



INTERNATIONAL  
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# Doing This and That: Self-employment and economic survival of women heads of households in Mullaitivu



**Chulani Kodikara**



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**International Centre for Ethnic Studies**

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Doing This and That: Self-employment and economic survival of women heads of households in Mullaitivu

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2, Kynsey Terrace, Colombo 8, Sri Lanka

E-mail: [admin@ices.lk](mailto:admin@ices.lk)

URL: [www.ices.lk](http://www.ices.lk)

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**Doing This and That:  
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of women heads of households in Mullaitivu**

**Chulani Kodikara<sup>1</sup>**

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1 Chulani Kodikara is currently reading for her PhD at the University of Edinburgh, UK.

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## **Executive Summary**

In post-war Sri Lanka, small, medium and micro (SME) enterprise development is the dominant approach to livelihood development for war-affected women, and particularly for women heads of households (WHH). Yet not every woman who is a recipient of SME support becomes an “entrepreneur” running an “enterprise” or even a micro enterprise. Rather, they assist women to commence and engage in a diverse repertoire of extremely precarious self-employment activities, in which their own labour is the most important ingredient. However, women’s own productive labour was materially, temporally, spatially and affectively entangled with and circumscribed by the extraordinary labour of remaking their lives after war. Although many of the women continued to receive or were eligible for state social welfare payments such as Samurdhi and the Public Assistance Monthly Allowance (PAMA), these were woefully inadequate. Women coped and survived in spite of the failure of these self employment ventures due to handouts from charitable institutions and family, even though these were ad hoc, episodic and unreliable. Based on these findings, I argue that women’s (and men’s) livelihoods in post-war Sri Lanka have to be located, analysed and addressed within the broader politics of post-war development and reconstruction, and as a question of economic justice beyond a market-based approach to economic empowerment.



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## Introduction

[Suganthi Matheeseelan] . . . used to run her small tailoring business from home but with help from the ILO she learned business skills such as budgeting, bookkeeping and business expansion, and was able to build a shop in Mullaitivu District and provide jobs for six other people. Her monthly net profit is now around 25,000 rupees (US\$188).<sup>2</sup>

Indrani is 50 years old, was born in Jaffna, and lives at Uppukulam-South in Mannar. Her husband was disabled in the war and is not able to work. Due to their financial constraints, they were unable to send their three children to school. In 2009, she received loans from the VDO<sup>3</sup> and cooperative bank to build and expand a “buy back systems” business with five other poultry farmers in the area. She has since doubled her business and is now planning to employ three other women to expand further.<sup>4</sup>

Success stories of beneficiaries or recipients of economic empowerment programmes such as those cited above abound in publications and progress reports of international donor organisations, and international and local NGOs, which are in turn reproduced in local and international media reports. They form an intrinsic part of descriptions and discourses of livelihood support programmes, which seek to develop small, medium and micro enterprises in war-affected areas of Sri Lanka, particularly for women-heads of households (WHHs). Following Philip Mader, “(w)ritten in colourful, evocative prose, and reporting or promising impacts from the relatively mundane to the spectacular . . . and often accompanied by uplifting images,” (Mader 2015: 5) these stories are invariably hinged to and framed in terms of what he refers to as “mobilising narratives” of empowerment and development (ibid 2015).

This paper is not seeking to challenge the success stories cited above as fabrications or fictions. A certain percentage of those who receive livelihood

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2 Our impact, their stories. “Post-war resilience: New skills bring better incomes for Sri Lankan women.” *ILO website*, 1 September 2016. [http://www.ilo.org/global/about-theilo/newsroom/features/WCMS\\_513769/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/about-theilo/newsroom/features/WCMS_513769/lang--en/index.htm)

3 Village Development Organisation.

4 Sri Lanka: Economic Empowerment of Rural Women, 15 October 2013. Feature story on World Bank website. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2013/10/15/sri-lanka-economic-empowerment-of-rural-women>

development assistance may succeed<sup>5</sup> – in some cases, exceeding the expectations of organisations implementing these programmes. Yet they do not tell the whole story. Based on in-depth interviews with seven women living in Mullaitivu, this paper questions and challenges the common sense of the development industry, which promotes self employment in the war-affected North and East as a magic bullet to alleviate poverty and empower women. Not every woman who is a recipient of these enterprise development programmes becomes an “entrepreneur” running an “enterprise” or even a micro enterprise. Rather, most end up engaging in “survival activities or strategies” (de la Rocha 2001a; Haan 1989; Kabeer 2012), or “petty commodity production and petty trade” (de la Rocha 2001a; 2001b; 2007: 50).

Moreover, such activities which I refer to as self-employment activities<sup>6</sup> in this paper are merely one or more of a diverse repertoire of precarious livelihood activities and meagre, subsistence level income sources engaged by women as a matter of economic survival in which their own labour is the most important ingredient. Yet women’s own productive labour was materially, temporally, spatially and affectively entangled with and circumscribed by the extraordinary labour of remaking their lives after war. Although many of these women continued to receive Samurdhi or PAMA, such payments were woefully inadequate. Women coped and survived because of the additional financial and material support they received from charitable institutions, individuals and other family members, even though these were ad hoc, episodic and unreliable.

The literature on livelihoods tells us that livelihoods have both a social and economic (Ellis 2000), as well as a political dimension linked to macro-economic policies of nation states (de la Rocha 2001a; 2001b; 2007; 2009). I thus locate and analyse women’s livelihoods in post-war Sri Lanka within the broader politics of post-war development and reconstruction, arguing for the need to recognize women’s (and men’s) right to livelihoods in war-affected areas as a question of economic justice beyond a market-based approach to economic empowerment.

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5 See for instance Gunatilaka, Ramani and Ranmini Vithanagama, *Women’s Labour Market Outcomes and Livelihood Interventions in Sri Lanka’s North after the War*, Colombo: ICES. Forthcoming.

6 A recent IDS report acknowledges that entrepreneurship is now considered synonymous with self-employment, i.e. any activity that is undertaken to generate an income (Ayele et al. 2016: 4.), even though this risks draining both terms of all meaning. I draw on an older distinction made between entrepreneurship and self-employment, which recognizes the small scale and informal character of self-employment (Langevang et al 2015).

This paper attempts to provide a thick and rich description of the livelihood and income generation strategies of seven women heads of households – six Tamil and one Muslim – in post-war Mullaitivu who have been renamed **Bahirathi, Faizunnisa, Manohari, Nirmala, Kalainidhi, Rathirani** and **Vasanthamala** to protect their identities. Through this thick and rich description, the paper seeks to understand vulnerabilities, strengths, constraints, and barriers as well as opportunities to make a life and make living in the midst of loss and trauma, while recognizing that they are not merely victims but also agents making choices, albeit constrained by broader socio-political structures (Kabeer 1999). While this is not a household-level analysis of livelihoods, following from the work of Frank Ellis and Mercedes Gonzales de la Rocha, I attempt to study their livelihoods in the context of the households in which they are embedded on the premise that the characteristics of the household (and their trajectory over time) influence livelihood options. Although this task has been constrained by the fact that the interviews for this study did not consistently ‘open up’ the household for inquiry, nevertheless based on the information available, I have attempted to piece together how household structures shaped the choices made by these women. The analysis also draws on three interviews with managerial-level staff working for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), International Labour Organisation (ILO) and Sewalanka, a local Non-Governmental Organisation implementing SME programmes.

The seven interviews analysed in this paper were conducted in Mullaitivu by Tamil speaking researchers who were part of the ICES GROW research study. The study conducted a total of 116 interviews in Tamil in the five districts of the North of which 95 were translated into English. The number of translated interviews from each district is as follows: Jaffna -32, Kilinochchi - 20, Mannar - 20, Mullaitivu – 8, and Vavuniya – 15. I chose seven interviews from the 8 interviews conducted in Mullaitivu on the basis of the richness of the interviews and the age, ethnicity and geographical location of the respondents. The decision to focus on Mullaitivu was based on the fact that it was the district worst affected by the war, has the highest poverty rate and the lowest mean household income in Sri Lanka compared to other districts (World Bank 2015). Of the 41,367 families and a population of 130,873 living in Mullaitivu, 6,515 households are headed by women, including “war widows, natural widows and those living separately from their husbands” (District Secretariat

2015: 44). As a percentage, Mullaitivu has the second largest percentage of women-headed households in the North after Kilinochchi (Centre for Women's Development 2013). Even though, it was my intention to conduct a follow up interview with each of the seven women, I was unable to do so. I acknowledge that this is a significant limitation of this paper.

The paper is divided into four parts: I begin this paper by briefly detailing the dominant approach to livelihood development in war-affected areas in Sri Lanka, going on to examine key characteristics of the seven women that were part of this study in part two; their age at the time the interviews were conducted, their education; their age of marriage and circumstances of marriage, the number of children they had and their livelihood activities. In part three, I examine the kinds of self-employment engaged in by these women, their limits and possibilities, as well as the other kinds of support that are helping to sustain their families despite the failure of self-employment ventures. Part four explores women's labour as the most critical element in their livelihood strategy, and the ways in which it is constrained and stretched to its limit. I conclude with some observations. The paper does not explore in detail the policy implications of the findings. That I will leave to those better versed in matters of the economy.

## **Part 1: Reconstruction, Development and the Dominant Approach to Livelihood Development in Post-War Sri Lanka**

Livelihoods are core to rebuilding community and lifting people out of poverty in post-war contexts. Local economies in post-war environments face many economic and social challenges, including the reintegration of several particularly vulnerable groups such as ex-combatants, persons with disabilities, displaced persons, and youth. However, whether women heads of households are more vulnerable and prone to poverty than other households is a matter of considerable dispute in the scholarship on livelihoods (Gonzalez de la Rocha and Grinspun 2001: 61)

Before proceeding any further, it is perhaps necessary to first clarify my understanding of livelihoods. I draw primarily from the work of Frank Ellis (1998; 2000) and Mercedes Gonzales de la Rocha (2001; 2007). Ellis defines a livelihood

or a means to a living as comprising of assets (natural, physical, human, financial and social capital), activities, and access to these, mediated by institutions and social relations that together determine the living gained by the individual or the household (Ellis 2000: 10). Citing Scoones (1998) he elaborates on each of these assets: natural assets are natural resources such as water, land, and trees; physical assets are those brought into being by economic production processes such as tools, machines, irrigation canals and terraces; human assets comprise education and good health; financial assets refers to access to cash, savings and credit; social capital refers to the networks and associations in which people participate, and from which they can derive support that contributes to their livelihoods. Ellis stresses the impact of social and kinship relations for facilitating and sustaining diverse income portfolios, i.e. gender, family, kin, class, caste, ethnicity and belief systems and institutions that mediate an individual's or family's capacity to achieve its consumption requirements. Ellis's work relates to rural agricultural communities, and declining incomes from farming, which is increasingly forcing such communities to find supplementary forms of in-farm and off-farm income sources (Ellis 2000).

