Sri Lankan government fought fire with fire, but on a much larger scale. The GoSL enacted a ‘Reign of Terror’ in which anyone suspected of being a ‘subversive’ of the state (i.e. a left-wing activists, playwrights, lawyers, and journalists who were monitoring human rights violations) was murdered or disappeared.⁹⁷

Subsequently, JVP Sinhala youth became a primary target of the government during this time. Between the years, 1988 and 1990, “bodies, rotting on beaches, smoldering in grotesque heaps by the roadsides and floating down rivers, were a daily sight during the height of state repression.”⁹⁸ Second to Iraq, Sri Lanka is reported by the United Nations to have the highest number of disappearances in the world.⁹⁹ During the ‘Reign of Terror,’ the government used disappearances as a way to instill fear and obedience among Sinhalese and Tamil communities. Terror became a formal mechanism of control by the government.

Once someone has disappeared they are never seen again and what happens to their bodies is never fully known. In the documentary, *White Van Stories*, Leena Manimekalai meets with the families of Sri Lanka’s disappeared, interviewing mostly women who have lost their children or spouses to the state. Remarkably, a common theme observable among the women is their refusal to give up the hope that one day their loved ones might return. Many women reported shared experiences of helplessness, watching as their children and husbands were abducted from their homes and taken away

⁹⁶ De Alwis, 1998

⁹⁷ De Mel, 2001

⁹⁸ De Alwis, 1998, p. 152

⁹⁹ Manimekalai, 2013

in un-marked white vans. As the documentary shows, across Sri Lanka, these vans have become a symbol of the oppression and abuse of human rights by the government.¹⁰⁰

Despite the pervasive culture of fear and abuse perpetrated by the Sri Lankan government, women came together as mothers to protest the disappearances of their sons publically. I argue that the magnitude of social stress mothers endured as a result of the kidnappings and murders of their children, created an environment in which they were no longer capable of concealing their opposition to the state. Unified as mother, sisters, and wives, women took to the streets and demanded that justice be served and the government be held accountable. These protests, led by Mother's Fronts, were successful in drawing international attention to the human rights abuses in Sri Lanka. In an effort to draw the media away from such concerns, government representatives would periodically give public statements denying any part in the disappearances and provide reassurance that they were looking into the growing situation. However, as to be expected, these investigations never led to any actual findings.

The term 'disappeared' carries with it the weight of unknowingness and the hope that your loved one could still be alive. One of the woman interviewed in the documentary stated that while she often thought about killing herself after her husband disappeared, the hope that he might return one day kept her fighting. In this woman's journey for answers, she found other mothers. While men were afraid of being detained by the government, it was the women who stepped forward during the reign of terror and confronted the authorities in public protests.¹⁰¹ Together women in both the north and south resisted against human rights abuses by Sri Lankan state forces and demanded that

¹⁰⁰ Manimekalai, 2013

¹⁰¹ De Mel, 2001

justice be served. It was during this period of terror and militancy that the first southern Mother's Front was founded in the province of Matara.¹⁰² Two year later, in 1992, the Mother's Front membership soared to over 25,000.¹⁰³ This marked an incredible transition of women from the private sphere of the home to the public space of protest.

Feminist Cultures of Resistance

Within the Sri Lankan civil war, feminism, and nationalism have had a dynamic relationship. Historically, the nationalist state has sought to suppress the modern woman, for her body is the “discursive terrain on which significant socio-cultural tenets of the nation are produced.”¹⁰⁴ In this sense, to preserve the traditional woman is to preserve the nation. While the GoSL has been proactive to control and oppress women in the nationalist framework, the LTTE widely promoted the liberation of women as one of its primary tenants. However within both organizations a certain level of control over women's bodies is being exercised. The moments in which feminism and nationalism intersect, draw attention to the mechanisms of resistance women are using to oppose their construction as partial citizens in the nationalist patriarchal framework. Dominant nationalism constructs women as the mother's of the feminized nation and the bearers of cultural tradition, which men seek to protect from competing nationalist interests.¹⁰⁵ While the traditional woman is tasked with upholding the nationalist state, the modern woman resists limitations to her advancement imposed by patriarchal institutions. These women are at odds with one another in Sri Lankan society.

¹⁰² De Mel, 2001

¹⁰³ De Mel, 2001

¹⁰⁴ De Mel, 2001, p. 16

¹⁰⁵ De Mel, 2001, p. 2

Kumari Jayawardena, in her work, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, seeks to “‘uncover’ the role played by women in nationalist struggles rather than highlight their subordination within them.”¹⁰⁶ Women in Sri Lanka have taken on a variety of complex roles within the LTTE as female combatants as well as outside of the military on the frontlines of activism as members of Mother’s Fronts. This section introduces the specific strategies women have deployed in opposition to Sri Lankan forces, particularly the use of motherhood and violence. This section identifies how women have redefined traditional expectations, drawn international attention to human right abuses in the country, and elevated their concerns to the political sphere. Using tears on the streets and guns on the battlefield, I argue that these women have deployed both feminine and masculine strategies of resistance to their advantage.

Public Sacrifice and Resistance: Women in the LTTE

In 1983, the LTTE set up its first special unit for women called the *Vituthalai Pulikal Munani* (Women’s Front of the Liberation Tigers) and in 1985 women began to be trained for armed combat.¹⁰⁷ In 1987, following shortly after Vituthalai Pulikal Munani’s initial battle, the LTTE’s leader Velupillai Prabhakaran established the first all-women training camp in Jaffna.¹⁰⁸ This move by the LTTE forwarded a great transformation in the role of women in Sri Lanka. Within the LTTE, and other Tamil militant groups, a strong commitment to linking women’s liberation with the goal of national liberation was expressed.¹⁰⁹ In a speech given by LTTE leader Prabhakaran, he states that “[t]he ideology of women liberation is a child born out of the womb of our

¹⁰⁶ De Aliws, 2003

¹⁰⁷ Alison, 2003

¹⁰⁸ Alison, 2003

¹⁰⁹ Alison, 2003, p. 45

liberation struggle.” to which he also adds, “[t]he Tamil Eelam revolutionary woman has transformed herself as a Tiger for the Liberation of our land and liberation of women. She, like a fire that burns injustices, has taken up arms.”¹¹⁰ While the sincerity of the LTTE’s commitment to women’s liberation is highly debated among scholars, it has great symbolic significance.

