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and Young Women Ex-Combatants:
*A Case Study from Batticaloa***

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INTERNATIONAL
CENTRE FOR
ETHNIC STUDIES



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Sonny Inbaraj Krishnan

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

Sri Lanka Association of Women With Disabilities	AKASA
Community Based Rehabilitation	CBR
Criminal Investigation Department	CID
Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration	DDR
International Centre for Ethnic Studies	ICES
International Labour Organization	ILO
International Organisation for Migration	IOM
Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam	LTTE
Non-Governmental Organisation	NGO
Rana Viru Seva Authority	RVSA
United Kingdom	UK
United Nations	UN
United Nations Children's Fund	UNICEF
United Nations Security Council	UNSC
United Nations World Food Programme	WFP

The Transition to Civilian Life of Teenage Girls and Young Women Ex-Combatants: A Case Study from Batticaloa

Introduction

For nearly three decades, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fighters waged a violent bloody war in Sri Lanka where they controlled some parts of the North and East of Sri Lanka. In May 2009, the Sri Lankan army brutally crushed the separatist rebels ending one of Asia's longest-running insurgencies. In the midst of the war, a generation of Sri Lanka's Tamil girls – both children and young teenagers – in the Women's Front of the Liberation Tigers or *Vituthalai Pulikal Munani* formed an important part of the Tigers' forces. These girls, that comprised one-third of the active fighting force of the LTTE (Bouta 2005), were known as *Suthantira Paravaigal* or 'Birds of Freedom', a title bestowed upon them by Lt. Col. Thileepan, the Tigers' political chief in Jaffna (Manoharan, 2003).

The end of hostilities in May 2009 saw some 270,000 to 300,000 Tamils fleeing the conflict zone in the North and settling in camps for internally displaced people. Fleeing the fighting, together with the civilians, were thousands of Tamil Tiger combatants – many of them injured women fighters – both young women and more experienced middle-aged female fighters, who surrendered to the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL). Some of these combatants have now returned to their communities following a rehabilitation programme conducted by the government. However, there are no proper state funded safety nets and support services to assist in rebuilding their lives. Among ex-combatants in Batticaloa are also former women combatants who self demobilized in 2004.

Though survivors, many of the women ex-combatants that this researcher met in the remote hamlets of Batticaloa still bear deep emotional wounds caused by forced conscription by the Tamil Tigers; the witnessing of gruesome deaths; and the physical injuries of war. Their voices speak of fear, loss of education, and the severance of close family ties. Despite this pain, there is hope for these returned women ex-combatants as they reintegrate into their communities and eke out a livelihood through the support of women in matrilineal household clusters.

This paper, based on research carried out by the author in Batticaloa between April to June 2010, is on the resilient female networks, prevalent in eastern Sri Lanka, that care for the casualties of war and till recently protected self-demobilized girl child soldiers from forcible re-recruitment by the LTTE, also known as the Tamil Tigers. Following a section on Methods, Part 1 of this paper looks at recruitment by the LTTE and escape and self-demobilization prior to the end of war. Part II outlines the government policy relating to reintegration of ex-combatants. Part III explores women's experiences of civilian life. Part IV outlines the nature of support provided by female networks. Part

V points to the importance of organized schooling in transformation of identity of these women in the post war period followed by a concluding section.

Background to the study and research methods

For the purpose of this study, a total of 23 women ex-Tamil Tiger combatants were interviewed in the following divisions in Batticaloa district between April to June 2010:

- a. Iripudichenai – Pankudaveli (Chenkalady) Division
- b. Mavadivembu (Chenkalady) Division
- c. Sittandy - Eravur Division
- d. Vaharai North Division
- e. Mylampaveli – Eravur Division

In Vaharai North Division, a focus group discussion was held with 5 female and 2 male community journalists. In the capital Colombo, the researcher spoke to key personnel from donor agencies, embassies and international NGOs. The criteria used for the inclusion of female ex-combatants in the research study were those who were forcibly recruited by the LTTE and self-demobilized when the eastern Tamil Tiger command split from the northern command in 2004; those who voluntarily disarmed following the 2002 ceasefire; and those who were released from detention by the Sri Lankan military and police following the end of the war on May 19, 2009.

In carrying out the interviews for this project, a semi-structured approach was used with a combination of direct and open-ended questions. The technique employed by Alison (2009), when she interviewed young women Tamil Tiger fighters during the 2002 ceasefire period was found to be most appropriate for the researcher. Like Alison, the researcher structured the interviews around a few topics and key questions and then gauged where the discussion was leading to allow self-reflection by the participants (Alison 2009: 27). While the researcher had an interview schedule, it was adapted for each participant and each question was not necessarily asked in the same way.

The researcher received approval from the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine's Ethics Committee in the UK to conduct this research. All participants were informed by the researcher that:

- Participation is voluntary and this was clearly stated in the consent form – which was translated into Tamil.
- They may withdraw from the study at any time with no adverse consequences to the participant.

- The confidentiality of all information will be strictly maintained, as clearly stated in the consent form.
- All information will be encrypted to prevent it from being linked back to the individual.

It is acknowledged that the bias of the researcher is heavily in favour of the female perspective. The researcher defends this because in his opinion, he brought from the field a strong intent in what women had to say where there were no men present. The researcher who is fluent in Tamil, with the help of the female research assistant, used dialogue in Tamil and reciprocity to democratize knowledge and empower participants to speak about their understanding of their own condition – letting the female ex-combatants tell their stories through an open, dialogic text. The confidential nature of the interviews was made clear by both the researcher and research assistant. The researcher further assured participants that the sensitive nature of issues under discussion will be respected and that their views would not be judged, nor will it affect the services delivered by NGOs.