The resources of poverty / poverty of resources model developed by Gonzalez de la Rocha emphasises the household and its social organization as the appropriate unit of analysis of what she refers to as "survival strategies" of the poor. Such strategies she states are characterized by diverse income sources and multiple income earners and are based on four structural conditions for household capability: i.e. the possibility to earn wages; labour invested in the production in petty commodity and petty trade, labour invested in production of goods and services for consumption, and income from social exchange. Although her work is on the urban poor in one Mexican city and Latin America more generally, I believe it has sufficient analytical purchase to be applied to the context of post-war Sri Lanka.

## **The Political Economy of Development in the Post-War North and East**

At the time the interviews for these studies were done, the local economies in the war-affected districts of the North, reliant mainly on agriculture and fisheries, and to lesser extent on livestock and forestry were still in crisis with stable and

secure employment opportunities available only to a few (Gunasekera et al. 2016; Kadirgamar 2017). The post-war reconstruction and development policy of the government has been analysed elsewhere (Bastian 2013; Goger and Ruwanpura 2014; Gunasekera et al, 2016; Kadirgamar 2013a, 2013b, nd; Keerawella 2013), and will not be rehearsed here. However, based on this scholarship, it is possible to identify six main components of GoSL policy in this regard: prioritization of massive infrastructure development efforts such as rebuilding roads, railway lines, and electricity grids; encouragement and facilitation of private sector investment particularly in the garment and tourism industries, through release of land for industries, favourable land leasing terms, communications and electricity infrastructure, and fast track development approvals (Goger and Ruwanpura 2016: 13); promotion and facilitation of business enterprises by the army including in the agriculture, livestock, dairy, tourism and hospitality sectors (Skanthakumar 2013); implementation of a housing reconstruction programme to renovate or rebuild approximately 150,000 houses which were partly or fully destroyed due to the war (Gunasekera et al 2016: 1); expansion of credit facilities (Kadirgamar 2013a, nd); and the promotion of small and medium enterprise development. While both agriculture and fisheries sectors have received government and donor financial allocations for their revival, it has not been sufficient to meet all of the demands and challenges of rebuilding these sectors. Revival of these sectors has also been hampered by factors extraneous to the war: floods and droughts in the case of agriculture and intrusion of Indian and Southern fishermen into northern waters in the case of fisheries (Gunasekera et al 2016).

The infrastructure projects and housing schemes created some jobs, although mainly for able-bodied Sinhala men from the South. Even these were however petering out as the projects were completed or nearing completion at the time of writing. The army which is one of the largest civilian employers in Mullaitivu has created jobs in tourism, farms<sup>7</sup> and pre-schools, even though the rationale underlying its entry into economic activity is an altogether different one – to ensure the participation of “war heroes” in a militarized model of development (Jegatheeswaran 2017; Jegatheeswaran & Arulthas 2017). Other than these, the jobs

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<sup>7</sup> A recent study reports that the Army Directorate for Agriculture and Livestock operates farms in Udayakattukulam, Nachchikadu, and Wellakulam in the Mullaitivu district (Jegatheeswaran and Arulthas 2017).

for women were mainly in the few garment factories set up in the districts. This is where self-employment schemes and small and micro income generation projects (SMEs) enter reconstruction and development policy as the magic bullet to relieve poverty and economically empower the war-affected population, in particular vulnerable groups such as ex-combatants, youth, and women heads of households (Godamunne 2015, See also Senaratna 2017).

While SME promotion has a long history in Sri Lanka going back to the 1970s, they were repackaged as a post-war development intervention following the end of the war in 2009. Similarly it has a long history in international development orthodoxy and has been referred to as “nothing less than the most promising instrument available for reducing the extent and severity of global poverty” (Snodgrass, 1997: 1). Micro credit tends to occupy an important place in these programmes. Mader citing Harper (2011: 59) contends that microfinance offers a way of exploiting the labour of the poor, and indeed of extracting higher returns by financing petty businesses under the guise of assisting the poor to become entrepreneurs, without setting up factories and machines, without directly employing them, and without having to manage this labour. Marder elaborates that these new financial relationships are more advantageous than direct employment because 1) There is no need for any actual entrepreneurial activity by owners of capital; 2) A number of fixed costs are avoided; 3) The risks of entrepreneurship are outsourced to others and 4) There is no risk of employees appealing to or combining against their employers/ owners. He goes on to state:

Microfinance makes entreployee-type capital labour relationships possible even with the denizens of slums and villages in the Global South –a truly astonishing innovation. This form of surplus extraction is plainly more congruent with financialised capitalism than traditional employment, and may be understood as part of a fundamental ongoing transformation in how labour power is made amenable for capital accumulation in many different spaces. (Mader 2015: 23)

Women’s self-employment is especially encouraged because of an assumption that it generates higher incomes and empowers women to gain autonomy and improve the health of their families, helping to alleviate poverty in society at

large (Premchander 2003). Indeed, as Roy argues, the icon at the heart of these programmes are third world women, such as Indrani and Suganthy, whose stories open this paper, produced as figures of resilience and charged with converting poverty into enterprise (2012: 136). Women tend to be also constructed as virtuous and reliable recipients of microcredit tied to these programmes; the ones “who always pay” as opposed to unreliable male defaulters. In this sense, these programmes are “technologies of gender” that entail the feminization of risk, responsibility and obligation in the global fight against poverty (Roy 2012: 143).

Countries and communities emerging from war and natural disasters from Mozambique (Baden 1997) and Bosnia (Bateman 2001; Pupavac 2005), to New Orleans, USA (in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina) (Adams 2012) have been equally subject to the logic of these interventions. Pupavac refers to a 1997 ILO report on Bosnia to the effect that “international strategies after the war re-oriented their programming for women away from therapy toward income generation, micro-enterprise and skills training” (Pupavac 2005: 397). Both Bateman (2001) and Pupavac (2005) are critical of the outcomes of these programmes in Bosnia, seeing them as part of international structural adjustment policies and neo-liberalization of the economy, which eroded state employment and welfare provision. Bateman’s (2001) critique is particularly trenchant in relation to SME’s tied to microcredit. Taking this critique a step further scholars such as Roy and Adams link these programmes to “disaster capitalism” – whereby catastrophes and their disproportionate impact on poor communities are turned into market opportunities for profit (Roy 2012:107; Adams 2012).

In Sri Lanka, by 2011, two years after the end of the war, promotion and support for SMEs had become a taken for granted aspect of post-war development. In a 2011 IRIN article, the Government Agent for Vavuniya noted: “Cottage industries now play a vital role in generating income in the former war zone”. The same article quotes the Bank of Ceylon Area Manager from Vavuniya as saying “when jobs become harder to find, people find it easier to start something on their own, especially when they see there are opportunities to succeed.”<sup>8</sup>

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8 Cottage industries offer hope in former war zone by Amantha Perera, 10 November 2011. <http://www.irinnews.org/report/94176/sri-lanka-cottage-industries-offer-hope-former-war-zone>

## **SME Programmes in Post-War Sri Lanka**

In post-war Sri Lanka, SME programmes, ranging from home gardening, bee keeping, tailoring, poultry farming, dairy farming and support for small retail shops have proliferated. International institutions involved in implementing them include the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Organisation for Migration (IOM), Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), International Labour Organisation (ILO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank. Local Non-Governmental organisations include Sarvodaya, Sewalanka, and World Vision. State institutions involved include the National Enterprise Development Authority (NEDA), the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs, and the Samurdhi project.<sup>9</sup> The German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), Asian Development Bank (ADB), and USAID are among those involved in funding such initiatives. Such programmes are also part of bilateral aid provision from foreign governments such as Australia, Germany and Norway through their local Embassies. It is a crowded arena and there is no one model that is followed. Different agencies have adopted very different approaches comprising all or some of the following: vocational and management training, distribution of tools, and provision of credit facilities. Some target individuals, others only collectives whether farmer organisations, women's development organisations, cooperatives or self-help groups. Some assistance comes in the form of a comprehensive package providing monitoring and follow up assistance over a considerable period of time. Other SME programmes consist of one time grants or distribution of material assistance in the form of seeds, farming implements, livestock, poultry, sewing machines and the like. Some assistance is more popular than others. The number of organisations that have distributed chicks ranging from the age of 5 days to 40 days for instance are legion. Microcredit is a component of some of these programmes with interest rates ranging from around 20% to 70%.

The International Labour organisation's (ILO) Local Empowerment through Economic Development (LEED) programme is an example of a comprehensive package of assistance from training and capacity building, business planning and

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<sup>9</sup> This is the state's implemented poverty alleviation programme. It was renamed as Divineguma during the Rajapakse regime, but reverted to its original name following the election of a new government in January 2015 (see Divi Neguma Project now 'Samurdhi' Project, Daily News, 19 October 2016, <http://dailynews.lk/2016/10/19/local/96452>).

infrastructure development to marketing and follow up assistance.<sup>10</sup> Its support is however only available to collectives. One of the Programme Officers responsible for the implementation of the LEED programme explained that they don't support individuals or the very poor. In the ILO's view, the latter in particular have no capacity to sustain entrepreneurial activity. Sewalanka's Link with Relief, Rehabilitation and Development (LLRD) follows a similar approach with support only extended to groups within communities that they work in, although individuals remain eligible for microcredit from Sewalanka Credit (an arm of Sewalanka) provided the collective recommends the individual as credit worthy and provides a guarantee against default. This was described as an integrated approach, which involves community-level needs assessments, organising, and mobilisation of communities.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) takes a Competency Based Economic Formation of Enterprise (CEFE) approach to livelihoods in the war-affected areas, which was first introduced by the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) in the early 1990s. In promotional material, CEFE is described as follows:

CEFE is a comprehensive set of training instruments using an action-oriented approach and experiential learning methods to develop and enhance the business management and personal competencies of a wide range of target groups, mostly in the context of income and employment generation and economic development.

It represents an accumulation of instruments for entrepreneurship training combined with an active and dynamic approach and methods of empirical learning in order to develop and improve managerial and individual skills.