In Miranda Alison’s work, *Cogs in the Wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam*, she focuses less so on the LTTE’s recruitment tactics and instead investigates the gender-specific reasons behind women’s choices in joining the movement. I agree with Alison’s perspective that it is in the personal narratives of female combatants that we see true transformation and change taking place. In her analysis, Alison (2003) interviews fourteen female LTTE combatants and ex-combatants to gauge their perspective on liberation within the conflict. While nationalist sentiment may have been one reason behind women’s choice to join the fight of the Tamil Eelam, Alison argues that this sentiment is a “meta-reason for enlisting; beneath this ideological motivation there are also more specific, more personal factors operating.”¹¹¹ She notes that many of the women who chose to join the LTTE cadres also came from families and regions that had been particularly affected by the war, their motivations were both political and personal. In James Scott’s work, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, he emphasizes the importance of the “hidden transcript,” meaning the private spaces in communities where dissent is generated.¹¹² Scott argues that, “neither everyday forms of resistance nor the occasional insurrection can be understood without reference to the

¹¹⁰ Alison, 2003, p. 45

¹¹¹ Alison, 2003, p. 40

¹¹² Scott, 1990, p. xii

sequestered social sites at which such resistance can be nurtured and given meaning.”¹¹³

Many scholars have leapt to the conclusion that female combatants are pawns at the disposal of male LTTE superiors. As Radhika Coomaraswamy states, “[the LTTE women] are not initiators of ideas. They are only implementers of policy made by someone else...”¹¹⁴ This generalization discounts the agency and personal narratives of women who partake in extreme forms of violence. Scott (1990) however suggests that, “To do so is to see the performance as totally determined from above and to miss the agency of the actor in appropriating the performance for his own ends.”¹¹⁵ The majority of women interviewed in Alison’s study that joined the movement voluntarily expressed anger and resentment over the death of loved ones by the Sri Lankan army as a motivating factor in their choice to join the LTTE.

Alison (2003) outlines disruption to education and protection as other important motivating factors reported by female-combatants. A number of the women interviewed stated that because of displacement caused by the war and discrimination against Tamil youth in university entrance, access to higher education was limited. Five of the fourteen women interviewed listed disruption to education as a primary reason for joining the LTTE. One woman reported explicitly that she joined the movement because “She does not want this disruption to education to happen to future generations and wanted to help end this.”¹¹⁶ Another reason behind women’s participation was shared anger and fear towards the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF), which had raped and molested hundreds of Tamil women between 1987-1990 in the northeast. In one interview, a woman

¹¹³ Scott, 1990,

¹¹⁴ Parashar, 2009, p. 241

¹¹⁵ Scott, 1990, p. 34

¹¹⁶ Alison, 2003, p. 42

explained that fear of sexual violence was a primary motivating factors for joining the movement; she stated that, “Everyone has to protect themselves.”¹¹⁷ As a female she also saw it as her responsibility to fight for the protection of other Tamil women from the IPKF occupation.¹¹⁸ These examples prove that women could no longer sit idly as their community’s continued to be threatened and their opportunities limited. The social stress generated by the conflict motivated women to take up arms of their own, to fight against the atrocities of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces and IPKF in their communities, and participate in the struggle for Tamil liberation. Alison’s interviews show that in joining the LTTE armed forces Tamil women found psychological release, a space to exercise transgressive agency, and a sense of protection. Interestingly women reported becoming more aware of the issues affecting women after having joined the LTTE movement.¹¹⁹

In contrast to Alison’s work, Radhika Commaraswamy (1997) argues that no peace or justice can be achieved in society unless feminism is linked to humanism and non-violence.¹²⁰ In addition to Commaraswamy, Darini Rajasingham-Senanyake (2001) also cautions scholars to be wary of assertions that women’s empowerment and peace can come from acts of violence and injustice.¹²¹ For a long time feminist scholars have had a contested relationship with women’s involvement in war. Likewise, Swati Parashar (2009) discourages the glorification of female warriors, arguing that “The identity of women militants is multilayered, constructed by the societies they come from, by the militant and political extremist groups they are part of, and by the dominant media

¹¹⁷ Alison, 2003, p. 43

¹¹⁸ Alison, 2003

¹¹⁹ Alison, 2003

¹²⁰ Commaraswamy, 1997

¹²¹ Rajasingham-Senanyake, 2001

images that romanticize and feminize them.”¹²² While women’s involvement in the LTTE may not have resulted in the overall emancipation or liberation of women in Sri Lanka, I argue it created space for *liberating* experiences during the conflict. A pattern Alison (2003) noticed during her fieldwork is that “Tiger women have an air of quiet assurance and confidence that is not necessarily obvious in other women; even the way they carry themselves is different.”¹²³ This subtle change in women’s attitudes and actions is significant. The involvement of women in the LTTE armed forces not only changed the way society saw them but also how they viewed their own capacity for action.

Female Suicide Bombers: An Examination of Empowerment

During the civil war, women made up one-third of the LTTE’s suicide unit.¹²⁴ In committing extreme acts of self-sacrifice, these brave women broke down taboos and impositions of female identity. As De Mel (2001) states, these moments “acquire particular significance during national crises.”¹²⁵ Within the LTTE, martyr became synonymous with honored hero.¹²⁶ What impact has this “grammar of recruitment” had on the women who are chosen to preform the task? De Mel argues that such acts “can be viewed as an agentive moment in the militant’s life, the pinnacle in a career of dedication.”¹²⁷ While coercion is likely to play a role in women’s ‘sacrifice,’ I argue that the choices women make in this space are often more complex. Dhanu is one of the most well known female suicide bombers in the LTTE. When she was just seventeen years old,

¹²² Parashar, 2009, p. 253

¹²³ Alison, 2003, p. 48

¹²⁴ Bandarage, 2010

¹²⁵ De Mel, 2001, p. 212

¹²⁶ De Mel, 2001

¹²⁷ De Mel, 2001, p. 225

she carried out an attack on Rajiv Gandhi, the former Indian Prime Minister.¹²⁸ While her suicide was one of sacrifice, it was equally if not more so, one of revenge. After the attack, the LTTE came forward stating that Dhanu chose to avenge herself after being raped by members of the IPKF who had been sent to Sri Lanka under the supervision of Gandhi.¹²⁹

A rising concern however, among feminist scholars is that women are socialized to be altruistic suicide-bombers. Rajasingham-Sananayake (2004) argues that women in groups like the LTTE, “tend to subordinate their gender identities to the nationalist cause.”¹³⁰ She argues that because women have been socialized in patriarchal and Asian culture to put themselves second, women are more likely to sacrifice themselves. While this may be true to some extent, the reductionist nature of this statement risks discounting women’s legitimate political grievances and transformative potential in war and extreme acts of violence.

In the fourth clause of the LTTE’s Women’s Manifesto, one of the tenets listed is to “Ensure that women control their own lives.”¹³¹ De Mel (2001) critiques this claim and those made by Velupillai Pribakaran, the leader of the LTTE and founder of the Women’s Military unit of the Liberation Tigers. She states that despite these declarations for equality and liberation, Pribakaran is only the “midwife of their agency” reinforcing the “gender hierarchies which keep women in reliance on men...”¹³² While De Mel (2001) recognizes the complex nature of female combatants in her work, I disagree with the absolute nature of this statement. I argue that women’s empowerment is a process,

¹²⁸ Bandarage, 2010

¹²⁹ Bandarage, 2010

¹³⁰ Rajasingham-Sananayake, 2004, p. 163

¹³¹ De Mel, 2001, p. 222

¹³² De Mel, 2001, p. 222

which occurs along a spectrum. Women are continuously conforming, transforming, and re-creating themselves in the face of patriarchy and in their resistance to it. It is important to critique the structures that limit women's potential for agency, but scholars must be cautious of how these limitations are perpetuated in their work. For instance, Parashar (2009) argues that in the case of female suicide bombers, their identities and politics are reduced to their bodies and sexuality. She states that, "It would seem to suggest that there is no possibility of emancipatory politics for women in the LTTE ranks."¹³³ To argue that women have completely 'defeminized' themselves in armed combat or are completely at the will of the LTTE risks overlooking matters of choice and agency in such movements. My intention is not to glorify the actions of female suicide bombers, but to draw attention to the questions their involvement raises and how they have transformed the perception of women in Sri Lankan society.