Survival of a lost generation

The Batticaloa region, in eastern Sri Lanka, experienced two full-scale Sri Lankan army campaigns against the LTTE, as well as a military occupation by the Indian Peacekeeping Force resulting in torture, disappearances, and full-scale massacres of Tamils and Muslims (Goodhand & Lewer, 1999). As a result of these grievances against the state, Batticaloa became the main recruiting ground for the majority of active female and male Tamil Tiger combatants (Trawick 2007; Lawrence 2007).

In September 1989, the LTTE Women's Wing was formed and the first eastern military training camp for women was set up in Kudumbimalai (or Toppigala in Sinhala) in the Batticaloa district in August 1990. The two women's regiments – Anbarasi and Maduna – were used in the frontlines fighting side-by-side with the Tamil Tiger male-only regiments. Ex-Tamil Tiger young woman combatant M11 from Mavadivembu division was one of the first fighters in the Anbarasi regiment and recalls the time in August 1990 when she voluntarily joined the Tamil Tigers:

I wanted to fight the injustices against the Tamil people . . . For that reason I joined the LTTE and my mother and sisters supported my decision. I was sent to Kudumbimalai and underwent two months basic training with weapons and explosives. There were 100 women with me in training. I did well in basic training and after that I was made leader of a platoon of 20 women in the Women's Wing.

Yet not all recruitment was voluntary. The LTTE also engaged in forcible recruitment particularly of children. In 2002 at the time of the ceasefire brokered by the Norwegian government, the Sri Lankan armed forces controlled only 20 percent of the territorial area of the Batticaloa district, with the remainder described as “un-cleared” (Muggah 2008: 175). The forceful recruitment of children

in the LTTE and government-controlled areas increased during the 2002 ceasefire period when there was a temporary halt in the fighting. One probable reason was that the Tamil Tigers expected the peace talks to fail (which happened in Geneva in 2006) and wanted to radically increase their troop numbers so that they would be better prepared in case they had to go to war again.

Former child soldier M1 from Batticaloa's Manmunai division was forcibly conscripted in 2002, at the age of thirteen, during the ceasefire period. She relates how she was taken away:

Between five to six LTTE men came to my house and asked my mother to give me up for the movement. They threatened to kidnap me from school if my mother didn't release me. My mother negotiated with the LTTE command and met the commander four times. He refused to budge, and very reluctantly my mother gave me away. My mother and I just cried and cried as I was taken away by the LTTE. At the Taravai base camp they cut my hair short and sent me for basic training for four months. I learnt to shoot with an AK-47. After my basic training, I was sent to study field medicine.

During the 2002 ceasefire, a bitter political rivalry also emerged between the LTTE supreme leader Prabhakaran, who had his loyal Northern (Wanni) command, and the Eastern commander of the Tamil Tigers, Col. Karuna. In April 2004, the LTTE Wanni faction fiercely attacked Karuna's 6,000 troops in the East and, sensing defeat, the Eastern Tamil Tiger commander disbanded his forces and went into hiding (Human Rights Watch 2004; Goodhand et al. 2009).

Following the split of the LTTE in 2004, the Northern faction also re-recruited underage girl children released by the Eastern faction. If a family resisted, the child was taken away by force (Human Rights Watch, 2004). For many of these self-demobilized girl soldiers, the fear of re-recruitment by the rival LTTE Wanni faction was overwhelming.

Former child soldier M18 recalls the protection she received from her mother and women in the neighbourhood when she returned home to Kathiraveli, after her self-demobilization in 2004, and continued her schooling:

My mother who became the head of the family when my father died was afraid that I would be re-abducted by the LTTE. So she followed me to school. But she could not do it everyday because she also had to cook and look after my younger sisters and brothers. The days when she could not come with me, my friends in the neighbourhood, whom I call *akas* (elder sisters), would take me to school and wait till it finished for the day. They would then bring me back home. They were doing this for over a year, right till my Ordinary-Level exams.

Some children, however, do not blindly accept the rhetoric of armed groups, and this is evident when they choose to escape despite the odds of being captured and even killed (Wessels, 2006). Former child soldier M2 from Iluppadihennai division was twelve when she ran away from the Tigers in 2002. She tells of her escape:

I was in basic training at the Taravai base camp for a month. Every night we had to watch violent movies on killing before we slept. In the mornings it was training with an AK-47 to kill. I could not take it any more. How could I kill? I was just a child. My parents did not teach me that. I was

abducted by the LTTE from home and I missed my mother and sisters very much. One night I decided to escape. The sentry was a girl from my village and she let me run away. For four years my mother hid me from the LTTE, constantly moving me from one relative's place to another in different towns. I would have been killed if I was captured. In 2006, I got married to an ex-LTTE combatant who was demobilized from the Karuna faction. My mother arranged that. After that the LTTE left me alone.

Following the 2004 split, between the Northern and Eastern factions of the LTTE, thousands of other child soldiers who were forcibly recruited were simply forced to leave Karuna's group. Countless girls self-demobilized, silently disappearing into war-affected communities where, today, they still struggle to cope. UN agencies and international NGOs were caught by surprise by the large numbers of children leaving the LTTE and failed to monitor the numerous girls who were returning to their villages, in what journalist-author Narayan Swamy (2010: xiii) describes as, "one of the most shameful chapters in the history of the Tamil struggle." The implications of this oversight were still being felt in 2010.