Rather than solely transmitting information, CEFE trainings aim at creating competences including knowledge, attitudes, skills and habits. The trainings enhance the participants' ability for self-organised decisions and action taking in complex and continuously changing systems.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.ilo.org/colombo/whatwedo/projects/WCMS\\_397563/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/colombo/whatwedo/projects/WCMS_397563/lang--en/index.htm)

<sup>11</sup> <http://cefe.net/about/>

It is also said to be adaptable to diverse constituencies: academics, people with low educational backgrounds, managers, entrepreneurs, university graduates, demobilised soldiers, refugees or street children, just to name a few.<sup>12</sup> In implementing via this approach, the UNDP personnel that I interviewed broke down the CEFE process into the following steps:

- Identification and measurement of competencies such as skills, previous experience, and available resources;
- Facilitating the participants or beneficiaries to generate ideas based on their available competencies as well as marketing, technical assistance, and packaging information available to the trainers;
- Screening of ideas at a macro- and micro-level followed by the selection of one idea;
- Formulation of a business plan including organization management and finance, production and marketing.

Yet the UNDP does not fully fund an entire livelihood activity even while acknowledging that this posed a challenge for many participants. Rather, participants are expected to find their own finances to implement the business plans developed with UNDP assistance. Furthermore, UNDP advocated for an approach which targeted the household rather than individual women as they felt that not all WHHs could become primary income earners whether due to advanced age, the stage in the domestic cycle, health problems, low energy levels, or lack of literacy, etc. They were of the view that “WHHs need support from their families. If their sons have gone off somewhere, then she can’t do anything”. They felt that it was more feasible to target a young male in the family to take up an entrepreneurial activity, which would also prevent their migration in search of work away from home. Their proposed strategy was directed at keeping the young men at home, although of course not all WHHs had young sons who would stay at home and who could be put to work. Daughters, it is to be surmised, were expected to move in with their husbands and therefore not seen as worthy beneficiaries.

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12 <http://kaset.psru.ac.th/nec/admin/files/CEFEshort.pdf>

The NGO and UN staff who I interviewed acknowledged that interventions which were implemented in the immediate aftermath of the resettlement process was more in the nature of humanitarian assistance designed to ensure food security and that these programmes were not expected to succeed as livelihoods. The programme officer at Sewalanka expressed similar views. She stated: “You cannot give 30 chicks and think you have provided a livelihood. Often you don’t even know whether the chicks are hens or cocks. It takes about six months before the chicks will start laying eggs and from 30 chicks you can probably get an average of 15 eggs per day. If you sell 10 of the eggs, you can get 170 rupees a day. This is not an income. It allows households to manage some daily expenses including for food.” She acknowledged that most support given under the name of livelihoods is in fact a misnomer. Sustainable livelihoods intervention schemes I was told only commenced in 2012 or 2013 and the success rates of these are yet to be monitored. UNDP staff speculated that the success rate was around 40%.

### **National Policies and Birth and Deaths of SMEs**

There is in fact evidence to suggest that the success rates of small and medium enterprise development even in “ordinary” circumstances are not in fact guaranteed due to the lack of an adequate policy framework and requisite institutional support (Buddhadasa 2011; Gamage 2014). Asserting that “entrepreneurs cannot create economic development by themselves alone” Buddhadasa (2011:119) argues that only a small segment of the SME sector is capable of making full use of new business openings, and cope effectively with threats without assistance, and that smallness confers certain inherent competitive disadvantages. As a consequence, although SME’s account for about 92.4% of total business establishments in Sri Lanka, its contribution to the GDP is around 18.5%, while the “small” manufacturing sector contributes only a little over one per cent of the GDP (Buddhadasa 2011: 119). Gamage also finds that SMEs in Sri Lanka exhibit high birth rates and high death rates and many small firms fail to grow due to several impediments peculiar to SMEs (Gamage 2014: 359). He identifies a number of external factors such as inadequate infrastructure facilities which affect market linkages and development of investment opportunities; lack of roads limiting market access to products, trade

and labour mobility; poor telecommunications; and inadequate market demand. He also identifies a number of factors internal to SMEs such as lack of information on domestic and international markets which make it difficult to exploit and expand markets; lack of skills in relation to product development, packaging, distribution and sales promotion; lack of access to finance; lack of knowledge about bank facilities and procedures; and lack of collateral (ibid: 362). According to both, some sort of external support is warranted in order for these enterprises to reach their full potential (ibid). This analysis begs the question: If SMEs are prone to failure in normal conditions, by what logic are women-headed households affected by war expected to succeed as entrepreneurs? Indeed, Gamage concludes that the “(p)ost-war environment is not conducive for the development of SMEs . . .” (Gamage 2014: 363).

While a National Policy Framework for SME Development in Sri Lanka, has now been approved by Cabinet (January 2017), it still does not appear to include and address the very small enterprise development programmes of the kind being rolled out in war affected areas.<sup>13</sup> The new policy document identifies the SME sector as an important and strategic sector in the overall policy objectives of the GoSL and as a driver of change for inclusive economic growth, regional development, employment generation and poverty reduction. It is envisaged to contribute to transform lagging regions into emerging regions of prosperity. The policy seeks to create an enabling environment to encourage SMEs, and provide support in relations to technology transfer, skills development, access to finance, market facilitation and research and development. It also seeks to give special attention to “nature’s capital, green growth, entrepreneurship development, women entrepreneurship, craft sector and promising industrial clusters by strengthening enterprise villages, handicraft villages, industrial production villages and SME industrial estates / zones.”

SME’s in this framework include small, medium and micro enterprises, which are defined on the basis of the total number of employees and annual turnover (see Table 1).

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<sup>13</sup> National Policy Framework for Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) Development, Ministry of Industry and Commerce, [http://www.industry.gov.lk/web/images/pdf/framew\\_eng.pdf](http://www.industry.gov.lk/web/images/pdf/framew_eng.pdf)

*Table 1: Defining SMEs in Sri Lanka*

<b>Size Sector</b>	<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Small</b>	<b>Micro</b>
Manufacturing Sector	Annual Turnover	Rs. Mn. 251 - 750	Rs. Mn. 16 - 250	Less than Rs. Mn. 15
	No. of Employees	51 - 300	11 - 50	Less than 10
Service Sector	Annual Turnover	Rs. Mn. 251 - 750	Rs. Mn. 16 - 250	Less than Rs. Mn. 15
	No. of Employees	51 - 200	11 - 50	Less than 10

According to this definition, a micro enterprise is one which has an annual turnover of less than 15 million and less than 10 employees.<sup>14</sup> This threshold clearly excludes much of the livelihood assistance for WHHs implemented under the banner of small and medium enterprise development in the war-affected North. Moreover, SME policies may not be the most important in determining the success or failure of SMEs. In fact, macro-economic tax policy (VAT, NBT, etc.) has a significant bearing on SMEs deserving further analysis.

The formulation of a National Action Plan on Women-Headed Households which was approved by Cabinet in September 2016 does now seem to address at least, some of the limitations and gaps in the SME policy as it affects WHHs. The Plan prioritizes six programme areas including livelihood development, support services, protection, social security, national level policy formulation, and awareness building, while allowing the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs (MoWCA) to implement “tailored interventions” for WHHs (Ministry of Women and Child Affairs 2017). While this is a positive development, it is however, set up for failure as there is no clear understanding or vision for micro-enterprises in the broader economic policy and MoWCA has little capacity to implement and sustain this programme. Hence this specialized policy may do little to improve prospects of self-employment for women.

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.industry.gov.lk/web/images/pdf/framew\\_eng.pdf](http://www.industry.gov.lk/web/images/pdf/framew_eng.pdf)

## **Part 2: Seven Women Living in Post-War Mullaitivu**

When the government of Sri Lanka, launched Ealam War IV<sup>15</sup> against the LTTE in 2006, the LTTE was in control of a fairly substantial area of land covering the whole of Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu, parts of Mannar and Vavuniya,<sup>16</sup> as well as part of the East, where they ran a de facto state administration which included revenue collection, police, judicial and public services, and economic development initiatives (Stokke 2006). Following the defeat of the LTTE in the East, the government focused on regaining the North. As the war intensified from 2007, and the army advanced into LTTE controlled areas from the west, the LTTE progressively abandoned land held by them taking the population in those areas with them. The Tamil women – **Bhahirathi, Faizunissa, Kalainidhi, Manohari, Nirmala, Rathirani and Vasanthamala** – were part of this exodus and experienced the final phase of the war in all its intensity. **Faizunissa** was one of the thousands of Muslims who were expelled by the LTTE from the five districts of the North in 1990, and who decided to return to Mullaitivu after the end of the war.<sup>17</sup>

The Tamil women who were part of this study lived under LTTE control all their lives or for much of their lives. Indeed in the case of three of them, their husbands were either in combat or worked for the LTTE. As the LTTE retreated east towards Mullivaikal, they together with their families abandoned their homes and villages and moved east as part of the LTTE's human shield. They stopped wherever the LTTE ordered them to stop. Kalainidhi went across Mullaitivu from Nedunkerni to Puthukudirippu to Vallipunam and Devipuram to Kompavil and then to Mullivaikkal. Some were lucky to have a relative in a village where they stopped with whom they could seek refuge. Vasanthimala went first to Akaraayan in Kilinochchi, and then to Maankulam, Unionkulam and Puliyankulam. But eventually, they all ended up in the small strip of land between the lagoon and the sea in Mullivaikal. In the case of four women, their husbands died or disappeared during the last months

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15 Sri Lanka's civil war which commenced in July 1983 and ended in May 2009 is divided into four phases as Eelam War 1 to IV, each phase interrupted by a ceasefire or peace talks. Phase IV - the last phase was from 2006 to 2009.

16 This was the result of a number of military successes of the LTTE from 1995 to 2002.

17 In October 1990, the LTTE systematically expelled close to 75,000 Muslims living in the five districts of the North. Many of those expelled sought refuge in Puttalam and continued to live there until the end of the war in 2009. For an account of the expulsion through the narratives of those affected, see the "Quest for Redemption: The Story of the Northern Muslims, Final Report of the Citizens' Commission on the Expulsion of Muslims from the Northern Province by the LTTE in October 1990", 2011, Colombo: Law and Society Trust.

of the war. In the case of one – her husband died in her arms. They also lost other close family members during this final phase.

Following the end of the war, the women were displaced to different camps in Vavuniya and returned to Mullaitivu only in 2010, 2011 or 2012. On their return, their houses and household goods were destroyed. Their livestock, poultry and home gardens were dead. While the Muslim woman who was part of this study was spared this fate, her life is equally marked by loss and hardship. Her father was shot dead in 1987 (during the time of the Indian army). Having grown up and having lived in Puttalam for most of her life, she returned to her mother's property in Mullaitivu when Muslims were able to return to their old lands in 2010. For all of them, return and resettlement meant starting life all over again rebuilding homes, lost assets and livelihoods.

