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WAR AND RECOVERY: PSYCHOSOCIAL CHALLENGES IN NORTHERN SRI LANKA



Jeevasuthan Subramaniam

**War and Recovery:
Psychosocial Challenges
in Northern Sri Lanka**

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International Centre for Ethnic Studies

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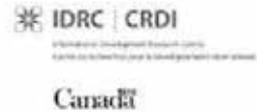
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War and Recovery: Psychosocial Challenges in Northern Sri Lanka

Jeevasuthan Subramaniam*

*Jeevasuthan Subramaniam is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Sociology, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka and a researcher at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) in Colombo, Sri Lanka. He obtained a Ph.D in Social Work from University of Science, Malaysia and has a Master in Social Work at the University of Madras. He is also a visiting lecturer at the Sri Jayawardenepura University, Ruhuna University, Sri Lanka Open University and National Institute of Social Development.

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Executive Summary

The proliferation of women heads of households has been one of the significant challenges created by armed conflict in many parts of the world. It has been estimated that more than one hundred thousand war-affected women have been registered with governmental and non-governmental organizations to obtain support in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka (UN 2015). In this milieu, this study aims to explore the psychosocial challenges faced by women heads of households during war and in the post-conflict scenario with the specific objectives of identifying the initiatives adopted by them and investigating the changes which have taken place in their lives and the sustainability of their attempts.

This attempt focuses on women's priority concerns and capacities related to their formal and informal aspects that may enhance their livelihoods and strengthen their family well-being. The study explores beyond conventional images of women as victims of armed conflict to document the diverse ways in which they rebuild their families, livelihoods, and social image. To form an in-depth understanding of the nature of their lives and how they perceive their experiences, a qualitative method is adopted using in-depth interviews to garner information. The dominant *themes* of the study are: reasons for women taking leadership of their families; psychological and socio-economic challenges and the initiatives taken and strategies adopted by participants to combat them; and perceptions on the present condition of their lives. Significant findings showed that most of the participants use home-grown approaches to deal with the challenges and they are able to excel in different domains like livelihood, ensuring basic facilities, decision making and encountering challenges in a changing world. Above all

these aspects, formal and informal support systems play a crucial role in promoting the women's psychosocial well-being and provide them with a platform to advance in their livelihood tasks.

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1. Introduction

Women experience the direct and indirect negative consequences of armed conflict more adversely than men. Armed conflicts have created large numbers of female-headed households where the men have been conscripted, detained, displaced, have disappeared or are dead. The term “women-headed households” is defined as a significant group of vulnerable people in the world and it is not a new social phenomenon (Gandotra and Jha 2003) because challenges relating to conflict-affected women date back to ancient Greek, Roman and Hebrew wars. Historically, these women and their experiences have been silenced, and this continues to occur globally (Strohmetz 2010).

The women who head households face both instant and sustained impacts of armed strife in many countries. In times of crisis, they face deaths or forced abductions of loved ones, sexual assaults, confrontations, and life threats from armed personnel (Aoláin 2011). Due to these dreadful experiences, they undergo extensive trauma, other mental health-related challenges or become compelled to undertake duties that are traditionally or culturally not part of their life. In conflict situations, most women live in poverty conditions, as well as despondency, and they share all the war-related devastation with men (Korac 2006; Rehn and Sirleaf 2002).

As Thiruchandran (1999) asserted, “Usually, the rapid numbers of households headed by women are easily attributed to the detrimental outcomes of the conflict.” Armed conflict also challenges women’s sexual morality and increases female dependency on male breadwinners and other male heads of households. They are also bound to accept responsibilities for child rearing and care of elders, as well as to bear with sexual harassment and assaults (Tambiah 2004). In addition, they face significant gender discrimination and challenges related to poverty, hunger, malnutrition, overwork, domestic violence, and sexual violence. The challenges encountered by these particular marginalized groups are deliberately ignored and their voice silenced during conflicts or in their aftermath. The World Health Organization also stated, “Failure to address women’s mental and health problems has undesirable social and economic consequences on communities” (WHO 2004, 1).

2. Internal armed conflict and its impact on women in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is another great victim of internal armed conflict in the Asian region. The Sri Lankan armed ethnic conflict lasted for more than three decades, starting from the early 1980s, and caused massive destruction in every aspect of the country (Sarvanantha 2006). A new social phenomenon has evolved as “women who head families” from the minority and majority ethnic groups (Surendrakumar 2006) and over 100,000 women who head households have been identified (Association for Women's Rights in Development 2012). Though women and men both suffer the death and disappearances of their loved ones, destruction of properties and livelihood, displacements and negative psychological consequences, many aspects of the war affect the psychosocial well-being of women disproportionately (Kastrup 2006).

Thiruchandran (1999) found that although war widows and some displaced women are relieved to avoid the restrictions of marriage due to war, they find that they are still subject to patriarchal practices including discrediting women from a moral perspective, sexual teasing, harassment, and violence (Hewamanne 2009, 159). Women are severely affected by gender-related violence and uncertainty in times of crisis, and even after the conflict terminates. It was also noticeable that these challenges may be aggravated in the midst of inadequate income, frailty, and frustration, which often occur following forced internal expulsion. Access to essential services and goods, including food, water, shelter, and healthcare is a problem faced by many women in a post-conflict context. Women who head families face discriminatory treatment when officials who are mostly male largely control commodities and services.