Backing Away from Binaries: Women in War

"Looking at women as vulnerable, passive and acted upon...reinforces the maleness of agency."¹³⁴

In the literature on conflict, but also environmental disaster, women are overwhelmingly depicted as victims of cultural traditions, gendered stereotypes, the state, nationalist struggle, and other patriarchal structures. However, the situation is far more complex. Even so, Parashar (2009) states, "Feminist International Relations can't deconstruct the identities of women militants and engage with their violent politics without endorsing or condoning it in any way."¹³⁵ While it is important to understand how women are vulnerable to certain forms of violence, it is equally important that their

¹³³ Parashar, 2009, p. 242

¹³⁴ Tuana, 2013, p. 29

¹³⁵ Parashar, 2009, p.254

strengths individually and collectively are recognized in the face of adversity. Significant social stress in Sri Lanka has shown to generate resistance to state sanctioned violence and provided an opportunity to for women to transform their social and political identities. I agree with Parashar that with regards to women in crisis, “The reality is somewhere in between the binaries of agency and victimhood, private and public, voice and silence...”¹³⁶ Given choices under conditions of social stress, I argue that Sri Lankan women have chosen to abandon cultures of patriarchy.

The case of female LTTE suicide bombers raise concerns among feminist scholars when matters of agency and empowerment are brought forward. In Charles Sarvan’s famous short story, *Appointment with Rajiv Gandhi*, he tells the story of Dhanu, the female LTTE suicide bomber who killed Rajiv Gandhi, the prime minister of India.¹³⁷ While Dhanu’s story is true, Sarvan adds his own commentary and backstory to the historic event. In one part of the story Dhanu reflects on her decision to participate in the suicide bombing, expressing that:

The world will think me ugly in what it’ll call my fanaticism. Wild, lunatic eyed and with disheveled hair, or frightening in my cold control, my cruel composure. Dressed for a wedding or festival, with flowers in my hair, I have pretended not to notice male eyes looking at me, but have felt warm in my womanhood; felt happy, felt even a touch of pride and power. I may not be a beauty but I was, have been, a woman.¹³⁸

While this story is fictional, the details of the Dhanu’s dress, adorned with flowers, are not. Her attire was meant to be symbolic in the same way that her actions were. In De Mel’s analysis of Sarvan’s story, she claims that Dhanu’s act of terror can be seen as an empowering one:

¹³⁶ Parashar, 2009, p. 254

¹³⁷ De Mel, 2001

¹³⁸ De Mel, 2001, p. 204

Through it she will break with an oppressive tradition. Unlike the usual arranged marriages, *she* will choose her bridegroom; unlike the usual traditional virgin bride, she will be touched by men before her ‘wedding’; unlike the modest women who shuns publicity, her photograph will be flashed in the world press; unlike other Hindu women, she will walk to the site of the numerous funerals, including her own.¹³⁹

But what is the price of such ‘freedom’? This is the question De Mel attempts to answer in her work. In what ways does Sarvan’s historical fiction capture the reality of Dhanu’s sacrifice? How have the actions of Dhanu, and other female suicide bombers like her, provided ambiguous and liberating spaces for empowerment? Rather than presenting an argument as to whether or not Dhanu was empowered, scholars should focus on the indisputable significance of her sacrifice.

Women in the LTTE chose to embody resistance in different ways. In the poem, *She the Woman of the Tamil EELAM*, written by Vanati, a female captain of the armed wing of the LTTE, she depicts her personal reality and that of fellow female fighters:

Her forehead shall be adorned
not with kunkunman (but) with red blood.
All that is seen in her eyes
is not the sweetness of youth (but) the tombs of the dead.
Her lips shall utter
not useless sentences
(but) firm declarations of those who have fallen down.
On her neck will lay
no tali, (but) a Cyanide capsule!
She has embraced
not men, (but) weapons!
Her legs are going and searching,
not for searching a relationship with relatives
(but) looking towards the liberation of the soil of Tamililam
Her gun will fire shots.
No failure will cause the enemy to fall!
It will break the fetters of Tamililam!!
Then from out people’s lips
a national anthem will tone up!!!¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ De Mel, 2001, p. 204

¹⁴⁰ Vanati, poem: *She the Woman of the Tamil EELAM*

This poem offers important insight to the perception of honor within the LTTE and the power of women to redefine what is expected of them. In this poem Vanati characterizes a woman who has rejected conventional gender norms and is in the process of reconstructing her identity. As De Mel states, she has “embraced a language of death and militancy where there is no place for squeamishness and coyness. Her sexual energy is directed at ushering in a new state and dispensation, not preserving old familial ties.”¹⁴¹ Women’s involvement in the LTTE illustrates a vast departure from the tradition behavior of Tamil women. Under extreme social stress, these women have chosen to resist the status quo, take up arms, and become agents in the fight for social change.

Within the discourse on women in war, scholars have had difficulty reconciling the roles of women in peace activism with those in armed combat. Parashar (2009) states that, “Women are often labeled as inherently peaceful and their violence is explained as the consequence of male victimization and maneuvering.”¹⁴² Such labels depict women as lacking personal political motivation or nationalist aspirations, presenting a major obstacle to their agency. Parashar (2009) advocates for IR feminists to deconstruct traditional binaries and be open to the multitude of roles women perform during periods of social stress. Parashar emphasizes that:

The ‘personal’ and the ‘political’ interact and influence each other. To exclude these voices implies imposing value judgments of what is ‘acceptable’ in women’s lives and behavior. Recognizing only certain kinds of women’s activities is a problematic framework of gendered enquiry that strips women of difference and renders them powerless.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ De Mel, 2001, p. 207

¹⁴² Parashar, 2009, p. 251

¹⁴³ Parashar, 2009, p. 252

Parashar's point here is critical for feminist IR scholars to bear in mind. We cannot mainstream women's voices effectively into discussions of peace if we do not understand their motivations for violence. The field of Feminist IR must accept the diversity and legitimacy of women's experiences in conflict so that the women's participation in violence is no longer marginalized, but rather understood through the lens of agency.