Former child soldier M17 was sixteen during the April 2004 Prabhakaran-Karuna split and was in the LTTE's second Batticaloa base camp in Karadiyanaru:

I remember seeing all the adult cadres running about. They were certainly in a hurry to leave. No-one told us anything about what was happening. The next thing I knew was that we were asked to remove our uniforms, leave our weapons and hop into a truck that took us to the main Taravai base camp. We did not have civilian clothes, and so we were just in our T-shirts and shorts after taking off our uniforms. On reaching Taravai, we were asked to alight. Then the truck drove off, abandoning us there. There were no sentries, no fighters, no-one. It was like a ghost-town. We then decided to make a run for it. This was our chance to escape. There were 30 girls with me and we walked for six hours in the jungle to the Sri Lankan army base in Chenkalady where we surrendered ourselves.

The army registered us and then said we could all walk back home. I went to a relative's house in Chenkalady and he took me by motorcycle to my family house in Kathiraveli, North Vaharai. My father, mother and sisters embraced me and we all cried together. I had not seen them for four years since I was abducted by the LTTE.

For over a year M17 stayed indoors, fearful that she would be re-abducted by the LTTE Wannai group. She recalls that time:

I was in constant fear. At night I would sleep in the middle, with my sisters on either side of the bed. If someone broke into the house to get me, my sisters would be alerted. I missed out on continuing my schooling because of this fear.

Today, M17 works in a school as a cleaner, in exchange for food. "That's the only thing I can do. I have no skills and no means of making a livelihood. No NGO ever came to see me. It looks like I have been forgotten – just dumped in the middle of nowhere and asked to go home."

Ironically, UNICEF states that the whereabouts of these self-demobilized ex-child soldiers need to be established and 1,380 individuals are still 'open cases' in its database (Cammaert 2009). This database has been maintained in Sri Lanka since 2003 to monitor recruitment of children into the LTTE. The failure to verify the existence of these self-demobilized former girl soldiers precludes other agencies like the International Organization for Migration (IOM) from providing services to these women in the form of skills training.

Sri Lanka's policy on reintegration of ex-combatants

Following the immediate aftermath of hostilities in May 2009, thousands of Tamil Tiger combatants – including injured women fighters – both young women and more experienced middle-aged female fighters surrendered or were captured by the GOSL.

M10 - who lost her left leg in a 1995 battle in the Wannai region - surrendered herself at the Omantai military checkpoint during the closing days of the war after fleeing the heavy shelling on Puthikkudiyiruppu with civilians. There she was immediately taken to Pampaimadu Camp for interrogation by Sri Lankan army intelligence and the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of the police force. A year later, in late April 2010, M10 was released and recalled how she was sent back to Batticaloa:

After about one year of intense repetitive interrogation by army intelligence and the CID, I was told that I would be released. There were about 20 girls like me. We were asked to get in a military truck and after we all got in, the back of the truck was covered with a large tarpaulin. We could not see where we were being driven. After several hours the truck stopped and my name was called out. I knew I was in Batticaloa as the surroundings looked familiar. Then I saw my sister and her children run towards me. I shouted *perria akka* (big sister) and we all embraced and cried. There was a CID officer who accompanied us. He warned me not to talk to anyone, or else I would be in trouble. The truck then drove off. I felt that I had just been dumped into uncertainty. My sister is poor; I am disabled; so how is she going to look after me? No NGO came to talk to me in my sister's place, except for the police who drop by every week to check up on me.

M7, like M10, is an injured ex-Tamil Tiger young woman combatant who surrendered at the Omantai checkpoint in the closing days of the war. In April 2010 she was released after a year in Cheddikulam camp, where the CID interrogated her.

Unlike in a situation where women and girls either escaped or self demobilized, the post-conflict environment does provide an opportunity for a proper process of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants. In 2000 the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted a ground-breaking resolution on women, peace and security. With the passing of Security Council resolution 1325 the members of the Security Council for the first time acknowledged the different needs of female and male ex-combatants and those women associated with the fighting forces in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) processes (United Nations Security Council,

2000). As successful DDR processes form the key to post-conflict reconstruction and sustainable development, it is crucial to include both women and men in such programs.

But a common concern among practitioners is that DDR tends to be viewed by planners as an undertaking in a program with externally driven mandates and interests, rather than a continuation of the political dialogue from the peace process and a social contract with communities receiving the ex-combatants. Scant attention is also devoted to understanding the community reintegration of women ex-combatants in matrilineal societies like Batticaloa, where women are afforded a certain amount of power.

In Sri Lanka, the National Action Plan for the reintegration of ex-combatants into civilian life is stymied by an array of ministries and bureaucratic entities; Ministries and institutions responsible for reintegration include the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights; Several state institutions within the Ministry of Defence – namely Public Security, Law and Order, Terrorist Investigation Department and the Military Intelligence Corps, the Ministry of Justice and Law Reforms and the Office of the Commissioner General for Rehabilitation. Most of these institutions act independently of each other resulting in fragmentation of policy. At the provincial level DDR policy is implemented by under-funded provincial councils, which were formed following constitutional amendments in 1987.