In many conflict regions, the customary roles of women in the family, the community, and the “public” domain have been completely changed. And, the gendered roles of women and traditional family structures have encountered a remarkable transformation. This is an unintentional phenomenon. The collapse of family and community structures forces women to undertake new and unfamiliar roles. Women are compelled to bear a greater burden for their family members and of livelihood responsibilities. The absence of male leaders often heightens the insecurity and danger for the women and children left behind and accelerates the breakdown of the traditional protection and support

mechanisms upon which the communities—especially women—have previously relied. Women are heads of households and breadwinners, taking over responsibility for earning a livelihood, caring for farms and animals, trading, and being active outside the home—activities often traditionally carried out by men. This necessitates the development of new coping skills and confidence and requires courage and resilience to help sustain and rebuild families and communities torn apart by war (Lindsey and Lindsey-Curtet 2001).

Finally, it is essential to understand the vulnerable situations, because the negative impact of armed conflicts and politically-motivated violence hampers women who head households differently. These categories of understanding can be divided into: before-war occurs, the period of conflict and transformation periods, and development phases.

3. Problem Statement

An independent survey conducted in 2013 revealed that nearly 100,000 women who head households have been identified in the Northern Province alone (Perera 2013). Many studies on women heading households during the ethnic conflict and its aftermath in Sri Lanka have been published over the years by different scholars and institutions. However, few scholars have concentrated on the women who head households in the Northern Province through the case study method, where war-affected women who head households have been identified as a subculture.

The conservative perception among the Tamil community stigmatizes widows, preventing them and their children from gaining social acceptance and limiting their access to essential services and facilities (International Crisis Group [ICG] 2012). Therefore, it is crucial to understand the situation of women who head households in the Northern Province and how they are able to maintain the welfare of their households in the midst of social and psychological complexities. This study mainly focuses on aspects such as the ability of women who head households to make decisions on their family matters, carry out livelihood tasks, guide their children, and face any adverse situation with confidence. Therefore, this study highlights the psychosocial recuperation

of women who head households through a scholarly perspective, as it is a prominent issue in the Sri Lankan post-war scenario.

This study intends to meet the following objectives.

1. Study the psychosocial challenges encountered by women who head households in the Sri Lankan post-conflict context.
2. Identify the strategies and efforts employed by women to recuperate from their situation and their roles in livelihood initiatives in the changing social and political landscape.
3. Explore the views of women who head households on their prevailing living conditions and how they are reviving their engagement in psychosocial domains after the end of the armed conflict.

In sum, this study will present evidence of a women's community, gradually coming into existence over the past 30 years of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, encountering different challenges and adapting to daily changes in the post-conflict scenario.

4. Conceptual and theoretical approach

This paper uses a constructivist approach (Robson 2011) to explore the psychosocial challenges faced by women who head households in post-conflict and development phases, as it deals mainly with the perceptions of women on their current situation, and their initiatives to sustain or change their everyday lives. The term "psychosocial" refers to the combination of psychological and social components of an individual. It is also related to a person's social scenario of his/her psychological and emotional well-being. According to the United Nations Children's Education Fund (UNICEF 2003) the term "psychosocial" is applied, assuming that a combination of psychological and social factors is responsible for the psychosocial well-being of women who head their households, and that the biological, emotional, spiritual, cultural, social, mental, and material cannot necessarily be separated from one another. The term psychosocial will direct the researcher's attention toward the totality of participants' experiences rather than focusing exclusively on the physical or psychological aspects of health and well-being.

As this study is designed to explore the specific challenges and better understand the factors that create the challenges from the perspective of the participants encountering them consideration is given to understand the impact of conflict on women in Northern Sri Lanka as well as on the landscape for the restoration of normal life (Robson 2011). From this, specific factors significant to this research and which are inevitable to the identification of research findings are identified. Furthermore, the participants were provided with an ample opportunity to express their grievances that remained unaddressed. This study also recognizes women who head households as actors or presenters, not merely as respondents (Blackburn and Chambers 1996).

Moreover, the study also allowed the researcher to practice a mindful inquiry into personal and crucial issues and an opportunity to adopt a holistic approach to investigate the complex and multi-faceted interactions and experiences of the participants and the contexts in which they live (Hopkins 2000).

The theoretical and conceptual approach of this study take account of different challenges and coping strategies of war-affected women, the way the women adjust to the unfamiliar situation, their need for empowerment and the role of change agents, and the role played by social support systems in enhancing their lives.

The following theories are applied to meet the above requirement:

1. Coping Strategy Theory
2. Adjustment Theory
3. Social Support Theory
4. Community Empowerment Theory

The Coping Strategy Theory is used in this study to understand the three major components of coping strategies of women who head their households: biological/physiological, cognitive, and learnt (Lazarus 1993). Therefore, behavioural, cognitive/information seeking, and emotional aspects of the study population, have been scrutinized.

Adjustment is found to be fundamental in a person's life. It implies harmonizing the relation between a person's needs and his environment. It is a process enabling a person to build a balanced behavior between the incompatibility of life and the environment. Considering this aspect, the adjustment theory was applied in this study to understand how war-affected women continued their lives despite multi-faceted challenges and led their families successfully.

The Social Support Theory gives a theoretical idea on who might be social support providers and what mechanism could be employed to deliver such supports (Dow and McDonald 2003). The social support theory is used in this study to identify support providers and their processes to provide social support to the war-affected women in their areas. Therefore, the study examines the tangible and/or intangible support initiatives, which protect war-affected women from any adverse and unexpected overwhelming situations (Langford, Bowsher, Maloney and Lillis 1997).