Gendered Struggle and Public Resistance: The Rise of Women's Groups

Over the last several decades, women in Sri Lanka have made their presence known in the political and public sphere. Female-led organizations have been overwhelmingly successful in speaking across geopolitical and methodological borders to address issues of nationalism, militarization, and gender violence in the context of war.¹⁴⁴ Periods of increased trauma and social stress have resulted in new opportunities for resistance among women of all ethnic groups and classes. The formation of the Women's Action Committee (WAC) in 1982 (a coalition of women's groups, women NGO activists, church groups, women writers, and academics) marked the beginning of contemporary feminist peace activism in Sri Lanka.¹⁴⁵ Soon after WAC's formation, the groups created the "Women for Peace 1984" petition which received over 10,000 signatures from women across all ethnicities, calling for an end to the civil war.¹⁴⁶ However, the WAC was eventually forced to disband after supporting the controversial entrance of the IPKF to Sri Lanka as well as after having received serious threats from the JVP.¹⁴⁷ After a period of hiatus, these women re-emerged in 1989 when the group Mothers and Daughters of Lanka (MDL) was formed. Similar to the WAC, the MDL

¹⁴⁴ Giles, 2003

¹⁴⁵ Bandarage, 2010

¹⁴⁶ Bandarage, 2010

¹⁴⁷ Bandarage, 2010

worked primarily on creating a political platform for devolution and to negotiate an end to the war.¹⁴⁸ During the same year that the WAC was formed, Tamil women in the Northern city of Jaffna mobilized the first Mother's Front.¹⁴⁹ Two years after the formation of the WAC, in 1984 the Northern Mother's Front was formed in Jaffna and six years later in 1990, Sinhalese women expanded the Mother's Front in the southern province of Matara.¹⁵⁰ While these women's organizations oppose dominant nationalism, it is important to remember that they also function within it.

The Mother's Front: The Politics and Strategy of Motherhood

The emergence of Mother's Fronts during the height of the Reign of Terror demonstrated tremendous courage. During this time Tamil women in the north and Sinhalese women in the south took to the streets and demanded justice for the arbitrary disappearances and murders of their sons by Sri Lankan state forces, the LTTE, and IPKF.¹⁵¹ Wenona Giles, a prominent feminist scholar, explains that "In times of war and socio-political insecurity, the figure of the mother becomes a central signifier of racial and cultural values, national pride and purity, and is intrinsically connected in this way to the nation's honor."¹⁵² While historically the Sri Lankan government has used motherhood as a tactic of oppression, members of the Mother's Front chose to reclaim motherhood as a site of protest, demonstrating their collective unity and potential. Through public activism and the deployment of "Mother Politics", women brought about significant changes in the balance of political power.¹⁵³ While motherhood might not be

¹⁴⁸ De Mel, 2001

¹⁴⁹ Samuel, 2003

¹⁵⁰ Samuel, 2003

¹⁵¹ Bandarage, 2010

¹⁵² Giles, 2003, p. 167

¹⁵³ Giles, 2003

the most transformative feminist tactic, I argue that it was effective in elevating the concerns of women and offered a certain level of protection in a politically unstable and dangerous context.

The politicization of motherhood brought women together across ethnic, religious, and socio-economic divides. Together mothers identified a common cause and drew international attention to the disappearances of their children.¹⁵⁴ Some scholars critique the use of motherhood as a strategy and de-value it as a ‘safe tactic.’ I argue however, that the deployment of motherhood acted as a necessary safeguard against state brutality and allowed women to form inter-ethnic linkages in the ethno-nationalist context of Sri Lanka. In James Scott’s work, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, he states that “Conformity in the face of domination is thus occasionally—and unforgettably—a question of suppressing a violent rage in the interest of oneself and loved ones.”¹⁵⁵ While women might have expressed varying degrees of rage publically, they had to be careful of where and how they did so. Motherhood as a strategy allowed women to balance the need to protection with that of remaining heard domestically and internationally. In the North, after 800 Tamil Youth were abducted and transported to the south, Tamil women mobilized and formed the Northern Mother’s Front. Shortly after the group was formed, over five thousand women marched to the Kahecheri building (where the Government Agent’s office was located), it was reported that, “in a mood of militancy and anger, the women stormed the office of the GA, climbed onto his conference table, and read their demands to him...the Minister was forced to assure the mothers that their

¹⁵⁴ De Mel, 2001

¹⁵⁵ Scott, 1990, p. 37

children would be returned within the week.”¹⁵⁶ The international attention attracted by the mothers of the disappeared, combined with the government’s efforts to cover up human rights abuses, afforded women both moral legitimacy and political protection in activism.

Defying Nationalist Hegemony: Pluralist Tactics in a Separatist Conflict

One of the most important aspects of the women’s movement in Sri Lanka has been their ability to form coalitions and defy homogenization through the diversity of the movement.¹⁵⁷ Within the Mother’s Front especially, pluralism was an essential tactic in advocating for an end to the separatist conflict in Sri Lanka because of its inconsistency with the goals of Sri Lankan separatist nationalism. In its extreme form, nationalism “negates difference and diversity, forging an identity and a politics that will brook no dissent.”¹⁵⁸ As can be seen in the efforts of the Mother’s Fronts, feminist peace activists sought to disrupt nationalist homogeneity through the incorporation of diverse stakeholders in their movement.

James Scott states that, “geographical separation, linguistic differences, or fear...impede the growth of an elaborate, shared hidden transcript” because of this, “the explosive realm of public defiance is nearly the only social site where communication among subordinates is possible.”¹⁵⁹ In the case of Sri Lanka women found their collective voice within the larger group of mothers. Together they organized across geographic and political borders. In the following section, I will discuss how the organizational capacity

¹⁵⁶ Samuel, 2003, p. 169

¹⁵⁷ De Mel, 2001

¹⁵⁸ Coomaraswamy & Perera-Rajasingham, 2009, p. 108

¹⁵⁹ Scott, 1990, p. 217

of women developed during the civil war proved an essential basis for meeting the needs of impacted communities following the 2004 tsunami.

When Waves Crash on a Broken Shore

When the tsunami struck Sri Lanka's shore in 2004, Sri Lanka was already broken. Not only had 80,000 people been killed and more than 800,000 people displaced, shortly after the disaster war was resumed in 2006. The ceasefire agreement signed between the GoSL and LTTE in 2002 quickly fell apart as tensions mounted over foreign aid. During the second phase of the war, another estimated 21,000 people were killed followed by tens of thousands more in the final military campaigns of 2009.¹⁶⁰ In total, over 101,000 people were killed in Sri Lanka between 2004 and 2009. The tsunami did not occur in a vacuum. With the influx of foreign aid focused solely on victims of the tsunami, previously Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from the war who were not tsunami-affected received little, if any, aid.¹⁶¹ Competition and tensions arose due to aid reserved for those affected by the tsunami *versus* those affected by the war.¹⁶² The lack of gender, political, and socio-cultural sensitivity by international relief, furthered conflict in the country.