Therefore, large sections of the National Action Plan are devoted to screening procedures for ex-combatants before reinsertion and reintegration through a ‘strong labour market’ (Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights 2009: 6–20). But what is a ‘strong labour market’? The biggest problem women ex-combatants have, is that civilian society does not allow them to use the skills they developed in the armed movement. Society would have them learning how to sew or be domestic helpers, rather than being carpenters, masons, bricklayers or computer repairers. And what about plans to reintegrate disabled Tamil Tiger ex-combatants?

Disabled ex-combatants, more so female ex-combatants, are one of the most difficult groups to reintegrate in the absence of specific medical and psychosocial care in communities. Due to their disability they are unable to generate any income without intensive training and rehabilitation (Mehreteab, 2007). The International Labour Organization (ILO) in its guidelines on disabled ex-combatants warns DDR planners against treating them as, “objects of charity” and adds that these ex-combatants, “do not want to depend on families and communities to sustain them ... [and] wish to become economically and socially active in their civilian communities and avoid being a burden on society” (ILO 1997: 166). Sadly, the National Plan of Action does not come up with concrete proposals to provide assistance in empowering these disabled individuals, whether males or females, to return to productive life.

The Association of Women with Disabilities (AKASA) is the only women’s organization in Sri Lanka addressing the needs of civilian women with disabilities. They are located in the North

Central province and work with other women's NGOs involved in development and human rights activities to promote inclusion, access and participation of women with disabilities in mainstream activities. However, this NGO does not work with disabled women ex-combatants. For disabled ex-service combatants and their families, the Rana Viru Seva Authority (RVSA) looks after their socio-economic integration. The RVSA is a semi government organization working under the Presidential secretariat in close collaboration with the private sector. Obviously none of these facilities will be made available to ex-LTTE combatants – sworn enemies of the Sri Lankan army servicemen and women.

From combat life to civilian life

In the peaceful order of things after a war, women ex-combatants who have returned to their communities now attempt to establish themselves as adult individuals through an identity transformation from militants to civilians. Though survivors, many of the women ex-combatants that this researcher met in the remote hamlets of Batticaloa still bear deep emotional wounds caused by forced conscription by the Tamil Tigers; the witnessing of gruesome deaths; and the physical injuries of war.

M1 who was recruited at the age of 13 and who became a medic, recalls how she progressed to killing:

. . . I was made a medic and sent to the frontlines to treat injured LTTE fighters. When I was studying to be a medic, we did not have human cadavers to study anatomy. One day some male LTTE fighters brought in a Tamil civilian man whom they accused of being a spy for the Sinhalese army. He was as good as dead with those accusations. We, medics, wanted to study the internal organs of his body and so I was the one who gave him the lethal injection. We then had a cadaver for our anatomy class!

M7 graphically explains how she was blinded in her left eye during a battle in Killinochchi in 1998: “I saw my eye-ball on the forest floor after I was hit by shrapnel and then passed out.”

M10, an injured ex-Tamil Tiger young woman combatant, who is now reunited with her sister's family in Batticaloa district after spending eleven months in an army detention center recalls the heart-wrenching scenes of human suffering in Puthikkudiyiruppu, in the North's Wannu region, as she fled the battlefield:

I saw babies, less than a year old, dying . . . I saw a busload of civilians with children blown apart by a shell . . . As we were fleeing the shelling, together with the civilians, there were literally waves of people dying behind us...When I see my sister's children, I think of the children in the last days of the war...

They also face numerous other challenges from lack of education to livelihood opportunities, to physical insecurity and changes in social structures. Their voices speak of fear, loss of education, the severance of close family ties, and the struggle for some measure of security in their lives.

M7 recalls how she tried to look for a job in Batticaloa after the army left her in her mother's house:

My father passed away when I was in the jungle. Now my mother has to look after my six younger sisters. I did not want to be an extra burden to my mother because of my disability, and so I travelled to Batticaloa town with my three disabled [ex-LTTE] friends. We registered ourselves at the IOM [International Organization for Migration] office and asked whether there were any jobs for disabled young women, like us. After taking our details the IOM officer told us that they would contact us if anything turned up, and then asked us not to come back to the office to make enquiries. We were hurt.

The economic case for helping female-headed households, especially with extra mouths to feed in the care given to returning female ex-combatants, is strong. Help cannot be limited to just food subsidies given out by the World Food Program (WFP) in Batticaloa. The circumstances of the households in a post-conflict environment need to be taken into account.

Labour initiatives are also an established element of reintegration plans for former child soldiers and young women combatants. By receiving education, training, internships, job placement or small business development support, these former combatants can be helped to contribute to their own livelihood, support their family and find a legitimate place within the broader community (Krishnan & Dwyer, 2008).

The IOM programme in Batticaloa and other parts of the East, funded by the United States government, says it, "provides information and counselling to former fighters, referring them to vocational training, psychosocial support and employment opportunities" (Embassy of the United States, 2009). Some participants, with appropriate experience and skill sets, also receive small grants to help them start their own business in their local communities. Mehreteab (2007: 13) offers a word of caution for dealing with disabled ex-combatants when he points out that many have little education, few skills and poor health in societies where it is already difficult to start a small enterprise or find employment to generate adequate income to achieve a moderate standard of living.

Lack of education is another issue. Wessels (2006) emphasizes that being in school symbolizes normalcy for the former child soldier, in the sense of being like other children. Former child soldiers frequently identify education as one of their top priorities because having an education increases their life opportunities (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). Some child soldiers are attempting to resume the education that was interrupted.