The Community Empowerment Theory is deployed to investigate the role of change agents in providing support to women who head households during post-conflict and development phases and to identify the aspects considered as crucial factors to be changed by the change agents.

- **Coping Strategy Theory**

Coping strategies are a blend of three spheres of a person's life: behavioural, cognitive/information seeking, and emotional (Maria et al. 2009). Behavioural aspects constitute a process of actions which helps the individual to be prepared for an action and its results. The information sought by an individual to adapt to changes is regarded as the cognitive part of a coping strategy. Lazarus defined "coping behaviour as a process that changes over the course of a situation. Coping behaviour is dependent on the meaning of the event, the context, and the goals of the person in the situation (1993, 234)."

Coping strategies depend on an individual's unique quality. Individuals cope with their stress, appraising the situation through a mental process. This process functions in two ways: either an assessment of a situation by which an individual is engulfed or managing the situation with the support of available resources around her/him. These resources can be identified as psychological resources, physical resources, and social resources. The households living in armed conflict situations have to enhance their livelihood and adopt coping strategies to restore their social, economic, and political capital, accordingly (Justino 2009).

Emotional coping strategies are related to unreasonable and non-active processes ranging from simple to multi-faceted emotional processes. Thus, a coping strategy is derived from a combination of these three components. Based on its nature, coping strategy could be typified into six categories, which are emotion focused, social support, withdrawal, attitude modification, control, and denial. The term focused signifies the ability of an individual to seriously consider the challenges and looking forward to solving them successfully. Social support implies obtaining information, advice, and moral support to handle an overwhelming situation (Maria et al. 2009).

Any potential overwhelming event or challenge to which an individual/human body is exposed is likely to be subjected to internal and physiological changes. When people are facing a stressful situation, social support plays a vital role in helping individuals to cope with their stress. Social support is divided into three subdivisions: intangible (emotional), tangible (money and material), and informational (Taylor et al. 2004). At times persons who experience a problem may opt to keep away from it and resort to daydreaming, imagination, or adopting negative strategies, including consuming alcohol, chewing and smoking tobacco excessively, drug abuse, or gambling. They also remain socially withdrawn.

Coping strategies and psychological, physiological, social, and cultural aspects are mutually affected and interconnected. Coping strategies are determined by physiological, cognitive, and learnt aspects of a person. Conversion of attitudes indicates the transformation of behaviour, morals, or cognitive ability. This differs from

acceptance, turning to God, which acquires a philosophy of life, or cracking jokes over the issue or a particular challenge. Control means domination over the situation through the organization of behaviours or activities and suppressing the emotions. This includes control over the ability to restrict impulsive behaviour or to confine to certain decisions. The person who is stressed is more prone to develop serious medical challenges like heart disease and cancer. However, some personalities are “hardy” and possess the ability to have control over their situations, accept responsibilities, and be prepared to take risks. Denial is the case when the person behaves as if she/he does not experience any problem, having fun or living in a fantasy world (Maria et al. 2009).

Women who head their households may adopt their own or culture specific coping strategies to handle overwhelming situations. The main objective and the research question have also been framed to obtain information on these items. Therefore, this body of knowledge would be useful to conceive an elaborate idea on coping strategies adopted by women who head their households and the support system available for them to deal with their challenging situation in the Sri Lankan post-conflict scenario.

- **Adjustment Theory**

Adjustment theory focuses on the adjustment adopted by human beings when their lives are in jeopardy. Constructive coping methods are always helpful to aid a person’s adjustment. Therefore, it could be said that there is a positive relationship between coping strategies and adjustment (Picken 2012). A previous study has proved that efforts and coping strategies have an important impact on people’s adjustment (Abdullah, Elias and Mahyuddin 2010).

According to this theory, human beings have their individual life demands or life needs. These include: basic needs and other needs. While basic needs remain common for every human being, the other needs may differ from person to person. When the person’s environment responds poorly or is not capable of meeting his/her life needs, the relationship between the life needs and the environment would be hostile. This hostility prompts human beings to adopt an adjustment between their needs and

environment. This adjustment is essential for human beings to survive and to be successful in daily life (Laurence 1999).

Adjustment is built on a person's life ambitions and psychological wishes. Life ambitions are something the person wishes to achieve, while psychological wishes are the person's desire to achieve life ambitions. When life ambitions and psychological wishes work enough in a person, they enhance the person's skills to cope with the hostile relations between life needs and the environment. In other words, they influence the person to be adjusted between his unmet needs and unsuccessful environment to achieve life ambitions. Now the person finds the relations between his life and environment positive. He wants to harmonize life and the environment. He is carrying out this either by adjusting life needs according to his environment or changing the condition of the environment according his life needs (Caligiuri, Hyland, Joshi and Bross 1998).

Adjustment is found to be a fundamental aspect in a person's life. It is a process enabling a person to build a balanced behaviour between the incompatibility of life and the environment. A well-adjusted person has a good understanding of his strengths and limitations, satisfaction of basic needs, flexibility in behaviour, a capacity to deal with adverse circumstances, a realistic perception of the world, a feeling of being productive in his environment (Chang and Kim 2000; Laurence 1999; Ross 1990).