The Gendered Terrain of Disaster

Kathleen Thurnheer, an anthropologist who has written significantly on violence and disaster in Sri Lanka, states that while disasters discriminate based on established differences such as class, caste, gender, ethnicity and age, "ultimately, power

¹⁶⁰ Thurnheer, 2014

¹⁶¹ Hyndman, 2009

¹⁶² Thurnheer, 2014

relationships lie at the core of a disaster's impact."¹⁶³ The 2004 tsunami was one of largest recorded to hit parts of India, Africa, and South East Asia.¹⁶⁴ In the aftermath of the disaster, it was estimated that approximately three times as many women as men were killed between the ages of sixteen and thirty years old.¹⁶⁵ This sparked concern among scholars and spurred an academic movement to look at gendered data in disasters more closely to better understand the multiple layers of women's vulnerability. As such gender relationships have become a part of the "deep social grammar" that disasters reveal in their aftermaths.¹⁶⁶

When determining who is most vulnerable in a disaster situation, it is important to look at who has the least assets and capacity to adapt to such changes. By this equation, women who work as subsistence farmers and land managers in the rural north and east worn-torn territories are the most vulnerable, provided their dependent position on their land, in most cases their husband, and the responsibility to their family to provide food, care, water, etc. As stated by Chew, in *Caught in the Storm: The Impact of Natural Disasters on Women*, in countries similar to Sri Lanka:

Women are especially likely to work in agricultural industry or the informal economy, both of which tend to be heavily impacted by natural disasters. Due to this fact and their lower educational and literacy levels, they are overrepresented among those who end up unemployed. Due to their care taking responsibilities, they are not free to relocate in search of work. As a result, they are vulnerable to impoverishment, forced marriage, labor exploitation and trafficking.¹⁶⁷

In addition, due to head-of-household rules governing eligibility for assistance, after the tsunami women who had become widowed were put at a significant disadvantage in their

¹⁶³ Thurnheer, 2014, p. 110

¹⁶⁴ Pickrell, 2005

¹⁶⁵ Hydman, 2008

¹⁶⁶ Thurnheer, 2014

¹⁶⁷ Chew, 2005, p. 3

recovery. Inheritance and property laws also limited women's ability to acquire assets.¹⁶⁸ Women play key roles in their homes and communities, as Elaine Enarson, an expert on disaster sociology states, "women are significant economic actors whose time, efforts, and income sustain life for others, and their economic losses impact overall household and community recovery after disasters".¹⁶⁹ Enarson emphasizes that the inclusion of women in development projects, relief efforts, and decision-making is critical to move entire communities forward.

In addition to lacking certain financial resources to adapt, due to cultural norms and socialization women were placed in especially vulnerable positions when the waves struck. In addition to wearing restrictive and long clothing, which made it difficult to swim, many women lacked certain survival skills (generally taught to males) such as tree climbing and swimming¹⁷⁰. A number of women also reported being unable to evacuate their homes in time because they were traveling with smaller children who could not walk or run as fast.

Pre-Existing Gender-Biased Policies: Socio-Economic Vulnerability

In comparison with other South Asian countries, women in Sri Lanka rank highly in terms of literacy and health. However, these rankings do not necessarily equate to economic or social security. Studies show that in post disaster circumstances women often face heightened risk of inequality and violence. According to scholarship conducted on ecofeminism and natural disasters in Sri Lanka, policies that favor men financially such as gender-biased inheritance allow for a culture where women are forced to remain

¹⁶⁸ Tierney, 2007

¹⁶⁹ Enarson, 2000, p. 9

¹⁷⁰ Thurnheer, 2014

dependent on men for their survival.¹⁷¹ For instance, “many Sri Lankan women whose husbands died in the tsunami were left without their former property because of inhibition under Sharia law prohibiting women from property inheritance.¹⁷² This is just one example of how pre-existing structures made it more difficult for women to cope and adapt, women are more vulnerable not because they are less capable but because they have been historically and structurally disadvantaged in society. Because of these restraints on women, resources allocated towards building their economic and adaptation capacity should be prioritized.

In times of crisis, how are women’s specific needs supposed to be met when there are no women included in decision-making process in disaster risk management? If their voices are not heard, their needs are more likely to be overlooked in relief and recovery.

According to a 2004 report in Sri Lanka:

Only 0.6% of the female labor force was employed at the senior administrative and management level, in comparison to 1.6% of their male counterparts. Women comprise only 5% of the Parliament and occupy 2% of the provisional and local government positions (Asian Development Bank 2004).¹⁷³

These conditions are reflected both in disaster impact and recovery, which show clear disparities between men and women. Unfortunately, experiences such as this are not unique among women in Sri Lanka and other Central and South Asian countries. With inadequate assistance following a natural disaster, women’s already numerous responsibilities are increased, leaving them with even less time than was available before for them to become involved outside of the gendered sphere of the home. Investment must be made in this area to help increase women’s access and presence in decision-

¹⁷¹ Banford & Froude, 2015

¹⁷² Banford & Froude, 2015

¹⁷³ Ariyabandu, 2005, p.3

making.

Even among women, vulnerability differs significantly. In Kanchana Ruwanpura's research, *Temporality of Disasters: The Politics of women's Livelihoods 'after' the 2004 Tsunami in Sri Lanka*, she argues that women's responses in times of disaster must be contextualized, stating that, "Women in the various ethnic groups are likely to have experienced the tsunami differently."¹⁷⁴ In her work, Ruwanpurna (2008) examined Hikkaduwa and Batticaloa, two badly impacted regions on the southern and eastern coast of Sri Lanka. Ruwanapurna chose to conduct her research in these two distinct regions, "to capture and represent the multifaceted aspects of regional discrepancies and spatial specificities" in the aftermath of the tsunami.¹⁷⁵ She defines natural disasters as not just cutting across gendered landscapes, but ethnonationalist ones as well.¹⁷⁶ Hikkaduwa and Batticaloa are both coastal towns, however, Hikkaduwa is popular among tourists and has been more successful economically, as opposed to Batticaloa, which is "is located in a severely depressed part of the country that in recent times has been subjected to the ravages of the 'ethnic war' in multiple ways".¹⁷⁷ After the tsunami the Sri Lankan government declared that there would be a two hundred meter buffer zone established in the Tamil and Muslim dominated Eastern Province (Batticaloa) and only a one hundred meter buffer zone in the southern Sinhala majority and tourist heavy province (Hikkaduwa). This decision caused unequal displacement and setbacks, outraging a number of people in the Batticaloa province who felt that the government was

¹⁷⁴ Ruwanpura, 2008, p. 327

¹⁷⁵ Ruwanpura, 2008, p. 326

¹⁷⁶ Ruwanpura, 2008

¹⁷⁷ Ruwanpura, 2008, p. 327

systematically disadvantaging them.¹⁷⁸ The institute for Policy Studies in Colombo stated that, “if public safety was the prevailing aim, the buffer zones should have been equal for all areas”.¹⁷⁹ ‘No-build zones’ were also larger in Batticaloa, which impacted the community’s ability to reconstruct their livelihoods following the tsunami.¹⁸⁰

In a study of 200 homes in Batticaloa, it was found that 80% of the people who died in the tsunami were women, in addition to the loss of lives, “women’s wealth, often in the form of gold jewelry (but also bicycles), was also swept away by the destructive waves”.¹⁸¹ The loss of lives and capital among women was grave throughout Sri Lanka and was more severe in marginalized communities, such as Batticaloa. Women who were widowed after the tsunami faced significant challenges in accessing emergency relief and overcoming cultural stigmatization. In the aftermath of the tsunami, “52.2 percent of Sinhala women heads interviewed were widows, 67.2 percent of Tamil women and 61 percent of Muslim women heads were widows”.¹⁸² Jennifer Hydman (2008), a researcher on feminism, conflict, and disasters in post tsunami Sri Lanka, advocates for greater analysis of the power relations between men and women that result in social reproduction and deep-rooted inequality. Hydman’s states that, “The practices of aid, policy and history which position certain groups of people in hierarchical relation to others are not easily unraveled”.¹⁸³ However, Hydman (2008) suggests that through a feminist lens and approach these structures can be disassembled.