### **Age, Education, Marriage and Children**

The seven women were born between 1963 and 1991. The youngest, **Manohari** was 24 at the time of the interview and the oldest **Vasanthimala** was 52. War, displacement, poverty or a combination of these factors had disrupted the education of many of them. Some of them were also forced into marriage at an early age because of LTTE's policy of forced recruitment.<sup>18</sup> The age of marriage of the women ranged from 14 to 33.

**Faizunissa** and **Vasanthamala** were amongst the youngest to drop out from school. Faizunissa stated that she was in grade four when the family was displaced from Mullaitivu to Puttalam in 1990, and that she never went back to school. **Vasanthamala** was in grade six, when she gave up school to take care of her mother who fell ill. **Rathirani** studied up to Grade 10 but did not do her O' Levels.<sup>19</sup> She said the family could not afford to continue her education. She married when she was 28.

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18 The LTTE enforced a "one family, one child" policy in areas under its control for much of the war. Tamil households were obliged to provide a son or a daughter for "the cause," including children as young as eleven, although they didn't always stop with one (Human Right Watch 2014). It appears that women could avoid recruitment through marriage, but not men.

19 The Ordinary Level (O' Level) is a [General Certificate of Education](#) (GCE) qualification in [Sri Lanka](#), conducted by the [Department of Examinations](#) of the [Ministry of Education](#). It is based on the United Kingdom (British Cambridge) [Ordinary Level](#) qualification. An O' Level is a qualification in its own right, but more often acts as a prerequisite for the next level of education – the [Advanced Level](#) exams. On successful completion of A' Levels, students are eligible to apply for tertiary education, including university education.

**Manohari** and **Nirmala's** education was disrupted by marriage. **Manohari** was 14 when her boyfriend of 22 proposed marriage to her in order to avoid being conscripted by the LTTE. She stated that she agreed because he convinced her that he would be taken away by the LTTE and she was in love with him. However, the LTTE forcibly conscripted him nevertheless, a day after their 'marriage', as there was no one else in his family who could join them. Following his recruitment, she only saw him sporadically when he was allowed to come home on leave, until he abandoned the LTTE two years later at the height of the war. **Nirmala**, on other hand got married in July 2008 at the age of 18 to avoid being conscripted by the LTTE. She had by that time completed her O' Levels with six subjects, but it meant she could not do her A' Levels. Following the disappearance of her husband during the last stages of the war, she lived with another man after the war for a brief period, but is now living separately from him. She stated that they could not get formally married, because she hadn't got the death certificate for her first husband. **Kalainidhi** was the only one to complete her A' Levels <sup>20</sup>despite a number of challenges. Her O' Levels in 1990 got postponed due to the war, and she eventually did it only in 1993. She learnt to sew during those years while attending tuition classes. Her parents arranged her marriage due to the family's economic situation soon after she completed her A' Levels in 1997. **Bhahirathi** learnt sewing for a time after completing her O' Levels before taking a job in a private clinic. She was the oldest to get married at the age of 33 in 2003 but it only lasted three months and she remarried in 2005.

Except for **Bhahirathi** who had no children, the other women who are part of this paper had between one and four children, many of whom were still going to school and still dependent on their mothers. **Rathirani** and **Nirmala** had one daughter, both six years old at the time of the interview. **Kalainidhi** and **Manohari** both had two children. The former, a son of 17 and a daughter aged 15, and in the case of the latter, a daughter of eight and a son of two. **Vasanthamala** had three daughters. **Faizunissa** had four daughters, who were 17, 16, 14 and 7.

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<sup>20</sup> A number of entry-level jobs both in the public and private sector are open to those who successfully complete A' Levels.

## Women's Work

As opposed to the dominant narrative that women heads of households do not have any experience of engaging in income generation activities before their husband died, disappeared or separated from them, many of the women had supplemented the incomes of their natal and or marital families, through their own livelihood activities on a daily basis or during times of family crisis. In fact, in a context of disrupted education and early marriage, many of the women started working early in their lives. **Kalainidhi** had worked as a child in the family's peanut farm helping her parents to sow peanuts. When her O' Levels got postponed due to the war, she also learnt to sew and started taking sewing orders. She later paid her O' Level tuition fees with the money she earned. She recalls that tuition fees were low compared to now, only Rs. 20 or Rs. 30, but it was still "big money" at the time. Later, following marriage, she took sewing orders, raised poultry and also helped her husband to grow chillies and brinjals on the small piece of land that they owned. When her husband started making coconut oil, she also helped him to do that.

**Faizunissa** and her older sister started weaving coconut leaf mats once they were displaced to help her widowed mother bring up their family, even though a mat only brought about 5, 10 or 15 rupees at that time. When Faizunissa married she stated that she didn't have to work, because her husband looked after the family, but she took on the mantle of breadwinner during a brief seven-month period when her husband fell ill and was bedridden. She made string hoppers and 'mothakam' for sale. **Rathithevi** remembers her mother taking her to the family farm as a child, but stated that she was not allowed to come after she attained puberty. To the question since when she has been doing agriculture – she stated, "For a long time, even before marriage, since I was a little girl". **Bhahirathi** started working in a small clinic soon after her A' Levels and later worked with the Tamil Rehabilitation and Relief Organisation (TRRO), an NGO affiliated to the LTTE. She was still working with them when the war broke out and was earning Rs.16.000 per month. **Kalainidhi** mentioned that she had worked with an organization for some time under the LTTE and used to get a monthly salary of Rs.8000. **Manohari** had started working after marriage at the age of 17 as her husband was away for a long period of time after being conscripted by the LTTE. She first volunteered as a Gramasevaka and later worked

for NGOs whenever there was an opportunity to work, even though her husband was not very supportive of her working. Even Vasanthamala who stated that she never had to work when her husband was alive, and who spoke with nostalgia of many years of married life with her husband who drove his lorry for the LTTE, had raised poultry for household consumption. Only Nirmala had no history of working before or after marriage. Having just finished her O' Levels before war broke out, she made the decision to get married.

### **Pathways to headship**

Women's pathways into headship analysed here differed considerably. **Manohari, Bhahirathi and Nirmala** separated from their husband /partner on their own accord after the war. Faizunissa also left her husband after he married another woman, and started living with her in a separate house. She says she continued to live with her husband's family for a year, waiting for him to come back, "today, if not tomorrow or the day after, but he never came". So she decided to move to Mullaitivu. **Manohari** left her husband after the war ended because he was an alcoholic. Vasanthamala, and Rathirani lost their husbands during the last phase of the war. At the time the interviews were conducted, some women were contemplating remarriage. Others were however categorical that they had no desire to marry again.

**Kalanidhi** recalls the exact day that her husband died – 18 March 2009. She remembers shells falling around them and the family getting scattered and running in different directions. She found shelter in a house but others who were still outside were hit by a falling shell. Her husband's cousin and his elder brother died on the spot. Her mother and her husband, were both injured and taken to a medical camp that had been set up in the school nearby. She was told that her husband had a piece of shell lodged in his head and was given saline, but he didn't receive any care for a long time. By the time the doctor came around at three or four in the afternoon he had died.

**Vasanthamala's** husband (who was driving his vehicle for the LTTE) disappeared during the final days of the war, following his surrender to the army. She says that "the army took him with them" and subsequently brought back his

documents and told her that he was shot by the LTTE. She had “cried and cried and asked them to show his body to her, but they didn't”. **Rathirani's** husband disappeared in May 2009 in Vattuvaakal, along with her father and her younger brother. Two of her elder brothers also died in the war. **Nirmala's** first husband (who was an LTTE cadre) also went missing around the same time. She was seven months pregnant at the time. She doesn't believe he is alive because shells were falling continuously at the time. “Its not possible to escape from it.” On March 11 her mother, father, and younger brother also died in Vattuvaakal. She lived with another man after the end of the war for about three months, but had been living separately from him for more than a year at the time the interview for this study was done.

I dwell on these different histories and trajectories of women's lives, to provide a glimpse into their gendered experiences of the war and life under the LTTE. Families coped and survived amidst displacement, violence and loss, in no small measure due to the sacrifices and struggles of women. Women's own aspirations and dreams, including of education, were often amongst the first casualties of the war. Yet these narratives also complicate and disrupt the trope of the victim, revealing women's agency and will to survive in desperate circumstances.

### **Part 3: Making a Living in Post-War Mullaitivu**

Following the end of the war, women such as those studied in this paper entered development discourse under the category of WHHs. Yet their households defy easy definition or categorisation. Women's narratives reveal that they have been unable to establish and maintain consistent family forms in accordance with any ideal due to the war, and their household arrangements are characterized by diversity, fluidity and their unresolvedness (Reynolds 2000: 155).

**Faizunissa** was living alone with her three daughters. The rest of her family – three sisters and three brothers as well as her mother – still lived in Puttalam, although she stated that they visited her from time to time. **Nirmala** who lost most of her family in the war was living alone with her six-year-old daughter, although her grandmother and elder sister were not too far from her. **Manohari** one of six children, was originally living with her parents but she and her two children later

moved to live with “some women.”<sup>21</sup> She had left her parent’s house because they were forcing her to get back with her husband and she had no wish to do so. Her own house was occupied by one of her sisters, but she was hoping to move there, once her sister moved out.

A few of the women were living with their extended families. **Rathirani** was living with her mother, daughter and younger sister. **Bhahirathi**, the youngest of seven was living in her elder sister’s house with her parents while also looking after her parents. **Kalainidhi** was living with her two children and her parents. **Vasanthamala** had refused to join her family in Jaffna and was living with two younger daughters (One brother was living with her for her safety at the time of the interview, but she stated that he was hoping to get married and would go away. Her elder brothers who are living abroad wanted her to join her mother in Jaffna, yet she preferred to be in Mullaitivu. (Her eldest daughter was also married and living in Jaffna.) She said:

I like to live here and not in Jaffna. If I live here I can live according to what I earn. I cannot live up to their standards. They are doing well and they don't want me to sell short eats. I want to have my own money and live with it. If I am with them, I will have to ask them for everything. I don't want to live like that. Even if I earn a little, I want to earn on my own and spend my own money.

Households are commonly defined as sharing a roof and a pot. De la Rocha and Grinspun assert that innovative strategies and resourcefulness that poor people use to survive economic change derive largely from initiatives at the household level. Household size, composition and stage in the domestic cycle therefore have significant implications for livelihoods strategies of the poor (2001: 56). The sex of the head of household may be another determinant of household vulnerability, although whether women-headed households are more vulnerable and prone to poverty remains disputed in the extensive scholarship that has examined this question (ibid. 61).