This theory is deployed to this study to recognize how war-affected women continue to be prepared to face the challenges in their daily lives despite their environment and lead a meaningful life in the absence of other breadwinners. Furthermore, the post-conflict scenario can provide women with new opportunities by forcing them to take on unfamiliar and non-traditional roles and responsibilities. Transformation in economic aspects and decision-making within families, dealing with various stakeholders of their own free will or under compulsion, transformation in their "identity/consciousness," and formation of self-help strategies are explored in this study (Sorensen 1998).

- **Social Support Theory**

The Social Support Theory argues that social support is a tool for human beings to recover from any negative effects of life and rehabilitate their well-being after suffering (Dow and McDonald 2003). In providing social support, two main aspects are to be considered carefully. They are support resources and support processes. Support resources include all those who provide social support to people in need. Government, civil institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and non-governmental individuals can all be support resources. They are the resources who could extend support to people in responding to satisfy their unmet needs. They may be involved in basic needs, physical and mental health, education, employment, counselling, information, and awareness. Support processes would be essential means for support resources to provide these supports to the people. Public laws, social policies, programmes, campaigns and awareness are all support processes. Social support is not possible without both support resources and support processes (Chang and Kim 2000; Dow and McDonald 2003; Jiang and Winfree 2006).

For the purpose of this study, the four specific supportive measures available for war-affected women—emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal will be investigated. It is also crucial to consider that the participants may utilize their own or culture-specific supportive services to handle overwhelming situations. The main objective and the research question have also been formulated to obtain information on these items. Therefore, this body of knowledge would be useful to conceive an elaborate idea on available support systems for women who head households to deal with their challenging situation in the Sri Lankan post-conflict scenario and development phases.

- **Community Empowerment Theory**

Given the consequences of war, violence and trauma, women's empowerment alone without considering the empowerment of the community as a whole within which the women are located, would be inadequate. Community empowerment theory is about empowering the disempowered community. This theory argues that the community can be disempowered for several reasons. Natural and man-made incidents all disempower a community. Such disempowerment could involve social, economical, psychological,

emotional, cultural, religious and political aspects. Any form of disempowerment would disturb the community's natural life and destroy the community's social capital. It challenges the community's psycho-socio-economic goals and produces negative perceptions of life among members of the community. It makes the community helpless and leaves its members' needs unmet. It undermines the skills and abilities of community in rebuilding their lives themselves. It also at times threatens the very existence of the community. This disempowerment needs to be responded to and a disempowered community needs to be sufficiently empowered (Adams 2003; Williamson and Robinson 2006).

To empower a disempowered community, there should be empowerment agents like civil institutions, community-based organizations (CBOs) and social. They can empower a community by many ways. Social education, campaigns based on religion and culture, issue-based advocacy, public participatory initiatives, training, guidance and advice of different sorts, are some of the empowerment tools. This empowerment process can begin first for members of a disempowered community or it can be target the entire community in general (Williamson and Robinson 2006).

The roles of community-based individuals and grassroots organizations are most crucial as community empowerment agents. They strive to empower a vulnerable community in many ways. These kinds of change agents empower socially incapacitated communities utilizing their specialized skills to rebuild the affected communities' destroyed institutional network. The change agents empower a psychologically and emotionally disempowered community guiding the rebuilding of their capacity to handle situations and make decision for themselves. To economically empower an underprivileged disempowered community, the change agents act as facilitators between communities and sources of help. In empowering a community, change agents employ several tools: guidance, advice, awareness and social education (Adams 2003).

5. Methodology

This paper used primary empirical data from the Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW) programme being delivered by the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) in the Northern Region of Sri Lanka and gathered using qualitative methods through purposive sampling with participants most appropriate to the subject.

The exact data collection methods were determined by ICES and the researcher opportunistically made use of this data with the ICES's consent. The empirical evidence consisted of data collected from in-depth interviews carried out with war-affected women in five districts of the Northern Region: Kilinochchi, Mannar, Mullaitivu, Vavuniya and Jaffna, severely affected by the three decade-long armed conflict and well recognized for the rapidly increasing number of women who head households in the post-conflict scenario.

The analysis was carried out based on emerging themes from the collected data, literature review and theories. Then analysis was directed toward narrowing down the information into significant points or quotes (Creswell, Hanson, Plano and Morales 2007). During the analysis the following steps were followed prudently:

1. The qualitative interviews were carefully scrutinized so that the researcher could obtain an insight into the dynamics of the phenomenon.
2. The data coding was conducted based on the statement of the problem and research questions.
3. The data were broken down and merged back together in a new form to make comparison and interpretation. Finally, the paper is presenting the main findings according to the objectives of the study.

The researcher did not require to directly interact with participants as the interviews were already carried out by ICES in the Northern Province. The researcher was provided with an opportunity to choose the interviews and define the number of interviews based on an appropriate justification.

This study used the convenient (and pragmatic) sampling strategy, recommended for qualitative investigations (Palys n.d; Thomas 2003). The selection of in-depth interviews for the study purpose was based on self-made sampling criteria, which were adopted to choose the potential participants. The researcher utilized primary empirical data shared by the ICES. The researcher received 75 interviews from ICES in the form of raw data and it was decided to exclude the single participant who was above 45 years as the young age group of women who head households is considered to be a newly emerging social phenomenon in the Sri Lankan post-war scenario (Handunetti 2011 and Jayathunge 2010). The qualitative empirical data were collected from participants representing different districts of the Northern Province. These included; Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Vavuniya, Mannar and Mullaitivu. The number of participants/sample size was confined to a small size for the study purpose. Therefore, a total of 30 participants were selected and the richness of the data was also considered carefully.