M8's mother is now making plans to send her to school after she arrived home in April 2010, blinded in one eye by shrapnel in a 2007 battle in Puthukkudiyiruppu. M8 had spent over a year in a Sri Lankan military detention camp:

It's a miracle that my daughter (M8) is still alive. It's through [the goddess] Amman's grace. Now I want her to have a good life. But first she has to go back to school. My eldest son has just finished his Ordinary-Levels, so I'll send him to work in Batticaloa town to help support his sister. He's still young and we can depend on him. But once he marries, his responsibility will shift to his wife and her family.

Some women, including returned former Tamil Tiger combatants, face a choice between remaining single and never establishing a family of their own, or entering into polygamous or informal relationships. M16 talks about the social problems in North Vaharai:

During the time of the LTTE, men could not take second wives. With the LTTE gone, more and more men are taking second wives and mistresses. Now there are lots of family problems because of that. Alcoholism is also a big problem here and families are heavily indebted because of the alcohol problems of breadwinners.

Women combatants who are back in their communities may also feel particularly vulnerable in the prevailing climate of insecurity. In January 2007, Vaharai was the last LTTE stronghold in the East that fell to the Sri Lankan army after regular Tamil Tiger troops withdrew to the North. The breakaway LTTE Tamil militant groups regrouped into paramilitary gangs that still operate underground in Batticaloa. Ex-Tamil Tiger young woman fighter M16, who is now a social worker, explains:

Previously, former female Tamil Tiger combatants used to feel safe with their families here in North Vaharai. But many of the households have lost their men, and it is these households that the paramilitary gangs target to take revenge against their former LTTE enemies. Animosity is not forgotten here – war or no war. The women in these households are really scared. There are still abductions and many of the former LTTE women combatants feel very insecure. The military works with these paramilitary gangs, and most of the time we are not sure who's who.

These challenges point to the need for a holistic rehabilitation approach, including the important aspects of vocational training for the disabled, occupational therapy and psychosocial counselling or rehabilitation (Mehreteab 2007).

Female support networks in a post-war context

At the community level, in times of conflict and post-conflict, women often emerge as the main informal providers of social welfare, more so when there is a breakdown of services in caring for the casualties of war and supporting sick or injured women in their household tasks (El-Bushra, 2003). In Batticaloa, female networks and women heading households bear the main burden of caring for

injured Tamil Tiger female ex-combatants and traumatized returned former girl child soldiers in the absence of social welfare services.

Batticaloa has an intriguing pattern of female kinship solidarity that sustains needs-based safety nets and ameliorates fear and impoverishment. In Batticaloa's matrilineal system, when new families are formed, the husband would live in the house of the wife's mother. After marriage the husband joins the family of his wife and when the mother dies in a family, the children grow up with her relatives (Balasundram 2008; McGilvary 2008).

As this researcher found in his field trips, in a matrilineal society all the families which are part of the same sub-clan system could be found living in the same vicinity. McGilvary & Lawrence (2010) document that matrilocal clusters of married sisters in adjacent households in the same compound are emotionally appealing as it allows for shared childcare and sisterly solidarity that acts as a deterrent against domestic violence. Balasundram (2008: 133) points out that in Batticaloa's matrilineal system, when the mother passes away her children become "heir to her properties". Here, mothers, wives and daughters hold sole property title or joint title with their husbands (McGilvary & Lawrence 2010). Interestingly, according to Balasundram's (2008) findings, the wife in a matrilineal society is entitled to the entire income of the husband and, compared to the husband, the wife's brother enjoys more privileges and rights over the properties through his mother.

Like Lawrence (2007), Ruwanpura & Humphries (2004) argue that mothers in matrilineal Eastern Sri Lanka often seem to represent the collective interest when it comes to children. Both girls and boys, Ruwanpura and Humphries (2004: 20) found out in their fieldwork, can be, "chosen as sacrifices according to family circumstances and local employment opportunities". If a child had to help support the family, Tamil female-headed households were inclined to choose boys to work because the duration of their loyalty to their households of origin was limited by their allegiance on marriage to their wives and their wives' families (de Alwis 1998). But if work at home was available, then girls were chosen because this meant that the family did not then have to expend time chaperoning girls back and forth from school (Ruwanpura & Humphries 2004: 194).

Nonetheless, Ruwanpura (2003) cautions analysts from being distracted by matrilineal practices in the East and losing sight of other aspects of women's status and position in the civil war. While women have lost men due to the fighting, killings and abductions, Ruwanpura (2003) points out that there are many instances of desertion, separation and divorce, resulting in female leadership of families. Pressures exerted by the war further exacerbated this. In Sri Lanka, the civil war also worsened male migration from the Eastern Province, leaving families headed by women stranded. El-Bushra (2003) notes that the war in North and East Sri Lanka also put economic stress on the community leading to increases in male alcoholism and domestic violence, and to the inability of the community to provide support to particularly vulnerable women such as those heading households. This in turn affects women's long-term expectations of marriage and family life.

The brutality of the civil war has also transformed the female-centered aspects of life in Batticaloa, with family ties severed by disappearances and internal displacement due to the fighting, as this researcher found in North Vaharai division. Batticaloa's local temples and shrines to the Amman often offer solace to grieving mothers and Lawrence (1997) has observed the emotional outpouring of these women as they try to overcome their grief by 'speaking' to the goddess. In a posture of worship while crying and speaking to the Amman, she writes, they, "beg or demand the return of their children who had been disappeared or displaced or who were engaged in fighting" (Lawrence 1997: 254).