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21 It is unclear from the transcript who these women are.

## Post-War Livelihoods

In deploying their labour after the war, many of the women studied in this paper fell back on their history of supplementing family incomes. **Kalainidhi** went back to agriculture and sewing; **Faizunissa** went back to making stringhoppers; **Rathirani** returned to cultivation. Self-employment was the predominant source of income. Five out of the seven women studied in this paper were involved in self-employment activities. Self-employment initiatives mentioned fell into the broad categories: agriculture, poultry farming and animal husbandry, and petty commodity production and petty trading. Women also went looking for informal waged labour to supplement incomes from self-employment. Women's livelihoods were characterized by diversity, precarity and meagreness of incomes, which I consider in more detail below.

**Faizunissa** was making string hoppers for sale, buying and selling Indian garments, and also working as a labourer cutting grass, planting and digging onions, and plucking long beans. **Rathirani** was growing rice, chilli, seasonal vegetables and bananas on the one-acre of land owned by her. Sometimes she also went looking for daily waged labour. For about three years after resettlement, she also sold milk from two cows, but at the time the interviews were conducted they had died. **Kalainidhi** was engaged in poultry farming, while being part of a tailoring business with four other women where she worked part time. Additionally, she weaved palmyrah thatch for roofing although it is now not in much demand because houses are made of concrete. **Bhahirathi** was perhaps the most enterprising of the women who were part of this study, (explained maybe by her youth, the fact that she had no children to look after, and was living with her elder sister and parents). She was part of the same tailoring business as **Kalainidhi** and also raised poultry. The house she built with the housing grant that she obtained when she returned to Mullaitivu had been given on rent. Moreover, half an acre of coconut land that she owned had 17 coconut trees, which yielded some income from the sale of coconuts. At the time of the interview she (together with her family) had also started cultivating four acres of paddy land. She also did other odd jobs. Drying chillies on request – even for a meagre 20 to 50 rupees. **Vasanthamala** was involved in making short eats and vadai, on order for sale. But the business was affected after she fell ill and was in hospital for over three

months. At the time the interview with her was conducted, she was mostly depending on daily wages from digging wells. **Nirmala** and **Manohari**'s attempts at poultry farming had failed. **Nirmala** was depending on money (around Rs. 8000) from the grandmother of her first husband on a monthly basis. **Manohari** was being supported by her brothers.

The self-employment activities that women were engaged in were all gender-stereotypical activities which were mainly household based with no substantial barriers to entry in terms of skills and capital.<sup>22</sup> Women were managing them without any additional labour input, with the exception of some help from within their families. Women's decisions and choices to engage in specific livelihood activities were mediated by a number of different factors including their own skills and inclination, assets and resources available to them, the nature of livelihood support they had received, the stage of the domestic cycle, as well as the highly militarized environment in which they were living. A preference for flexible home based-work was most strongly expressed by those with young children.

**Manohari** for instance found it difficult to sustain a formal job because of her two young children. She had worked for a garment factory in Kilinochchi in Ariviyal Nagar<sup>23</sup> but she left after a month because she found it difficult to travel back and forth from the factory everyday. She had also worked in a cooperative store as a cashier, followed by a job with CARE as a field worker, which she had also left after some time.

For both **Kalainidhi** and **Bhahirathi** the good thing about the tailoring shop was that they could go to work at 2 p.m. and come back at 5 p.m. **Vasanthimala** stated that she would not go to work, if she had to leave her children at home alone.

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<sup>22</sup> Sarvanathan has argued while there have been few successes with the promotion of non-traditional occupations among women in the North and East, such as carpentry, masonry and auto repairing, particularly through the efforts of the World University Service Canada (WUSC), the struggle of women to break out of traditional occupations is being undermined by the (covert or overt) opposition to such occupations for women by men and women, as well as constituents and politicians (Sarvanathan 2016: 123). He cites two examples: the failure of an initiative which trained women to drive and which provided trishaws to them to run for hire after the end of the war and a women-only fishing boat-building venture in Point Pedro set up by an INGO during the ceasefire (2002–03) (ibid 2016: 125).

<sup>23</sup> She is most probably referring to the MAS factory, which was set up in Ariviyal Nagar in 2012.

I don't like to go out for my work, because of my two daughters. If I go out to work, I will not be able to spend time with my daughters or get home in the evenings. Then my daughters will be all alone in the house. I don't want that. You know what happens in the country these days. You cannot leave your children alone at home. . . . I don't take anyone into my house and I don't go to anybody's house. There are young girls in this house, so I am strict. I don't even let my girls go to see a movie in other houses. . . . I ask the neighbour lady to look out for them.

She went on to say that when she is sometimes asked to work outside the village as a cook, she would refuse, because she didn't want to leave her two young girls at home. **Fainsunissa** mentioned that she would have considered migration as an option, if not for her daughters.

Two of the women, **Manohari** and **Nirmala** were keen to continue their education, which was disrupted during the war, and to find a salaried job in the future. After the end of the war, **Manohari** had in fact sat for her O' Levels and passed five subjects, even without proper preparation. She was determined to repeat the exam, and was borrowing her sister's old notes and studies, even though she found it difficult to care for her children and study at the same time. She also wanted to follow a computer course. **Nirmala** also wants to learn computer because she believes it could improve her chances of getting a job. "I would study with the hope of getting a job. Everyone can't get a job, but I can give a try to get it. . . . Whether I get the job or not, I will try to study whatever I can".

### **Precarious Work, Meagre Incomes and Diversification as a Survival Strategy**

As I read and reread the interview transcripts of **Bhahirathi, Faizunissa, Nirmala, Manohari, Kalainidhi, Rathirani** and **Vasanthamala**, I was struck by the many different things they were doing all at the same time to generate an income. They were not involved in just one self-employment activity; they were involved in multiple and overlapping such activities to augment insufficient incomes. On tabulating their livelihood activities (see Table 2), this diversity becomes even clearer.

*Table 2: Summary of livelihood activities and support*

	B	F	K	M	N	R	V
Agriculture	X		Y			X	
Livestock			Y 2 cows		Y	X2 cows	X
Poultry	X		X	Y	X / Y	Y	
Salaried job	Y		Y	Y			
Wage Labour / daily paid	X	X				X	X
Self Employment 1	X	X	X Sewing				X
Self Employment 2	X	X	X Palmyrah thatch				
Paddy land given on lease	X						
Home garden	Y			Y		X but water issues	
Selling / pawning Jewellery	X				X		
House rent	X						
Land given on lease	X						

X- currently engaged in                      Y- engaged in the past

In both Ellis and de la Rocha's framework of livelihoods (i.e. the exploitation of multiple assets and sources of revenue), diversity is recognised and emphasized as an intrinsic attribute of many rural and even urban livelihood strategies. While there is recognition that diversification has been deployed as an accumulation strategy, or a response to opportunity (Ellis 1998, 1999), in the case of the women analysed here, it was mainly a survival strategy, a response to crisis, and a part of coping strategies often for very low returns (Reardon and Taylor 1996b).<sup>24</sup> The exception was perhaps Bahirathi. As it will become clearer, with the exception of stinting and depleting, other livelihood strategies recognised in the literature such as – intensification and extensification of agriculture, migration, hoarding and protecting were simply not available to the women studied here (Rakodi 2002: 6, Scoones 1998: 3).

<sup>24</sup> Diversification as a strategy is shaped by resources, assets and capacities whether categorised in terms of financial and human (Ellis 2000; Scoones 1998) tangible and intangible (Rakodi 2002) or actual and future claims and expectations (Kabeer 1999).

Moreover, what is common to the narratives analysed here is the precariousness of the livelihood activities engaged in by these women and the meagreness of their incomes. Poultry and livestock died. Hens went missing, petty trading ventures collapsed. The earnings from self-employment activities engaged by the seven women, fluctuated somewhere between Rs. 300 and Rs. 600 a day. **Rathirani**, among the more entrepreneurial of the women, said that on average she only earned around Rs. 9,000 per month. Several narratives of women in fact vividly illustrate the meagreness and inconsistency of incomes.

There is not much income. Even if I sew a dress, it is not enough for sugar and tea.  
**(Kalainidhi)**

With salaried work, the salary comes even during leave. Now only if we sell eggs we would get money. If a hen dies, the number of eggs would reduce. Coconut prices would sometimes increase, sometimes decrease. There is no consistency in monthly income, so whatever is picked from the trees we would sell them. **(Bhahirathi)**

Indeed, the self-employment activities documented here could be characterized as “survival” activities, which occupy the survival end of the self-employment continuum (Kabeer 2012; see also Haan 1989).

Kabeer analyses SME programmes in terms of a continuum. At one end of the continuum is survival-oriented income-generation, which is ‘distress-driven, precarious and characterised by high levels of self-exploitation’. At the other end she finds accumulation-oriented enterprises. At which point of this continuum women find themselves is dependent on gender-specific constraints and opportunities embodied in rules, norms, roles and responsibilities of the intrinsically gendered relations of family and kinship as well as the ‘imposed’ constraints and opportunities embodied in the rules and norms of the purportedly gender neutral institutions of states, markets and civil society as well as the attitudes and behavior of different institutional actors. According to her a large majority of self-employed women are closer to the survival end (Kabeer 2012: 24).

This was certainly the case with reference to livelihoods studied here. Yet women were in receipt of livelihood assistance. I discuss below the kinds of assistance women received for agriculture, poultry farming and animal husbandry and petty trade and petty commodity production. While it is not my intention to critically evaluate these different sectors in any depth here, I explore their limits and possibilities as they emerge through the narratives of the women.

### **Limits and Possibilities of Livelihood Support**

The proliferation of livelihood support programmes in Mullaitivu, when seen through the individual stories and experiences of the women studied here, creates an interesting map. All of the women, with the exception of **Vasanthimala** had received some form of financial or material assistance from the government, an NGO, INGO, faith-based institution, private charity or donor as livelihood support. This assistance took a number of different forms, from outright grants, which allowed the recipients to make the decision about what to do with the money, to interest free or interest payable loans. Assistance also came in in the forms material goods such as livestock, poultry, tools or implements. Some of this assistance was catalytic in commencing or recommencing a self-employment activity, although in other cases, it was not useful or women were unable to sustain the activity beyond an initial period.