6. Perspective of women who head households on psychosocial challenges

This section strives to capture some of the multiple forms of psychosocial challenges faced by women who head households which do in fact fuel the collective vulnerability, but go under focused in most post-conflict research. Informants talked at length about psychosocial challenges, with many immediately linking it to their tragic experience.

7. Psychosocial challenges:

8. Conceptualizing Psychosocial Challenges

Most of the informants noted the gravity of armed conflict, describing it as being the “barrier for ordered social life.” Psychosocial challenges were not only talked about in terms of daily stressors, but were also discussed in broader terms such as the combined influence of psychological factors and the surrounding social environment on the physical and mental wellness of the participants and challenges to their respect and recognition.

9. Economic challenges: Insufficient income, lack of stable livelihood opportunities, health issues, poor housing and homelessness

- **Insufficient income**

Insufficient income and lack of livelihood opportunities were talked about in reference to economic challenges. Most agreed that this is the crucial challenge and cannot be fixed except upon livelihood opportunities and a strong social support. The income they received was insufficient to meet their daily needs. The respondents strongly believed that they face many other challenges directly or indirectly connected to insufficient income. *“We are managing now with what we earn, the rest is with God,”* said one informant from Mannar. The likelihood of rapidly increasing multifaceted needs was a common challenge that affected them considerably. One respondent from Mullaitivu stated, *“I am living in a tight economic situation. It is worse compared to the time before the war. The cost of living has increased and things in general like groceries have definitely gone up”*. Another participant from Jaffna was more succinct, *“I need extra money for my daughter’s treatment. It would be good if I increase my income because it is necessary for her medical needs.”*

Although informants talked extensively about the problem of lack of income, it was reflected in different occasions and they were unique in nature. They faced challenges in providing their dependents with sufficient food. It was found that, already, many families are being forced to “eat less preferred food, limit portion sizes, reduce number of meals per day,” according to the participants. A woman from Mannar stated, *“Sometimes we eat, sometimes we don’t. Known people would give something.”* They struggled to meet their medical expenses and provide a good quality of education to their children. A participant from Jaffna said, *“I need extra money for my daughter’s treatment. It would be good if I increase my income because it is necessary for her medical needs.”* A woman from Mannar said, *“The income is not enough to educate children. It was a difficult task for me. So I left my son with my relatives in Parpangkandal for studies.”* Women also had to borrow money from different financial institutions due to the lack of savings and investments. *“I pawned the jewels and got the loan for my son’s medical expenses,”* said a participant from Mannar.

- **Lack of stable livelihood opportunities**

The lack of stable livelihood opportunities was another challenge acknowledged by most of the participants from all the study areas. The majority of the participants were employed in seasonal, menial labour or unprotected self-employment such as raising chickens and goats, selling food items, or tailoring in a small scale. It seems that they find it difficult to continue with these kinds of opportunities. One participant who sold food items in Jaffna stated, *“People eat but do not pay. Then the money they owe me will increase to 1000 or 2000 rupees. Thereafter, we cannot do anything and we thought that it was good to stop and then stopped. Now my mother goes out to cook for another house and does other odd jobs.”*

Poultry production was affected by frequent rain, hot weather, and infectious diseases. *“Yes, I had about 30 chickens. They all died during the rain last month. I gave them medicine and everything, but they all died,”* a woman from Kilinochchi stated. Yet, the availability of alternative livelihood opportunities was limited due to lack of education, skills and training. A participant also from Kilinochchi admitted, *“We make only mixture snacks. I do the packing. Only if I make 1000 bags will I get 550 rupees. It’s hard, it’s not easy. Sometimes I have to bring it home and make it overnight.”* Most of the participants are reluctant to go outside of their area to work. Another negative impact of lack of income is the high school dropout rate and the neglect of children's education. Some of the participants preferred to send their male children to work in order to satisfy the basic needs. One participant from Vavuniya said, *“My eldest son left his studies at the age of 15 and I sent him for a job as a mechanic.”* Settling back loans was also another major issue the women faced due to insufficient income and unavailability of permanent livelihood opportunities. Some of the women have taken loans from banks or from financial institutions to rebuild or renovate their houses. It has further aggravated their economic vulnerability.

- **Housing and infrastructure challenges**

Along with the challenges in meeting food, medical, and children's education needs, housing or a shelter is one of the most crucial challenges for the participants. Some participants are either house-less or land-less or live in a thatched hut or uncompleted or

partly-constructed houses or in houses owned by their relatives, friends or unknown people. *“We are seven girls. A small house. It belongs to younger sister’s husband. We have been living like this. We have to leave this house by this December. I don’t have a residence. That’s the big problem to me and I’m getting tension by thinking a lot about the future,”* a participant from Jaffna noted. She also told further, *“If I had my own land I could do anything. If I had a house built with bricks, it’s enough for me.”* Another participant when talking about poor housing said, *“We live close to the drainage. Our house is in low land. When it rains we face a water problem. My house leaks and water comes into the house.”* Similarly, another participant from Kilinochchi said, *“My house construction is still not completed, so, I am staying in the temporary shelter. I cannot say this is a secure one.”* *“We don’t even have a toilet in our home. We have to go to our sister’s house for that too,”* said a distressed participant from Jaffna.