¹⁷⁸ Hydman, 2008

¹⁷⁹ Hydman, 2008, p. 108

¹⁸⁰ Hydman, 2008

¹⁸¹ Hydman, 2008, p. 108

¹⁸² Hydman, 2008, p. 112

¹⁸³ Hydman, 2008, p. 118

Increased Ethnic Tensions

According to the 2001 Sri Lanka Census of Population and Housing, out of the 18 total districts in Sri Lanka it is estimated that about 82% of the population are Sinhalese, 4.3% are Sri Lanka Tamil, 5.1% are Indian Tamil, and the remaining 8.6% consists of smaller minority groups including Burghers, Moors, and Malays.¹⁸⁴ When the waves struck Sri Lanka, the eastern and northern coastlines were hit hardest.¹⁸⁵ During the civil war in Sri Lanka these same coastlines were where the majority of violent battles were fought between the LTTE and the state. In the aftermath of the tsunami Tamil communities in the north and east were tasked not only with the recovery of one disaster, but two.

As foreign aid flowed into the country, its distribution was shaped unevenly by the pre-existing political geography. Hyndman (2009) argues, and I agree, “Without a strong understanding of ‘new political formations emerging on the global periphery,’ humanitarian aid will be incorporated into the fabric of political violence.”¹⁸⁶ This was precisely the case in Sri Lanka, where the concentration of aid in the hands of the government sparked resentment and polarization within the LTTE.¹⁸⁷ In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami the LTTE and GoSL had agreed to a joint mechanism to distribute aid, the Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS), however this plan was never actually implemented.¹⁸⁸ Regional aid was prioritized not based on need; instead the areas that were politically more dominant (i.e. Sinhalese communities in

¹⁸⁴ <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/pophousat/pdf/population/p9p8%20ethnicity.pdf>

¹⁸⁵ Thurnheer, 2014

¹⁸⁶ Hyndman, 2009, p. 57

¹⁸⁷ Thurnheer, 2014

¹⁸⁸ Thurnheer, 2014

the south) saw more access to relief personnel, humanitarian items, and financial aid.¹⁸⁹ A year following the tsunami it was reported by a local aid official that, in the southern province of Hambantota, agencies were constructing 4,478 homes even though only 2,445 were needed. As this was happening in the south, in the Tamil district of Ampara (reported to have been hit hardest by the tsunami), only 3,136 homes were being built for over 18,000 families whose homes had been destroyed.¹⁹⁰ Following the norm in large-scale environmental disasters, NGOs implemented band-aid solutions rather than used their resources and power to promote political solutions and long-term reconstruction.¹⁹¹ As such, devastation caused by the tsunami and insensitive relief operations, led to further conflict and lives lost across Sri Lanka.

Role of Women in Meeting Survivor Needs

In post-tsunami Sri Lanka, I argue local female-led organizations were more effective than formal aid institutions in meeting the diverse needs of women and marginalized communities. Their prior-experiences working during the conflict years provided them with a level of sensitivity and consciousness that lacked in foreign aid interventions. Women's activism for human rights provided a useful frame of reference, enabling them to "draw attention to the contiguities between the political and 'natural' disasters of the war and the tsunami, and to go beyond the actual events themselves towards a feminist understanding of their impact as dynamic processes that affect women in particular gendered ways."¹⁹² In this section I uncover the

¹⁸⁹ Thurnheer, 2014

¹⁹⁰ Hyndman, 2009

¹⁹¹ Thurnheer, 2014

¹⁹² De Mel, 2008, p. 252

critical role women's groups played in responding to the tsunami and how this was influenced by their activity during the war.

When the tsunami occurred, women's organizations were already deeply embedded in women's issues in Sri Lanka, such as gendered violence, displacement, and the livelihoods of widows. This prior knowledge formed the basis for their work following the disaster. As Del Mel (2008) states, "A significant feminist trend in this post-tsunami activity... drew from prior experience in the work of gender and human rights in the context of armed violence."¹⁹³ In addition to pre-existing organizations including, the Coalition for Assisting Tsunami Affected Women (CATAW) was formed. CATAW is an example of a feminist group that saw its purpose as linking developmental and rehabilitation goals with human rights.¹⁹⁴ This group was one of the only ones to send out a fact-finding team to gather specific information on the impacts of the tsunami on women.¹⁹⁵ Most of CATAW's work took place in conflict areas and focused on bringing awareness to women about their rights through legal clinics.¹⁹⁶ CATAW also advocated that the state allow women complete ownership over personal property or at least joint-ownership with their husband, or children if they were widowed.¹⁹⁷ However, due to some ethnic bias of the CATAW, Tamil and Muslim women have been relatively more aware of their rights than less dominant ethnic minorities such as the Burghers (who were less directly involved in the war).¹⁹⁸ While CATAW assisted in meeting the immediate needs of women and providing important

¹⁹³ De Mel, 2008, p. 247

¹⁹⁴ De Mel, 2008

¹⁹⁵ De Mel, 2008

¹⁹⁶ De Mel, 2008

¹⁹⁷ De Mel, 2008

¹⁹⁸ De Mel, 2008

information related to women's rights—the goals and mission of the organization moving forward would be benefited by a more progressive agenda, using disaster as a way to promote women's advancement rather than a return to pre-tsunami status quo.

Apart from the efforts of CATAW, another approach to promoting participation among women and address gendered disparities after the tsunami was the development of “women-to-women” groups, in which female survivors were provided a space to come together:

With a larger group of women involved in the initiative to discuss ideas. Content of the groups included sharing experiences of violence and abuse as well as resilience and the promotion of safety. Such a modality of providing a context for the voice of women's resilience and perspective is critical in highlighting and addressing gendered structures that enable violence to continue.¹⁹⁹

Programs like this not only provide opportunities to build adaptation capacity, but to also validate women's experiences and support one another following intense trauma. In recent years, numerous scholars have contributed research on programs that have been successful in empowering and meeting women's needs. These programs emphasize the multiple needs and skills of women as well as the importance of sharing their stories and working together.

International Disaster Relief- Moving Forward From Sri Lanka

In contrast to the war years, Sri Lanka experienced a massive influx of foreign aid following the tsunami. The internal shock of the disaster was so immediately devastating that it resulted in the marginalization of war-related deaths as tsunami relief efforts became increasingly politicized.²⁰⁰ Regardless of whether or not aid agencies explicitly

¹⁹⁹ Banford & Froude, 2015, p. 179

²⁰⁰ De Mel, 2008

considered the war in their agenda setting, it was certainly a factor in the uneven distribution of aid across ethnic and party lines.