#### **Agriculture and home gardening:**

Consistent with Tamil and Muslim culture, where land and houses are inherited by female children as dowry (Sarvananthan 2017) or on the death of parents, all of the women had a piece of land of their own, although the extent of land varied considerably and not everybody had land enough to cultivate for an income. **Bahirathi** and **Rathirani**, had the two largest plots of land. **Bahirathi** had four acres of paddy land, 1/2 acre of coconut land and some panampilavu land. **Rathirani** had an acre of land, as well as an additional 60 acres of land owned by the family. **Manohari** and **Kalainidhi** had smaller plots sufficient for home gardening.

On return, women who had sufficient land for cultivation had begun working on the land. Most returnees received agricultural tools worth Rs.9000 as part of the resettlement grant. Additionally **Bhahirathi** and **Rathirani** mentioned that they got water pumps. **Bhahirathi** had received the pump from the Women's Development Centre in Mulliyavalai on a loan, and was paying Rs. 3000 per month. **Rathirani** had received her pump from a charity, which had also given her a few banana trees. She said she planted the trees and was subsequently able to sell the bananas, the income from which she used for her daughter's educational expenses. She also expressed appreciation of the fertilizer subsidy that she received from the Agricultural Productivity Committee, which allowed her to buy fertilizer at a cheaper price.

Women engaged in agriculture faced a number of constraints in realising the full potential of the land available to them. The inability to mobilize additional labour was a major constraint. In the case of **Rathirani** for instance, most of the land owned by her and her family had become jungle and remained uncleared. Even though she had aspirations to expand cultivation of the land, she said she could not afford additional labour:

I want to be involved in agriculture, which is what I am good at. Even if am growing chilli, I need to hire someone to work in the fields. Because of that I don't grow more than what I can work with. I can't afford to pay someone every time. So I mostly do all the things on my own.

Even **Kalainidhi** who had a very small plot – 1/4 acre of land – said she couldn't cultivate on her own without male support. She used to help her husband to cultivate chillies and brinjals which was relatively easy to grow and which yielded a harvest within six months, but she was not doing any cultivation at the time the interviews were conducted. **Bhahirathi**, who was living with her parents, appears to have solved the labour problem by giving their paddy land on lease.

Access to water was the other frequently mentioned constraint. **Kalainidhi**, **Vasanthamala** and **Manohari** referred to the inability to do any cultivation including home gardening because of lack of water. **Manohari** who had half an acre of land had planted vegetables on her return. However she stated that all the

plants died as the rains didn't come as expected. Water was generally drawn from wells, but not everyone had a well on their own land. Those who didn't have water on their lands, obtained water from neighbouring homes or relatives living close by expending time and energy in doing so. **Kalainidhi** was fetching water from her younger sister's house around 150m away while **Manohari** was going to her mother's house. **Vasanthamala** was looking for assistance from an NGO to dig a well on her compound.

It should be noted that none of the women here referred to problems with deeds or problems with army occupation of land which has been identified in a number of other studies (see for instance Sumathy 2016, Jegatheeswara and Arulthas 2017), and which is at the centre of a number of on-going struggles in which women are playing a central role at the time this paper was being written (de Silva et al 2017; Srinivasan 2017; Wickrematunge 2017a; Wickrematunge 2017b).

#### **Poultry farming and animal husbandry:**

Poultry farming and animal husbandry are home-based livelihood activities which women in the North and East (as in other parts of the country) have always engaged in, for home consumption as well as to supplement family incomes. Livelihood assistance in the form of cows or hens or cash grants to buy cows or hens was the most common form of assistance that women received, assisting women to revive these activities. **Bahirathi**, **Kalainidhi**, **Manohari**, **Nirmala** and **Rathirani** had received assistance for poultry farming and/or livestock. **Rathirani** had got Rs. 15,000 from the kachcheri to buy chickens and also received two cows. **Manohari** had got chickens from UNHCR immediately after she resettled. **Nirmala** received cows, hens and nests worth Rs. 40,000 from her Divisional Secretariat (DS) office. **Kalainidhi** got the same amount from the Karathurapatru DS office in 2012 to buy cattle from the Department of Social Services.

Poultry farming can provides a fair and steady income without imposing a massive workload on women due to the ready-made markets available locally and the relative ease of transport of eggs. It can also contribute to household nutrition. Yet beyond the initial random distribution of chicks or hens there appears to be no support or advisory services for poultry farmers in Mullaitivu.

At the time these interviews were conducted, poultry farming provided a steady income only for **Kalainidhi**. She had 30 hens divided in three nests and followed a system of rotation in order to get a continuous income. She said that she could manage her daily expenses with income from the eggs. She wanted to expand her poultry yard, but she needed capital and labour to do so. She needed at least 100,000 to buy more hens and also replace the temporary nests she had with permanent nests. But she lamented that “Money is the barrier . . .(and) It was not the case before.” If she expanded, she said she would need to make the roofing for the poultry sheds, feed the hens, manage the medicine as well as transportation in the absence of her husband. She was carrying 2-3 kg of birdfeed on her bicycle every few days to avoid having to buy it on a daily basis. But if she got more poultry, she would need a vehicle to transport the bird food. She stated that if her husband was alive she wouldn’t have to bear the full burden of responsibility to do these tasks and “he would do it completely.” Now if she hired someone, she would have to pay that person.

The more recurrent theme in these narratives was of the lack of success with poultry and of dying chicks and hens. **Rathirani**’s hens had died due to sickness. In **Manohari**’s case some died and others had stopped laying any eggs. Some of **Nirmala**’s hens went missing, others fell ill and yet others were sold. There were similar stories relating to cows. **Kalainidhi** for instance recounted how the two cows she owned did well for about three years, – she was able to sell the milk and also give her children – but then they “strayed towards the military boundary,” ate some polythene bags, and later died.

#### **Petty commodity production and petty trade:**

**Bhahirathi** and **Kalainidhi**’s involvement in the sewing shop was due to livelihood support they received from an International NGO. As **Bhahirathi** explained, the sewing shop was a collective of five women who were supported to set up the shop by CARE International. The initial capital investment was by CARE, which constructed the building and also gave machines, scissors, thread and cloth. Later, World Vision donated materials worth three lakhs to continue the work. **Kalainidhi** also got a bicycle so she can travel to work. **Faizunnisa** had benefited from Rs.30,000 she

received from the Mannar Women's Development Federation to buy a new set of pots, basins and other implements needed for her string hopper business.

Unlike in the case of milk or eggs, petty commodities such as food and clothes did not have such ready markets in the area. **Faizunissa**, **Vasanthamala**, and **Kalainidhi** spoke of the difficulties they faced selling their products in their own areas, and the difficulties of relying on individual consumers. **Faizunissa** mentioned that she preferred to sell to shops and schools rather than individuals because they paid her on time, but that individuals tended to ask for credit and then never paid her back. **Bhahirathi** also stated that people in the area didn't often have enough money to pay at once. "They will ask to pay Rs. 50 or Rs. 20 and say that they would give the rest later. This she said was a hurdle because they had to then run around to get the money back. However, according to **Vasanthamala**, even shop owners to whom she used to sell short eats to, did not pay at once. **Vasanthamala** also referred to the seasonal nature of work and the fact that profits waxed and waned depending on the time of year:

There was a time when Muslims came here for business during Ramazan and Christmas. Then my food business did really well. They would order breakfast and lunch from me and I could even earn Rs. 5000 – 6000 per day.

**Bhahirathi** and **Kalainidhi** who were part of the tailoring collective, stated that sales through the shop were hardly sufficient, and therefore they also sold at the Keppapulavu junction and Vatrappalai market. Remarks by **Vasanthamala**, **Bhahirathi** and **Kalainidhi** relating to selling string hoppers as well as clothes in Mullaitivu raises the question whether there is an over-saturation of the market of the gender-typed goods and services that they are producing, making it challenging to earn a reasonable income from these activities. **Nirmala's** statement relating to the lack of demand for woven thatch roofing material also indicates that traditional crafts, which women were involved in during the war, may no longer have a market in the post-war context and that such skills may in fact have to be put into different purposes. These findings resonate with Pupavac's observations about Bosnian women trying to sell home-made products along the main Sarajevo Moster road in the baking heat of summer despite having few buyers and limited markets for

handicrafts (Pupavac 2005: 402). As Milford Bateman would put it – “supply does not create its own demand” (Bateman 2014).

## **Savings, Credit and Debt**

Even while some women had aspirations to expand the self-employment ventures and to increase income levels, they did not have the ability to save or mobilize capital to invest in more material and bear the increased transportation and labour costs expansion would entail. This also meant that reviving an activity that had collapsed became a huge challenge. **Vasanthamala**'s food business collapsed following an illness for which she was hospitalized for three months. Even though she wants resume it, she has no savings to buy a new set of pots and pans. Despite the myriad self-employment assistance programmes, it seems she has no one to turn to for assistance for a new set of pans.

**Rathirani** stated that she put 10 rupees in her daughters till every now and then. **Bhahirathi** was the only woman who appeared to be saving on a regular basis. She was part of a seettu (chit) fund. Before the end of the war, she had about 30 pieces of gold jewellery which she had bought from money saved through seettu, and was continuing to save in this manner. Saving was however impossible for most women. Many spoke of the financial pressures after the war, including the costs relating to rebuilding homes and assets destroyed during the war, and therefore stretching incomes and rations to their limits. Even though women did receive housing assistance, it was often inadequate. **Faizunnissa** who received housing assistance under the Indian Housing Scheme managed the shortfall by stretching the rations which were given for two or three months after she returned to Mullaitivu beyond that period. Furthermore, out of the Rs. 25,000 which was given as a resettlement allowance, she reserved Rs. 15,000 to build the house. She stated that she built the house “without eating and drinking.” **Rathirani** received a housing grant of Rs. 550,000, yet she stated that they found it inadequate and the family had to spend their own money to finish the house. **Nirmala**, who was the only person whose house was not damaged, stated that although she didn't have to rebuild her house, surviving on return to Mullaitivu was still difficult. She had survived after resettlement with a young child and minimal support by pawning and selling jewellery given to her by her parents.

Microcredit was readily available in Mullaitivu whether to start, revive or expand a self-employment activity, as government policy following the end of the war had facilitated an influx of financial institutions to the North and East. Namini Wijedasa, in 2014 documented 28 financial institutions providing credit facilities to the poor in the North.<sup>25</sup> Of the women interviewed for this study, **Bhahirathi** and **Manohari** had taken a loan for livelihood purposes. **Bhahirathi** had taken Rs.100,000 from Commercial Credit at 22% interest. She was paying Rs. 4,200 as interest every two weeks. **Manohari** had taken a loan to buy poultry, which she was still paying back, even though all of the poultry had died.