Due to the lack of income, some of the participants were unable to rent individual house for their families. Therefore, those living with host families/relatives faced many issues. One participant from Vavuniya worried *“We struggled a lot when my daughter was doing her Advance Level. We don’t have a house of our own. We live in a rented house.”* Participants who live in the host families’ houses had to share common living halls, kitchens and even bedrooms. Some of the participants kept shifting their residences as they do not have a permanent house to stay and some participants in Jaffna had to live in dilapidated or collapsed buildings. A participant from Jaffna lamented, *“Yes, we lived in collapsed buildings. We did not have our own house, the house we lived in belonged to a Muslim family. Then they asked us to leave. Then we vacated the house. The houses belonging to Muslims were being repaired and they told us that it would not be good for Tamil people stay here. It would be better if we stayed in a place permanently rather than looking for houses and to be scolded.”* Participants from Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi had to borrow money from banks or pawn their jewellery to build their own houses. It was noticeable that even though most of the families were able to receive approximately Rs. 350,000 under the government’s housing scheme it was not sufficient to complete their construction work due to frequently imposed price hikes on building materials and increased wages of workers. A participant from Mannar confirmed the point, *“It’s very difficult. I have nothing. Even*

the earrings have gone. We take loans from here and there to complete this house.” Similarly, another participant from the same study location said, *“Yes, I borrow the jewellery from relatives or known people and pawn it because I have to finish the house. Now the loan is about 4 to 4 ½ lakhs.”*

- **Challenges with regard to health**

Information revealed that different health issues were prevalent among participants. Women talked about health issues in reference to physical and psychological challenges. Most agreed that diseases cannot be treated without sufficient income. A reasonable income among family members was seen as crucial to a well-functioning family.

Some of the participants mentioned that they suffer from different ailments like diabetes, blood pressure, knee pain, chest pain, stomach pain, back pain, heart disease, cholesterol, piles and respiratory disorders. Some participants who were injured during the last phase of the war in 2009 still live with pieces of explosive in their bodies. The women admitted that they happened to endure these adverse health/physical conditions due to their poor family background and could not neglect their family needs and as a breadwinner, looking after their children and dependents are their prime concern. It seems that they are helpless and unable to take any precautionary action to prevent these troublesome health issues due to lack of income and financial support. It was also found that performing multiple and unfamiliar responsibilities led to different kinds of health issues among the participants.

A participant from Jaffna who is involved in rolling *beedi* suffers respiratory issues due to inhaling tobacco leaf dust. *“Everyone tells that to avoid inhaling the dust. This work is on our own wish. No one compelled us to do this. So, if we went for a medical consultation, the doctor would ask why you we do this work knowing the effects it can have.”* Another participant from Jaffna who involved in cooking and suffering from diabetes and cholesterol worried that, *“Doctor advised me to reduce my walking here and there, avoid sitting in one place and working for a long time, and not to inhale dust. Even though I have cholesterol and diabetes, I decided to go for housework. Then I can*

earn more. I have a daughter and I have this illness. What else can I do?" Another participant from the same study location suffered from hypertension: *"I am having blood pressure and doctor advised me not to think about it too much and refrain from hard work. Thereafter I reduced working. However, I went to do cultivation work three days after being discharged from the hospital. If I stay home who will give me money?"* A participant from Vavuniya who worked in a rice mill and suffered severe back pain said, *"Doctor advised me to give up my job because I was weak and I have to eat healthy foods to do that job. They gave me this advice because of the heavy work I did such as carrying heavy pails."* Another participant from Kilinochchi disclosed, *"During the final war I got injured on my hand and neck. There is still a piece of explosive in my neck that could not be removed. So I can't do anything. I can't even move my hands. My hands are still swollen."*

Some of the women have been diagnosed with mental health challenges as well but it appears that the affected participants do not receive regular medical attention due to unawareness of the importance of medication. *"When I was hospitalized last time, they said I was affected mentally. I told them there are no persons in our descendant having mental issues. I discharged myself from the hospital by saying I don't have such issues. I didn't go to hospital thereafter."* Another participant said, *"Now I am worried that my husband is mentally ill."* One participant from Mullaitivu district was concerned about her mother's health condition: *"I have to look after my mother because my mother had a surgery this morning; she had to remove the womb."* Another participant from Mannar who is looking after her sick mother stated, *"My mother is now bedridden and it's very difficult to look after her with my workload and house responsibilities."*

When prompted, participants talked at length about their children's health issues, with some immediately linking it to lack of income and difficulties of accessing treatment. The children experienced various health issues including urinary tract infection, mental retardation, difficulty in breathing, bed-wetting and physical injuries. Some of them suffered *from diseases* caused by genetic issues like impaired speech, physical disability and mental retardation. *"My elder daughter can't speak and I am extremely worried about her future,"* said a participant from Jaffna. Another from Jaffna also agonized

over how to deal with her child's disability. *"My daughter is a differently abled child, has problems with her both legs, and cannot walk. She is sick as well."*

Women heads of households suffer without sufficient income or financial support to receive advanced medical care. They approach government officials and NGOs or individuals to obtain assistance. One participant from Jaffna stated, *"I have to buy medicine for my daughter every week from the pharmacy. She fell ill with a urine infection."*