Within international aid agencies women are overwhelmingly labeled as victims. This narrative is both pervasive and problematic, creating a dependent culture in which women rely on relief handouts rather than building their own capacities and lives outside of the dominant aid framework.²⁰¹ Ironically, in such circumstances relief actually incites more harm than good. It reinforces the dependency syndrome, assisting in short term livelihood solutions without providing the actual resources or tools necessary to meet long-term needs. For example, rather than helping to promote positive changes in social relations, international aid agencies found it easier replace boats that had been lost instead.²⁰²

While NGOs provide a number of services, such as education, health care, and economic empowerment, it has been critiqued by Asoka Bandarage (2010) that many still “represent a form of ‘Neo-Orientalism,’ upholding the long-standing hierarchal power dynamics between the Western donors and native subjects.”²⁰³ In Argenti-Pillen’s work, *Masking Terror: How Women Contain Violence in Southern Sri Lanka*, she studies Euro-American methods of dealing with trauma survivors during the war. These findings are equally relevant in the context of the tsunami. Argenti-Pillen argues that the Euro-American methods used by foreign NGOs pose a threat to culture-specific methods local women use to contain violence.²⁰⁴ Not only must foreign NGOs and international aid

²⁰¹ Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2004

²⁰² Hyndman, 2009

²⁰³ Bandarage, 2010, p. 656

²⁰⁴ Argenti-Pillen, 2003

agencies navigate the political terrain of Sri Lanka sensitively, but also the cultural terrain.

Male dominance in relief and recovery work, as well as in important decision-making, is a central issue in Disaster Risk Management (DRM). A major concern in male dominated decision-making is the likelihood of erroneous gender assumptions. Madhavi Ariyabandu (2005), an expert on gender issues in recovery following the 2004 tsunami, worries that these “assumptions by policy makers and practitioners may not only deny benefits to women, but also worsen the situation for women, in terms of their social and economic position”.²⁰⁵ Systematic exclusion on this level must be addressed in order for disaster risk management to be streamlined effectively and for relief to be administered equitably.

Conclusions

This thesis examines multidimensional vulnerability and agency among women as it is exposed during periods of sustained social stress in Sri Lanka. A more complete understanding women’s agency and organizational capacity in this context can enhance disaster risk management and response to be more effective in responding to the needs of impacted communities, not only in Sri Lanka but around the world. I advocate that the development and international relief community adopt a feminist IR lens to examine further the roles and potential of women in their work. The patriarchal and hierarchal structures of aid, policy, and history are not easily unraveled, however through a feminist lens and approach, scholars suggest these structures can be dissembled.²⁰⁶ Finally, in future scholarly research regarding women in global politics, we must move away from

²⁰⁵ Ariyabandu, 2005, p. 7

²⁰⁶ Hydman, 2008, p. 118

traditional narratives of that describe men as choosers and women without the ability to chose.

Implications

Policy recommendations and discussions cannot be made unless women's vulnerability and agency are fully understood and recognized in the context of social stress. If policy-makers and project managers view women as being acted upon, this leaves little room in the way of policy prescription. Working with existing agency is an entirely different policy discussion than assuming women lack agency to begin with. While differences in vulnerability have been identified between men and women during crisis, their differences in strengths overwhelmingly have not been. It is crucial that the knowledge, past experiences, and capacities of women are taken more seriously in disaster response and crisis management. However, there is still a critical need for more people out in the field, collecting data, and drawing attention to this critical issue. Unless urgency is demonstrated in the research agenda and literature, we cannot expect to see changes being made in the political sphere.

References

- Alison, M. (2003). Cogs in the Wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. In Kennedy-Pipe, C. & Keithly, D. M. (Eds.), *Civil Wars Vol 6 No 4* (pp. 37-54). Taylor & Francis Ltd.
- Alston, M. (2013). Introducing Gender and Climate Change: Research, Policy and Action. In Alston, M. & Whittenbury, K. (Eds.), *Research, Action, and Policy: Addressing the Gendered Impacts of Climate Change* (pp. 3-16). New York, NY: Springer.
- Alston, M., & Whittenbury, K. (2013). *Research, Action, and Policy: Addressing the Gendered Impacts of Climate Change*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Argenti-Pillen, A. (2003). *Masking Terror: How Women Contain Violence in Southern Sri Lanka*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Ariyabandu, M. (2005). *Gender Issues in Recovery from the December 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami- The case of Sri Lanka*. Development Research, Gender Expert, Colombo, Sri Lanka.
- Bandarage, A. (2010). Women, Armed Conflict, and Peacemaking in Sri Lanka: Toward a Political Economy Perspective. *Asian Politics and Policy*, 2(4), 653-677.
DOI: 10.1111/j.1943-0787.2010.01218.x
- Banford, A. & Froude, C. (2015). Ecofeminism and Natural Disasters: Sri Lankan Women Post-Tsunami. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 16(2), 170-187.
- Bell, K. (2013). Post-conventional Approaches to Gender, Climate Change, and Social

- Justice. In Alston, M. & Whittenbury, K. (Eds.), *Research, Action, and Policy: Addressing the Gendered Impacts of Climate Change*. (pp. 53-62). New York, NY: Springer.
- Chew, L., & Ramdas K.N. (2005). Caught in the Storm: The Impact of Natural Disasters on Women. *Global Fund for Women*. Retrieved from:
<http://www.globalfundforwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2006/11/disaster-report.pdf>
- Coomaraswamy, R. (1997). *LTTE Women: Is This Liberation?* Retrieved from:
<http://www.sundaytimes.lk/970105/plus2.html>
- Coomaraswamy, R. & Perera-Rajasingham, N. (2009). Being Tamil in a Different Way: A Feminist Critique of the Tamil Nation. In Cheran, R. (Ed.), *Pathways of Dissent: Tamil Nationalism in Sri Lanka*. Colombo, Sri Lanka: International Centre for Ethnic Studies.
- De Alwis, M. (1998). Motherhood as a Space of Protest: Women's Political Participation in Contemporary Sri Lanka. In Jeffery, P. & Basu, A. (Eds.), *Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia*. London, Great Britain: Routledge.
- De Alwis, M. & Hedman, E. (2009). *Tsunami in a Time of War: Aid, Activism, & Reconstruction in Sri Lanka and Aceh*. Colombo, Sri Lanka: International Centre for Ethnic Studies.
- De Alwis, M. & Hedman, E. (2009). Introduction. In de Alwis, M. & Hedman, E. (Eds.),

- Tsunami in a Time of War: Aid, Activism, & Reconstruction in Sri Lanka and Aceh* (pp. 9-29). Colombo, Sri Lanka: International Centre for Ethnic Studies.
Colombo, Sri Lanka: International Centre for Ethnic Studies.
- De Alwis, M. (2003). Reflections on Gender and Ethnicity in Sri Lanka. In Giles, W., de Alwis, M., Klein, E., & Silva, N. (Eds.). *Feminists Under Fire: Exchanges across War Zones*. Toronto, Ontario: Between the Lines (pp. 15-25). Toronto, Ontario: Between the Lines.
- De Lauretis, T. (1987). *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- De Mel, N. (2008). *Between the Sea and War*. *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 9(2), 238-254. DOI: 10.1080/13698010701409178
- De Mel, N. (2001). *Women & The Nation's Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Tierney, J. K. (2007). From the margins to the Mainstream? Disaster Research at the Crossroads. *Annual Review Sociology*, 33, 503-25.
DOI: 10.1146/annurev.soc.33.040406.131743
- Enarson, E. (2000). Gender and Natural Disasters. *InFocus Programme on Crisis Response and Reconstruction-Working Paper 1*, 1-73.
- Enarson, E. (2013). Two Solitude, Many Bridges, Big Tent: Women's Leadership on Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction. In Alston, M. & Whittenbury, K. (Eds.), *Research, Action, and Policy: Addressing the Gendered Impacts of Climate Change* (pp. 63-76). New York, NY: Springer.