**Vasanthamala** was offered a loan of Rs.100,000 by World Vision to improve her short eats business, but it came with a caveat. She was required to form a group with five other women or provide employment for five other women. She stated that she refused the offer as she felt it was not profitable, particularly, if she had to pay the wages of five others and repay the loan.

This whole 100,000 plan is not easy and attractive as it sounds. It is more complicated. It is not useful for me to take that opportunity. I asked them if they could give me anything for free, because that would help me to make some money.

Following her refusal of the offer made by World Vision, **Vasanthimala** stated that she contemplated taking a loan from Ceylinco, but the interest alone was more than she could pay. She had checked some other banks, but couldn't also get loan from a bank as she didn't possess a bank account.

A few of the women analysed here had taken loans for other purposes, and felt they could not afford to take another for livelihood purposes.<sup>26</sup> **Kalainidhi** had taken two loans: Rs. 50,000 from the women's organisations that she is part of and 3 1/4 lakhs at 1% interest from the rehabilitation project that she worked for to finish the doors of the house and fix windows. She was concerned about security for her girl child: "We have a female child, so we need security. We needed two doors for security reasons. And I have paid little by little from the money earned from selling eggs and sewing." She went on to say that she was aware of the higher interest rates

<sup>25</sup> "North in Debt Trap" by Namini Wijedasa, *Sunday Times*, 10 December 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Increasing indebtedness in these areas, among those rebuilding their homes is well documented (see Gunasekara et al 2016, Kadirgamar 2017).

charged by some of the financial institutions and that she would be cautious about taking a loan from such institutions:

I don't take those loans (from companies like Commercial Credit). I am afraid. Our income depends on hens, and if something happens like sickness or something like what happened to the cows, we would not be able to pay the debt. We don't have any other help like foreign help.

**Faizunissa** had borrowed Rs. 25,000 from World Vision to buy "this and that" which included a fan so her children could study more comfortably and to make some jewellery for one of her daughters reaching the age of marriage. Repayment was on a weekly basis. In her situation, **Faizunissa** also stated that she would think twice before taking another loan. "If I can settle only I will take. If I cannot I wouldn't take. In some places they couldn't pay back, and got scolded. I am scared of that situation. So I do not take. If I settle it then I can take another one anywhere." Manohari recounted how she tried to borrow from a male acquaintance from the area (for a much lower interest rate) when she was rebuilding the house, and he asked her what favour she could do for him in exchange for the money.

Thus despite the availability of credit, not all women were seduced by the promises being made by microcredit companies.<sup>27</sup>

## **Welfare Benefits, Charity and Family**

In the face of growing vulnerability and economic stress women appear to be surviving only due to various forms of support and assistance from charitable and religious institutions, individuals and family, even while these were ad hoc and unreliable. **Faizunissa**, **Kalainidhi** and **Nirmala** were in receipt of Samurdhi. Two others – **Bhahirathi** and **Rathirani** – had applied for Samurdhi but had not yet received it. There were also family members living with some of them, who were in receipt of the Public Assistance Monthly Allowance (PAMA). These welfare payments from the state, were however woefully inadequate. At the time the interviews were conducted Samurdhi payment ranged from Rs. 210 to Rs. 1500 depending on the number of family members and PAMA was a mere Rs. 250.

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<sup>27</sup> These narratives confirm Gunasekara et al's (2016) findings that women headed households have lower levels of debt than other households (2016: 7).

A number of those who had school-going children had received or were receiving assistance for children's schooling from a church or charity. **Rathirani** had received assistance from a children's charity for her daughter's education needs such as schoolbooks and stationary, as well as free tuition. **Vasanthamala** was also receiving assistance for her daughters' education from some sisters and a priest in the school. The sisters were providing stationary, clothes, shoes, and other things that her daughter needed while she was also in receipt of Rs. 1,500 from a priest towards her daughter's education. Her daughter had in fact been living for a while with the sisters, until she fell ill. She had started fainting and losing weight, and **Vasanthamala** had brought her back to live with her. She mentioned that because she didn't have a daily income, she depended on the 1,500 rupees that her daughter got at the end of every month. She would often pay debts accumulated buying groceries with this money. **Kalainidhi** was receiving Rs. 1,300 towards tuition fees for her daughter from an organisation called Amaithi Thenral. She had also received some short-term assistance. One benefactor had sent her Rs. 5,000 for just two months and then disappeared. This person had got **Kalainidhi's** details from another villager. When the support stopped **Kalainidhi** had tried to contact her by phone, but she could not get through because the line was continuously busy. She said "If they don't want to give anymore, we can't do anything, right." Similarly she had received Rs. 2,000 from Haridas Institute for two or three months with instruction to save Rs. 500, but that support was also not continued.

**Nirmala** was depending on money (around Rs. 8,000) from the grandmother of her first husband on a monthly basis. **Manohari** was being supported by her brothers. Yet family and kin networks were always not in a position to offer financial help. **Faizunissa** observed of her siblings: "All six will look after me if they have to, but they are also in difficulties. Therefore I do not expect much from them. If I have I give them." **Vasanthamala** stated that her brothers who are living abroad are not helping her as they wanted her to live with their mother in Jaffna and she refused. Thus, while the diaspora has provided a lifeline for many poor people in the Vanni, yet as the narratives reveal not everyone in the Vanni has family in the diaspora or those who are willing to support.

## Part 4: Women's Labour in the Aftermath of Violence

In the absence of capital and additional labour, women's own labour emerge as the most important element in these livelihood strategies. Yet the labour that women could deploy for income generation was severely circumscribed by the extraordinary labour that was needed to rebuild their lives in the aftermath of the war. The social world that these women knew and understood was all but shattered, yet they had to "pick up the pieces and to live in this very place of devastation" (Das 2007: 6). Women's productive labour was entangled and constrained by the labour needed to take care of homes and families, to rebuild and restore material lives, and the labour of traumatic memory. In making this argument, I am drawing on two strands of literature. Firstly, I draw on the work of a long line of feminist thinkers on women's double and triple burden of work and the need to make the connections between productive and reproductive labour (Beneria 1979, Pearson 2004; Kabeer 2000). I also draw on the scholarship of Veena Das (2007) and Elizabeth Jelin (2003) on the work involved in re-inhabiting the social world in the aftermath of extraordinary violence. Following from Das, the reinhabiting of a shattered world requires a descent into the ordinary and the everyday; in the aftermath of violence, life is recovered not through some grand gestures in the realm of the transcendent but through paying repeated attention to the most mundane, drab and commonplace of things. It also entails a descent into the unknown, the unfamiliar and unintelligible, working through memories of loss and pain and becoming claimants of truth and justice.

The women analysed here cooked, cleaned, washed clothes, drew water. They took children to school or tuition. In some cases livestock and poultry was kept purely for domestic consumption. Some domestic chores were particularly time and energy consuming. For instance collecting water, which was not available on their own properties. Women who cooked for a livelihood mentioned that they kept some of the food for family consumption to avoid more cooking. **Bhahirathi**, the only woman without children, was looking after her parents.

Self-employment in fact provided the only way of reconciling women's household burdens and the need to secure an income. Indeed in the model of self-

employment that is promoted, care work continues to be domesticated and women are expected to juggle the entrepreneurial activities with their familial obligations without question (Altan Olcay 2014: 251; Roy 2012:144). Roy argues that these programmes not merely reproduces but in fact deepens the domestication of care relations.

Additionally they were rebuilding homes and restoring assets destroyed during the war. All of the women, except **Nirmala**, had to rebuild their houses, which had been fully or partly destroyed, in some cases contributing their own labour to this task. Even though the government and I/NGOs provided various forms of housing and resettlement assistance, such assistance was not uniform and varied depending on whether the houses were fully or partly destroyed, the number of family members, and the type of donor involved. **Faizunissa** recalled that when she returned in 2010, the plot of land given to her by her mother had become like a jungle. She cleared the land herself and built a small hut. With the initial resettlement assistance, **Kalainidhi** “put up a tent with sticks and built a mud house” before they could build a cement and brick structure. At the time of the interview, **Vasanthimala** was still living in a temporary house she got from ZOA and was still trying to get her name included in a housing beneficiary list which involved innumerable visits to the Gramasevaka and Government Agent (GA).

Women’s lives were further compounded by the loss of loved ones and the work of memory and mourning. The researchers who conducted the interviews for the GROW study did not ask direct questions about trauma, yet the trauma of these women as well as the ways in which they are trying to cope, spill into these interviews without any warning or signal, disrupting their flow. The transcripts I studied were marked by tears, sighs, silences and the sudden loss of words. The women whose husbands had disappeared during the war spoke of the added trauma of not knowing what happened to them, the lack of closure and their search for truth and justice.

I cried and cried and asked them to show his body, they didn’t. I asked the GS and other offices to provide me with his death certificate, but they didn’t. They are telling me that someone must confirm his death. What can I do to prove them he is dead. I haven’t even seen his body. (Crying) . . . I am dying inside thinking about all that’s happening.

Family members of the disappeared had borne or continue to bear economic and opportunity costs of pursuing truth or justice. None of them had registered the disappearance as a death despite the legal provision to do so in terms of the Registration of Deaths Ordinance, or taken compensation offered by the state. Instead, they had spent considerable time, energy and money looking for the disappeared. As **Rathirani** said:

I am doing everything I can to find him. I sent letters to ICRC, UNHCR and UN along with his picture. They sent a reply that he is being searched for, but they did not find him yet.

For Jelin (2003), labours of memory refers to an active process through which people attempt to change their relationship to the past and rework their memories in order to re-inhabit the unfamiliar world in which they find themselves. This labour is made particularly difficult and a process without end in the case of disappearances. Of all human rights violations, disappearances thrust an inordinate amount of unanswered questions upon the survivor. Daya Somasunderam, a psychiatrist who has worked and written on the psychological effects of the ethnic conflict on individuals in the North and East of Sri Lanka, describes the homes of the disappeared as quiet, moody and akin to a funeral house where the mildest of conversations linked to the disappeared can set off tears and crying (2007). In these homes, survivors live year after year in the hope of imminent or eventual return of the disappeared because to think that the person is dead is considered disloyal or equal to killing the person (Hamber and Wilson 2002).

Women such as **Rathirani** occupy this liminal space with no escape and continue to attend to the everyday tasks of their lives. It is in fact difficult to determine where their productive labour begins and ends, because it is affectively, spatially and temporally entangled in these multiple other labours. Time was perhaps the most scarce commodity in their lives. Yet there was no additional household labour, which could be mobilized, or cash to pay for labour to support them in carrying out these multiple burdens.