Though families in Eastern Sri Lanka have been displaced, dispossessed and dispirited in the long running civil war and the December 2004 tsunami, matrilineal traditions and support provided by matrilineal household clusters seemed to have survived (McGilvray & Lawrence 2010). Ruwanpura & Humphries (2004) found in the kinship networks in Eastern Sri Lanka that neighbours and friends are an important source of assistance for female-headed households – particularly non-financial help that many women found invaluable such as childcare, help in chaperoning children to school, help with cooking, and emotional support. Both researchers caution against dismissing the value of this friendship as it makes female heads feel more emotionally stable and secure. Women Tigers - in fatigues and with AK47s, barking out orders and engaged in battle with men - might be in stark contrast to the image of the traditional village girl and suburban-educated woman. But there is a mutually supportive relationship in the community amongst Tamil women, as Sangarasivam (2000) points out. She explains that those who did not join the Tamil Tigers still had ties with those who chose to join the LTTE and, "emotional commitments and connections with friends and family are not severed by the act of joining the movement" (Sangarasivam 2000: 272).

Twenty-one-year-old injured ex-Tamil Tiger woman combatant M9, who was blinded by shrapnel in a 2007 battle with the Sri Lankan army in the Wannu region, is an orphan adopted by her neighbour, whom she calls *perria amah* (eldest aunty). M9 talks of the kinship and care she receives:

My *perria amah* and her sisters in her family look after me. They cook for me and also help dress me. They look out for me when I go to the well and have my daily bath. To keep my mind active, they read me newspapers and books every day. I do not want to be a burden to them, but they keep assuring me that we are all sisters and need to help one another. My wish is that some NGO could help me learn some skills so that I can be independent financially. My *perria amah's* family is poor and I would like to help them too.

For injured ex-Tamil Tiger young woman combatant M20, in Mylmapalaya division, the solidarity found in women's networks is important even though she is now married and has a two-year-old son. She explains:

I came back home to Batticaloa in 2003, a year after the ceasefire, because my right leg was semi-paralyzed due to shrapnel injuries I sustained in a 1997 battle in the Elephant Pass area. The LTTE allowed me to disarm and demobilize voluntarily. My mother, my aunts (mother's sisters) and the women in the neighbourhood help me in my daily household work because I often get dizzy if I try to walk too much. I also have frequent fainting spells, when I feel the pain. These women help me to

cook and clean the house and I would be at a loss without them. I got married in 2005, but my husband now works in Dubai to earn more money for the house. But I am not worried because I have still got my *akekas* (elder sisters) and *athais* (elder aunties) around me. My *akekas* also help me look after my son. He is happy as long as he can play with other children in the neighbourhood.

An attempt to relate to M20's dizziness and chronic pain can be found in Arthur Kleinman's (1994) studies of Chinese society in the aftermath of the brutal political turmoil in the Cultural Revolution, where he concluded that bodily suffering and symptoms such as dizziness, sleeplessness, fatigue and chronic pain are "as close as many could come to expressing political opposition and criticism" (Kleinman 1994: 715). In the common sharing of pain, El-Bushra (2003: 18) points out that female-headed households may be more efficient than male-headed ones in ensuring the welfare of their members and cites Sri Lanka, where she comments: "Disintegration of the social fabric [due to the civil war], family life and social values has increased pressure on the female-headed households in the region...."

Batticaloa's women's networks that have survived the devastating war are also a source of comfort and solace for many former girl soldiers who self-demobilized following the 2004 split from the main LTTE by Col. Karuna, the Batticaloa-based commander of the Tamil Tiger forces in the East.

Lessons can be learned from Nepal's community based rehabilitation (CBR) interventions. This approach can enable the disabled ex-combatants to live with their families and work in their community while benefiting from their extended family networks. CBR interventions involve working with the sectors that provide support services to disabled ex-combatants and working within the community to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in schools, training centers, work places, leisure and social activities (Mehreteab 2007).

But NGO workers remain sceptical that a CBR approach for ex-LTTE combatants will ever be adopted in Sri Lanka. For one, the Ministry of Defence is only pre-occupied with those they still consider 'dangerous'. An NGO worker in Batticaloa puts this succinctly:

The disabled ex-Tamil Tiger fighters no longer pose a threat to the government. So why would they want to spend money on them? They have their disabled ex-servicemen to worry about. It is the former active LTTE combatants that scare them. The disabled former LTTEs cannot create trouble and if their family networks cannot provide for them, the government will happily place these disabled ex-fighters in welfare homes. That is the reality and it is sad.

Nonetheless in the face of deprivation and hardship female household heads like ex-Tamil Tiger young woman fighter M11, in Mylampavelly, feel empowered and proud of their achievements:

My husband works for the local government, but it's actually me who runs the household. I am proud that I can care for my three children and also help women in the neighbourhood, especially those young girls who have returned home from the jungle with just the clothes on their back. Life's tough, it's hard. But I have survived and moved on. My story with the Tamil Tigers would probably

fill a book – and there are good and bad memories. The women in the community respect me – they have to. I sacrificed my life in the movement [LTTE] for these people.