- **Unfamiliar multiple responsibilities**

Performing multiple roles is one of the crucial challenges acknowledged by all of the participants. The complex and unaccustomed responsibilities included: income generating activities, preparing meals and cleaning the kitchen and utensils, taking care of children, washing clothes, attending school meetings, approaching aid agencies and government officials for assistance, helping children in their education and taking them to school and tuition classes and fetching them, cleaning the surroundings, and many other chores. Performing multiple tasks prevented them from being successful in income generating activities and forging relationships with others in their community. At times they found it difficult to look after their family members, including their children. *"I also worked in houses, when I supplied foods for the canteens. I gave powdered milk to my son as I was going out to work. I couldn't breastfeed my son sufficiently. My eldest son left his studies at the age of 15. As I was also going for work, I could not look after him,"* said a participant from Vavuniya. Taking care of dependents, including injured persons, amputees, sick and elderly persons, was another widespread issue reflected in almost all the interviews. Since most of the participants' families are nuclear structured, it was difficult for them to obtain support to share their household chores. A participant from Jaffna said, *"Since my husband goes to work, I have to cook for him early. I have to look after my children. Therefore, I do not go anywhere. I do not have anyone at home to help me to go to work. I have a differently-abled girl child. I do not like to leave her alone and go to work. My daughter has to go to the toilet often to urinate due to her illness. So I need to be with her. Therefore, I did not have a chance to leave her alone to go to work. I cannot go leaving her at home."*

A participant from Vavuniya had decided to undertake multiple livelihood responsibilities in order to earn additional income for her children's education. *"I undertake a variety of work relating to horticulture, working in a rice mill, doing childcare, and washing utensils and cooking in shops or hotels. When I had stomach ache, I couldn't go to distant places for work. I stayed at home and supplied food items for canteens."* A participant from Kilinochchi who is tired of playing multiple roles, conceded that, *"Before the war, I was living with the help of my husband, but, now I am doing everything alone including looking after my children. I feel that now I am taking care of the responsibilities of my husband as well. I feel that I am playing a role as a mother and a father for my kids. I can't say my present status is strong, I am weak right now."*

- **Negative influence of patriarchal dominance**

In all districts, informants spoke extensively of the challenge of patriarchal dominance and its impact on their psychosocial domain. They experienced: men's sarcastic comments and jokes with double meanings in public places like markets or on roads; family members fabricating stories; relatives and members of the community, manipulating women's vulnerability to sexually abuse them; men visiting their houses without valid reasons and harassing women under the guise of helping. Friends and acquaintances also kept watch over women's personal contacts and activities. The women who head their households worried about possible blame or accountability for any misdemeanor that might occur.

When describing the ill treatment of community members, a participant from Jaffna anxiously divulged: *"Nine years ago I got separated from my husband and have been listening to such stories. My neighbors told that I laughed at men like this and I have received money as well. My sister was in India and invited me to come over to India. I had to collect my passport so I hired a three-wheeler. I did not give him the three-wheeler charges immediately. I asked him whether I could give him the money when my brother deposited it. I would give the total amount then. Meanwhile would he come for hires, and he agreed. They spoke ill of me since we went like that. They cooked*

a story that we had an illegal connection and therefore he was travelling with me. His wife called me and scolded me with filthy words.”

- **Violence of intimate partner and close relatives**

Intimate partner violence, stalking, and psychological aggression by a current or former spouse are common issues, which were frequently highlighted. The intentional use of physical force with the potential for causing injury or harm was a common type of violence encountered by participants. Physical violence includes, but is not limited to, slapping, punching, and hitting. Participants conceded that there was a repeating pattern of physical and psychological violence and it causes fear or concern for their own physical and mental safety or the safety of their children and family members. *“We lived together in my sister’s house. Then after six months, he started fighting. I came back. I again went with my husband a second time and stayed with him for another six months. After three years I joined him again but stayed only for six months. Again I had to fight with him because he did not earn for a living,”* said one participant from Jaffna. Women had to tolerate the violence inflicted by their husbands in order to protect their family prestige or for the future benefit of their children or just to continue with their lives. A participant from Jaffna who tolerated her husband’s violence for too long lamented, *“I have a girl child at the age of 16 and ready for marriage. So, I have to live under him if there would be any marriage proposals for her. The first thing to consider is family background. Not only that, I need to respond to thousands of questions from the people.”* Some violence include repeated beating and unwanted control over participants’ activities and making phone calls when the participants do not want to be contacted or threatening them with physical harm. A participant from Jaffna who was restricted by her husband from getting involved in a livelihood initiative on her own acknowledged that, *“My husband doesn’t like me to stand on my own feet. He doesn’t want me to do something on my own and be separated from him.”* Another participant from Mannar faces similar challenges: *“My husband doesn’t like me going out. Not even to shops. He only goes.”* Some partners are not physically abusive but they are suspicious over the behavior of the spouses of women who head their households and this led to many challenges in their day-to-day lives. This situation is reflected in the following statement made by a woman from Kilinochchi: *“My husband started*

quarrelling for every single rumour about me. Problems arose between us as he believed what the villagers were talking about me and he went back to Qatar. I let him go and I have been on my own since then." Some women concurred that their husbands are really barriers that prevent them from becoming actively involved in livelihood activities.