If my husband was here to earn . . . I don't have to work too much. Now I need to do all the work. If rice or something else has to be bought, I need to go to the shops. I need to buy food for the hens. Workload is high and it is hard to balance . . . I need to take care of my kids, and do housework and everything. (**Kalainidhi**)

Here, we need to thirst for everything. At TRRO I had some free time in between. But here there is so much work like poultry, and the coconut grove. I need to move like this or that. There is no rest. I need to take care of my parents, full time. I need to take a bath, wash clothes, cook and go to the market and do household work. (**Bhahirathi**)

### **Adding Children to the Labour Market**

De la Rocha finds that in times of economic hardship the poor will mobilize additional household labour as a coping strategy. In two-parent households, where the man is employed or self-employed, additional financial stresses may be addressed by adding the women to the labour market. Indeed in Sri Lanka too, it would seem that prior to the end of the war, under LTTE control, these women and their families managed to survive, even with difficulty by supplementing one primary income earning activity, whether agriculture, fishing, livestock, or forestry, with other work.

However, following the death, disappearance or separation from their husbands there were few or no additional family members who could be mobilized whether to help with cultivation, other self-employment activities or childcare, with a few exceptions. **Manohari** referred to her mother's help and **Nirmala** and **Vasanthamala** referred to support from neighbours with childcare. While family and community support networks were not completely absent, they were nevertheless weak. Often, family members who might have contributed by household chores or other activities were not in good health, disabled or infirm.

In similar circumstances in other contexts, children are often expected to give up their education and join in income generating activities or if not, assist parents in these activities while also helping with household chores. Yet in the cases studied in this paper only **Vasanthkumari** and **Faizunissa** mentioned that they

might get the assistance of one of their children for their livelihood activities; that too because they had given up schooling. The others who had children were making every effort to ensure that education of the children was not interrupted either because of income generating activities or household chores. Even if sometimes children helped, women were not happy to impose on their children. **Kalainidhi** for instance mentioned that her son helps her with some chores, yet she was very conscious that such activity should not disrupt his studies. Similarly, **Rathithevi** stated:

I go to my sister's house for water and it is around 150 metres away from here. . . .I need to do it, because (my children) have tuition in the evening and school in the morning. They have the responsibility to study. I didn't study hard and so it was a barrier to get a job, as my parents sowed peanuts. It must not be the case for my children.

Women lived for the sake of their children and the meaning of their lives resided in ensuring their children's educations and safety; in arranging good marriages for their daughters and collecting sufficient dowry to do so.

I now live as a mother to my daughter. (**Nirmala**)

What is left for me through that marriage is only four children . . . I must earn, educate my children, and give them in marriage. I have to take efforts up to that . . .

I have a dream about how my children should be. (**Faizunnisa**)

## **Remarry or not?**

The question whether they should remarry or not was also a matter that emerges in these narratives with implications for economic security. Some wanted to remarry; others rejected it. **Faizunnisa** had this to say on the topic of remarriage:

He married another woman. That is upsetting. However, I don't want to remarry because my husband left me. I am very strong about it. If I marry again, the new one wouldn't feed my children or care for them. . . . He would curse them before feeding

them. I have witnesses such things. So I am living alone. . . . I want to live a better life with my four children than him and prove to the world that I can. . . .

**Mahohari** was being pressured by her parents to go back to her estranged husband, but she was refusing to do so and had in fact left her parents' home to avoid this pressure. **Kalainidhi** however was of the view that "women must get remarried" and that parents had a duty to arrange marriages for young widows. Indeed, families had arranged second marriages after the war, as in the case of **Nirmala**, but this second marriage also did not work.

Cultural and gender norms also made it difficult for women to seek male assistance from within the community, outside of marriage. **Manohari** related an incident, which has a bearing on this matter. She had hired a man to cut down the mango tree in her compound, which was damaged. According to her the neighbours started spreading rumours, although she dismissed them saying ". . . they just talk like that".

The ways in which the household is transformed in time, as the children of these women grow up and marry, as well as women's own decisions to remarry or not, will have implications for the question of labour analysed here. Again in this post-war context, women emerge not merely as victims but as agential subjects, navigating economic, cultural and even political pressures. As time passes, these pressures may ease bringing about more conducive conditions to generate an income through self-employment or to deploy their labour in other ways. By the time their children are older, perhaps Manohari may have completed her O' Levels and a computer course and is able to find a stable salaried job; **Faizunissa** may decide to migrate to the Middle East.

## **Towards a Conclusion: The Impossible Promise of Self-Employment**

Post-war Mullaitivu, as other war-affected districts in the North and East of Sri Lanka, is a site where humanitarian assistance, neo-liberal development and good old, and new charity converge and intersect to promote livelihoods for various sections of the population. SME promotion is at the centre of this assemblage of post-war discourses, practices and structures touted to deliver economic empowerment to the most vulnerable.

The discourse around SMEs is however a gendered one, for while it constructs women as independent, virtuous, reliable and rational economic actors, more creditworthy than men, it has nothing to say about the gender division of labour and the way in which care work continues to be domesticated. Moreover, in the post-war context, these programmes are rolled out almost without any change, altogether ignoring the material and psychological losses during the war and their implications for engaging in entrepreneurial activities. Indeed, women are expected to be so resilient and resourceful that a few chickens, a few plants, and a few thousand rupees is considered sufficient to enable them to recover from the shock of the war, and its economic, social, cultural and psychological ramifications still reverberating in their lives.

This paper documents women's experiences of these programmes in an attempt to disrupt this dominant discourse. Even as women reveal considerable resourcefulness and agency in negotiating with, struggling against, and manipulating the conditions of their lives so as to overcome the hardships that they face, six years after the war when the interviews for this study were conducted, they were still trying to cope with and recover from the last phase of the war. They tell a story of the impossible promise of self-employment where women are attempting to juggle a diverse repertoire of extremely precarious, and subsistence level incomes sources, in a context where they had few resources beyond their own labour. Even as women expressed a preference for self-employment over wage labour or salaried jobs, it is a choice made out of desperation, where it was impossible for them to neatly disentangle their productive labour and their livelihoods from the multiple

other labours that they were having to perform – the reproductive labour required to take care of family and home, the labour needed to rebuild material lives from scratch, and the labours of traumatic memory. Even though women and families were recipients of Samurdhi and PAMA, these payments were hardly sufficient. Thus charitable and religious institutions that flooded these areas after the end of the war and next of kin filled the gaps in post-war development policy. The narratives of the seven women reveal that in the face of growing vulnerability and economic stress, their lives are sustained by a multiplicity of sources, including income derived from self-employment, claims and entitlements (such as samurdhi), support from relatives, charitable institutions, and cash infusions obtained through pawning and borrowing.

What then is the responsibility of the Sri Lankan state to women such as those studied in this paper? Nagaraj has argued that post-war development in the North and East has been a continuation of the war by other means, while critiquing the unfolding transitional justice process for its failure to take account of the economic precariousness of war-affected communities.<sup>28</sup> Indeed the transitional justice process unfolding in Sri Lanka has emphasized truth, justice, and reparations for civil and political rights while completely sidelining questions of economic harm, economic justice, and redistribution. Within this broader context, policies such as the National Action Plan on Women Headed Households which I referred to at the outset is mere window dressing with no real meaning to structurally address the economic plight of poor women in war-affected areas.

What is now necessary is to locate, analyse and address the question of post-war livelihoods within the broader politics of post-war development and reconstruction and as a question of economic justice, beyond a market-based approach to economic empowerment. As Ni Aolain points out, the academic and policy spotlight after wars tends to be on violence, human rights, male perpetrators and victims while questions of equality, economic redistribution and social justice are off the table for the purpose of transitional justice. Commitments to economic and social transformation are generally articulated as vague principles, not as

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<sup>28</sup> "Beyond reconciliation and accountability: Distributive justice and Sri Lanka's transitional agenda" by Vijay Nagaraj, 18 May 2016, Open Democracy, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/openglobalrights/vijay-k-nagaraj/putting-distributive-justice-on-sri-lanka-s-transitional-agenda>.

binding roles. This is an enforcement gap that cuts across both genders but is acutely felt by women (2012: 79-80).

The magnitude of economic losses suffered during the last phase of the war, that is conveyed so starkly in the narratives documented here, and the structural impediments to post-war income generation requires that redistribution and social welfare become part of the transitional justice debate. Otherwise peace is likely to mean little to poor women in the North and East. The Sri Lankan state could start by taking serious note of the voices of war survivors highlighted in the recently released report of the Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanisms and their call for economic justice (Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanisms 2016). The report observes that at a focus group discussion with women-headed households in Mullaitivu who had faced numerous violations, they “chose to prioritise requests for the provision of basic needs for their children and themselves in order to lead a decent life” (Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanisms 2016: 36). In a section exploring the economic challenges of women-headed households the report states:

Women in Mullaitivu for instance pleaded for support in the form of immediate monetary compensation or support for their children’s upkeep and education, as they were finding it difficult to survive and provide for these needs. However, a number of the women asked for support not only in terms of payments or handouts, but also support to come to terms with their new lives and role (sic) as breadwinner, and support to build their skills. As such there were frequent calls for vocational training, self-employment support and job placements. These economic challenges, the women felt, needed to be factored in when designing reparation packages. (ibid 2016: 357)

Can the Sri Lankan state as well as the multitude of development actors crowding the field of livelihood support heed this call?

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# Doing This and That: Self-employment and economic survival of women heads of households in Mullaitivu

Chulani Kodikara

In post-war Sri Lanka, small, medium and micro (SME) enterprise development is the dominant approach to livelihood development for war-affected women, and particularly for women heads of households (WHH). Yet not every woman who is a recipient of SME support becomes an “entrepreneur” running an “enterprise” or even a micro enterprise. Rather, they assist women to commence and engage in a diverse repertoire of extremely precarious self-employment activities, in which their own labour is the most important ingredient. However, women’s own productive labour was materially, temporally, spatially and affectively entangled with and circumscribed by the extraordinary labour of remaking their lives after war. Although many of the women continued to receive or were eligible for state social welfare payments such as Samurdhi and the Public Assistance Monthly Allowance (PAMA), these were woefully inadequate. Women coped and survived in spite of the failure of these self employment ventures due to handouts from charitable institutions and family, even though these were ad hoc, episodic and unreliable. Based on these findings, livelihoods in post-war Sri Lanka have to be located, analysed and addressed within the broader politics of post-war development and reconstruction, and as a question of economic justice beyond a market-based approach to economic empowerment.



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