In post-war Batticaloa, M11 has a respected position in the district's matrilineal society where women hold most of the responsibilities and authority in the family. She is referred to as *perria akka* (big sister) in female networks in the clearly defined matrilineal and matrilocal households in Mavadivembu, a status she attained after she married soon after her demobilization following the 2002 ceasefire. With a living husband and three children, she has a *cumankali* or properly wedded woman status. The sacred knot or *thali* tied by their husbands during the marriage and the red dot or *kukum* symbolizes the *cumankali*. Lawrence (2007: 93) explains that Tamil culture respects the *cumankali* and it is common understanding that she has the capacity to provide protection through female networks.

M11 spends her free time, after sending her children to school, seeking out the former LTTE child combatants from Mavadivembu who self-demobilized in 2004 when the Batticaloa-based commander of the Tamil Tiger forces in the East, V. Muralitharan or aka Col. Karuna, split from the main LTTE. These self-demobilized former child soldiers, that UNICEF is still trying to trace (Cammaert, 2009), are now young adults. Former child soldier M12, who was recruited by the LTTE when she was thirteen, relates the visits made by M11:

I really look forward to the visits by *perria akka* [big sister]. I am very eager to tell my stories to people, but nobody wants to listen to me. We need people to talk to. Sometimes it is good to talk to people to get our problems out. Sometimes we feel we have been forgotten; dumped into the community and then abandoned. *Perria akka* was one of us in the jungle. She understands what we went through.

The protection roles played by mature women ex-combatants in the reintegration of former young women fighters into their communities warrants further research as these girls struggle to develop a new sense of identity, unlinked to war.

Organized schooling in a post-war context

This section discusses the researcher's experiences with a non government organization (NGO), which believes that the structure and predictability of organized schooling can help former girl child soldiers overcome their traumatic experiences and develop an identity separate from that of a combatant.

This NGO, founded in 1992 at the peak period of war and violence in Batticaloa, offers shelter to about eighty girls affected directly or indirectly by the civil war. Among the girls are twenty former child soldiers who self-demobilized following the 2004 split of Col. Karuna's Batticaloa troops from the LTTE high command in the Wanni region. Many of the girls who arrive at the shelter are ill, malnourished and traumatized.

As the Chairman, explains that the main hurdle was making the former girl soldiers feel accepted:

It was difficult. The difficulty was making these girls feel accepted. They were homesick and wanted to go home. But their parents did not want them because it was too dangerous for them to be in the community, with the Tamil Tigers prowling around and just waiting to re-abduct them. It was also difficult to win the confidence of the parents. They thought we would hand them to either the police or to the LTTE.

The former girl child soldiers are enrolled in schools near the shelter, with the house wardens ensuring their safety to and from school. Former child soldier M15, who was sixteen when she was brought to the shelter by her mother in 2004, recalls her past and talks about the future:

After I came out of the jungle, I went back to my village school. There I was treated badly. My hair was short; the teachers always scolded me and the other kids did not want to mix with me. I was depressed. Some NGO people told my mother about this shelter and she then brought me here. When I arrived here, I was enrolled in Grade 9. While being here, I got to know other girls like me and began to feel more confident. I started mixing around. I passed my A-levels and now I am in the Open University's Social Sciences Faculty. I want to finish university, get a good job and help look after my mother and sisters.

M15's transition from the jungle to university through this shelter can be likened to the analogy in Northern Uganda's war-torn Ancholiland, as depicted in Finnstrom's 'living with bad surroundings', of moving from bad to good surroundings. According to the Ancholi people, bad surroundings or *piny marac* are when, "sickness is abundant, children are malnourished, cattle are gone, crops fail, bad spirits roam the surroundings, and people are killed or die at an early age and in large numbers" (Finnstrom 2008: 14). Good surroundings or *piny maber*, as Finnstrom (2008: 13) quotes the poet Ancholi Okot p'Bitek, are, "when things are normal, society thriving ... and overcoming crises."

A whole generation of children in Batticaloa know nothing but war. As Briggs (2005: 84) writes: "The destruction of physical and social infrastructure, the irregular functioning of schools, and poor access to schooling for internally displaced children all mean that a large population of these children is not attending school." But this shelter offers them hope. The shelter allows former girl child soldiers to see themselves as normal young people, accepted by their families and communities. Former child soldier M13 tells of her journey:

I heard the LTTE was abducting kids, so I just hid in the house for four months after coming out of the jungle in 2004. My neighbour told my mother about this shelter and she brought me here to send me to school, and also for my own protection. I have passed my O-Levels and soon I will be sitting for A-Levels to enter university. If I did not come here, my life would have been very tough ... I can't imagine what it would have been.

The consequences of girls not receiving an education may be more severe than for boys; and Ruwanpura (2006) points out that this is due to the array of ideological structures stacked against

girls in a system with inherent patriarchal values. In female-headed households in Batticaloa, adult children seem to be a vital resource because the family often depends on their wages to make ends meet. Problems of poverty in these families are compounded by the presence of dependent children, like returned girl child soldiers, while advancement to more comfortable circumstances often depends on the ability of educated working-age children earning decent adult wages.

Conclusion

Analyzing war and post-war experiences from the women's perspective offers new angles and produces new knowledge in the domain of DDR research that previously has been characterized by its male bias.