- Enarson, E. & Chakrabarti, P.G. (2009). *Women, Gender, and Disaster: Global Issues and Initiatives*. New Dheli, India: SAGE Publications India.
- Gentry, C.E. & Sjoberg, L. (2015). *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Thinking About Women's Violence in Global Politics*. London, United Kingdom: Zed Books Ltd.
- Giles, W. (2003). Introduction: Feminist Exchanges across Conflict Zones. In Giles, W., de Alwis, M., Klein, E., & Silva, N. (Eds.) *Feminists Under Fire: Exchanges Across War Zones*. Toronto, Ontario: Between the Lines (pp. 1-14). Toronto, Ontario: Between the Lines.
- Giles, W., de Alwis, M., Klein, E., & Silva, N. (2003). *Feminists Under Fire: Exchanges Across War Zones*. Toronto, Ontario: Between the Lines.
- Hyndman, J. (2009). The Geopolitics of Pre-Tsunami and Post Tsunami Aid to Sri Lanka. In de Alwis, M. & Hedman, E. (Eds.), *Tsunami in a Time of War: Aid, Activism, & Reconstruction in Sri Lanka and Aceh*, (pp. 29-59). Colombo, Sri Lanka: International Centre for Ethnic Studies.
- Hydman, J. (2008). Feminism, Conflict and Disasters In Post-tsunami Sri Lanka. *Gender, Technology and Development*, 12(1), 101-121.
DOI: 10.1177/097185240701200107
- Israel, A. L. & Sachs, C. (2013). A Climate for Feminist Intervention: Feminist Science Studies and Climate Change. In Alston, M. & Whittenbury, K. (Eds.), *Research, Action, and Policy: Addressing the Gendered Impacts of Climate Change* (pp. 33-52). New York, NY: Springer.
- Jordan, K. & Denov, M. (2007). Birds of Freedom? Perspectives on Female

- Emancipation and Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 9(1), 42-62.
- Le Billon, P. & Waizenegger, A. (2007). Peace in the Wake of Disaster? Secessionist Conflicts and the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 33(3), 411-427.
- Mackinnon, C. A. (2001). Sex Equality: On Difference and Dominance. In Hermann A. C., & Stewart, A. J. (Eds.), *Theorizing Feminism: Parallel Trends in the Humanities and Social Sciences* (pp. 232-53). Boulder, Co: Westview Press.
- Mahr, K. (2013, November 28). *Sri Lanka to Start Tally of Civil-War Dead*. Time Magazine. Retrieved from: www.world.time.com
- Manchanda, R. (2001). *Women, War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency*. New Delhi, India: Sage Publications India.
- Manimekalai, L. (Director). (2013). *White Van Stories*. Retrieved from: <http://www.channel4.com/news/white-van-stories-sri-lanka-disappeared-video>
- Maunaguru, S. (1995). Gendering Tamil nationalism: The construction of 'woman' in projects of protest and control. In Jeganathan, P. & Ismail, Q. (Eds.), *Unmaking the Nation: The Politics of Identity and History in Modern Sri Lanka* (pp. 158-175). Colombo, Sri Lanka: Social Scientists' Association.
- Parashar, S. (2009). Feminist International Relations and Women Militants: Case Studies from Sri Lanka and Kashmir. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 22(2), 235-256. DOI: 10.1080/09557570902877968
- Pateman, C. (1988). *The Sexual Contract*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Pickrell, J. (2005, January 20). *Facts and Figures: Asian Tsunami Disaster*.

- NewScientist. www.newscientist.com
- Rajasingham-Senanayake, D. (2004). Between Reality and Representation: Women's Agency in War and Post-Conflict Sri Lanka. *Sri Lanka: Social Scientists' Association*, 16(2-3), 141-168. DOI: 10.1177/0921374004047741
- Rajasingham-Senanayake, D. (2001). Ambivalent Empowerment: The Tragedy of Tamil Women in Conflict. In Manchanda, R. (Ed.), *Women, War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency* (pp. 106-7). New Delhi: Sage.
- Risseuw, C. (1991). Bourdieu, Power and Resistance: Gender Transformation in Sri Lanka. In Davis, K., Leijenaar, M., & Oldersma, J. (Eds.), *The Gender of Power* (pp. 154-79). Sage Publications.
- Ruwanpura, K., A. (2006). Conflict and Survival: Sinhala Female-Headship in Eastern Sri Lanka. *Asian Population Studies*, 2(2), 187-200. DOI: 10.1080/17441730600923125
- Ruwanpura, K. (2008). Temporality of Disasters: The politics of women's livelihoods 'after' the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 29(3), 325-340. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9493.2008.00327.x
- Samuel, K. (2003). Activism, Motherhood, and the State in Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict. In Giles, W., de Alwis, M., Klein, E., & Silva, N. (Eds.), *Feminists Under Fire: Exchanges across War Zones* (pp. 167-180). Toronto, Ontario: Between the Lines.
- Scott, J. (1990). *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Siapno, J. A. (2009). The Politics of Reconstruction, Gender, and Re-Integration in Post-

- Tsunami Aceh. In de Alwis, M. & Hedman, E. (Eds.), *Tsunami in a Time of War: Aid, Activism, & Reconstruction in Sri Lanka and Aceh* (pp. 163-190). Colombo, Sri Lanka: International Centre for Ethnic Studies.
- July 1983 Remembered*. (2015, July 23). Tamil Guardian. www.tamilguardian.com.
- Thurnheer, K. (2014). *Life Beyond Survival: Social Forms of Coping After the Tsunami in War-affected Eastern Sri Lanka*. Gmgh, Wetslar: Majuskel Medienproduktion.
- Tuana, N. (2013). Gendering Climate Knowledge and Climate Justice. In Alston, M. & Whittenbury, K. (Eds.), *Research, Action, and Policy: Addressing the Gendered Impacts of Climate Change* (pp. 17-32). New York, NY: Springer.
- Vanati. *She, The Woman of Tamil EELAM*. Tamil Nation. Tamilnation.com.
- Weaver, M. & Chamberlain, G. (2009, May 19). *Sri Lanka Declares End to War with Tamil Tigers*. The Guardian. www.theguardian.com.