While the problems of community reintegration of young female ex-combatants in patriarchal societies have been well covered by researchers, there is, however, a dearth of academic literature on their reintegration in a matrilineal society like Eastern Sri Lanka's Batticaloa where female networks are strong. Nor are there in-depth studies on how young women ex-combatants are reabsorbed into extended families in matrilineal areas where power is derived from their capacity to resist the prescribed social order of Hindu Brahmanical traditions and patriarchal hierarchy. A distinctive East coast residence pattern of matrilineal household clusters in Batticaloa has been described in a pre-war ethnographic study by McGilvary (2008), and close groupings of sisters' houses can be found where displacement during war has not disrupted this practice (Lawrence 2007). Here, close female kin in female networks offer young women ex-combatants advice and consolation. How this companionship can help generate healing from post-war trauma as young women ex-combatants develop a sense of agency in their struggle to find a balance in life in the face of disempowering circumstances, needs to be studied further.

The stories of women and girls bypassed in DDR programs in the wake of the Sierra Leone war, in Chris Coulter's (2009), 'Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers', offers important lessons for policymakers. Many of the women interviewed by Coulter found it extremely difficult to return to their families, let alone integrate back into their communities. Without any reinsertion benefits, as a transitional safety net, some were forced into prostitution to eke out a living. The lessons from Sierra Leone are applicable in Sri Lanka's Batticaloa district where girl child soldiers – now young women – who self-demobilized in 2004, are especially vulnerable in the absence of official DDR supports. There is anecdotal evidence, based on the researcher's conversations with local social workers, of some of these young women turning to prostitution, in Batticaloa's North Vaharai division, to support themselves. This needs further verification.

In Batticaloa, women headed households bear the main burden of caring for traumatized returned former girl child soldiers and injured Tamil Tiger female ex-combatants in the absence of social welfare services. But social and economic conditions, the background of conflict, and the proportion of female heads in the population weigh against the kinship in women's networks, where sisters and

female cousins live within calling distance of one another (Ruwanpura & Humphries, 2004). Household boundaries can become permeable during conflict as members may die due both to acts of violence and indirect casualties in what is called “excess death” (Schindler & Bruck 2007: 9). Lawrence (1997: 8) discovered this when she was in Batticaloa to write an ethnography on women living in the periphery but instead confronted, “narratives of disappearances and massacres...of tens of thousands of people.” The economic case for assisting households headed by women in Batticaloa is strong. But lumping together all female-headed households in the East, and suggesting a single solution is a recipe for disaster. There is a need for a more nuanced analysis, one that recognizes that female-heads of households make difficult choices in conflict situations and their aftermath (Ruwanpura 2006; McGilvary & Lawrence 2010). The matrilineal structures in Batticaloa also need to be linked to other existing forms of analysis including human rights, gender, governance and social development, in order to understand how the young women former Tamil Tiger combatants can be provided for in the absence of proper state-funded safety nets.

But the state of Sri Lanka is, in itself, an anomaly. With a functioning democracy and strong social indicators, the confusion lies in how to engage with the state when the state itself was a party to the conflict and, now, to an extent a source of obstacles to reconciliation with the end of the war. On the other hand the LTTE, by appealing to the grievances and aspects of identity related to Tamil ancestry, territory, religion and language gained collective support from the community, through shared notions and group solidarity. This enabled the Tamil Tigers to wage a campaign of collective violence against the Sri Lankan state and the institutions that represented it. Hence, the conflict cleavage is between Tamil society and the state, rather than divisions within the Tamils. Donors funding DDR initiatives in Sri Lanka often tend to overlook this fact in their overt focus on a community-centered reintegration approach, instead of strengthening social networks within the community that ex-combatants, especially young female ex-Tamil Tiger fighters, rely on for their survival. Why fund a community-centred reintegration program for ex-Tamil Tiger fighters when it is clearly obvious that there are no divisions between former combatants and communities?

The main problem in Batticaloa is the lack of trust that the young women ex-Tamil Tiger combatants and Tamil communities have of the state and its agencies, which for about three decades have treated them with disdain and suspicion. There is little confidence that the Sri Lankan police and army and government ministries, like the Ministry of Child Development and Women’s Affairs, support them. In turn, there is a reluctance of communities in Batticaloa to work with these agencies. If the mistrust continues, development of the East will be marred by lack of cooperation.

The invisible wounds of war are in the minds and hearts of combatants, civilians and communities. But the current situation in Sri Lanka, with the end of the war, offers a window of opportunity. With a combined effort and international cooperation, much progress can be made in mending the relationship between the Tamils in Batticaloa and the government. In order to start the healing process at both the individual and community level, first and foremost, dignity must be given to the

young women ex-Tamil Tiger fighters. Also the female networks, in a matrilineal society, that heal, nurture and protect all groups of women ex-combatants must be recognized, valued and supported.

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This paper explores the complex and multifarious issues associated with the transition to civilian life for female Ex-Tamil Tiger combatants in Batticaloa following the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka in May 2009. This study focuses on the reintegration processes of both ex-combatants who have been rehabilitated and released by the GOSL and the former girl child soldiers who self-demobilized in 2004.

The author argues that disabled ex-combatants, more so female disabled ex-combatants, face serious reintegration obstacles in the absence of specific medical and psychosocial care in communities. Though Sri Lanka's National Action Plan for the Re-Integration of Ex-Combatants does include disabled fighters, an array of ministries and bureaucratic entities acting independently of each other have led to a fragmentation of policy. In the absence of social welfare services, female networks and female headed households bear the main burden of care for traumatized former girl child soldiers and injured female ex-combatants. The author also highlights the important role that access to organized schooling can have in assisting former girl child soldiers to overcome their experiences and establish an identity separate from that of a combatant. Given the lack of proper state-funded assistance, the author argues that these mechanisms that heal, nurture and protect all groups of women ex-combatants must be recognized, valued and supported.

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