It was noticeable that the participants were restricted from forging contacts for their personal needs and obtaining support from different stakeholders due to fear stemming from patriarchal dominance. A participant from Jaffna was compelled to restrict her business to customers visiting her doorstep to buy her products and hesitated to expand it: *"People talk about us that we are going here and there, and attack our reputation. Therefore, we sell our products only to those who come to our doorstep, avoiding bad names from the people."*

In addition to the intimate partner violence, a number of other factors were also raised by informants with regard to difficulties and concerns with the patriarchal system. A woman from Mullaitivu described her violence inflicted on her by her father-in-law: *"Last time I went there to see my daughter, my father in-law beat me up and kicked me out. Since then, I go to her school to see her."* Another participant also depicted a similar experience: *"One of my husband's elder brothers assaulted me once with a big stick. I was hospitalized. They said that there was a fracture in my vertebral column and I needed to do surgery in Colombo. I haven't done that surgery yet as I want to stay with my children until my death."* A participant revealed her younger brother's violence on her: *"I was going through the worst time of my live. I struggled a lot with my younger brother. Last year, he forced me to lend him 800,000 rupees. I went to the police. So one day he barged into the house and broke the windows and shattered the light bulbs. My son was sitting for the scholarship exam, so I had to stay somewhere else. I went through a lot because of him. He brought a big knife once, I was so afraid."* Another participant from Jaffna had a similar experience: *"A woman living close by once stormed into my house with some men and wrongly accused me for having an illegal relationship with her husband. The men beat me up mercilessly and scolded me in malicious language in front of my children and neighbors."*

Though it was not a common issue, some participants acknowledged that their children also have to endure physical violence of their fathers. *My husband attacked my son with a knife his wounds required five sutures at the hospital,*" said a woman from Jaffna. Given these experiences, intimate partner violence was the most crucial issue acknowledged by a majority of the participants. They believed that they are powerless before patriarchal domination and its impact and they decided to continue their lives amid all the serious psychosocial challenges inflicted on them.

- **Sexual and verbal harassment**

Participants in many instances admitted to the dilemma of sexual violence and associated issues like sexual harassment. Blood relatives like father, other men living around them, and some service providers caused sexual abuse on women and their children, especially on their female children. Men were accused of coercing the women to exchange sex for a favour such as lending money or doing some work for them. However, the incidents of child abuse by their fathers were not a common issue. When talked about the prevalence of parental child sexual harassment, a participant from Jaffna disclosed a painful experience: *"My husband abused our eldest daughter twice. Yes, I know. She can't speak and she was only six years old then. Due to this I separated from him."* When probing into sexual harassment inflicted by other men on children, a participant who works outside her home in Mannar leaving her two girl children alone does so in fear: *"There was no electricity at home. I finish work by 8.30 p.m. Children say that they are scared because people were peeping through the fence. Some men even peep when my girls are having a bath. My children's underwear goes missing. I have a fear within me to leave the children alone."*

Another woman going out for work said, *"It's common for men to make fun of us, whether we are married or not, when we go to work we have to face those problems. We cannot say there are no issues."* Another participant from Mullaitivu was quiet upset with the men in her neighbourhood: *"There are some men in the village who verbally harass me and try to cross the line"*. She also talked about an incident of harassment caused by her neighbours: *"When I was building the house I needed some money urgently. I asked someone and he asked me what favour I could do to him in exchange*

for money.” Another participant from the same study location revealed the harassment of an insurance salesman: “They call me on the phone and ask me to sleep with them at least once. Once there was an insurance guy who wanted to do the insurance for my daughter. He got my number and called me one day and harassed me.”

Patriarchal influences affected the participants adversely and restricted them from seeking support from outsiders or public servants even for an emergency. A participant from Mannar said, *“As I don't have a land I went to register for land at Land Registration Department. The officer in-charge, who is a married man and a father, took our number. Then he started calling officially. Later, his attitude changed. He started to call in the nights. He said he remembers me if he closes his eyes. Then I stopped answering his calls, I gave up the land matter too. Then a new officer came to that post. He also behaved in the same manner. He said he has a land. I can live there. I refused and said you need not to give me land and walked out. Then I gave up that too. I missed a land which is allocated by the government for people like us due to this.”*

In addition to physical violence, participants raised issues on verbal abuse. A participant from Mannar who endured her husband's verbal abuse said, *“He is suspicious about everyone. No one is left. He is suspicious even about the relationship I have with my brothers. I tolerated that too. Finally, he said that I have relationship between me and my son, when my son was only nine years old, and I decided to leave him.”* A Muslim participant from Jaffna also spoke about her husband's verbal abuse: *“Sometimes if I go and work outside home, he would say that I'm going out to work, I'm an immoral woman. How can I bear that?”*

An informant from Mullaitivu said, *“I am afraid to sleep in my own house at night. I used to be harassed over the phone several times. I had to change my sim card three times. But I am still afraid that people may harass me. So, I go to my aunt's house to sleep at night. People will speak even if someone comes to my house for nothing.* A participant from Jaffna also admitted that she faced verbal harassment from men in her area: *“There are men in our area to make fun on us, whether we are married or not, when we go to work. We have to face those problems. We cannot say there are no*

issues. ” A participant from Mannar who suffered harassment of men in her neighbourhood said, *“When we go out alone, and when men inquire and know that the woman is single, they pass comments and follow us I have suffered. I came home and cry. They continuously follow. Some say get into the three-wheeler, we will drop you and many wanted to drop me home.”*

- **Challenges with regard to sexuality**

Another negative impact of patriarchal dominance, which was discussed by participants on many occasions, is the challenge with regard to sexuality. Some women who head their households and young married girls were vulnerable to violence and unwanted pregnancy. Neighbours and relatives talked ill of participants who had extramarital affairs. Extramarital affairs were also found to be an issue, which challenged their social status. Some of the participants agreed that they had extra marital affairs and illegitimate children. This is directly and indirectly increased the vulnerability of women and their children. A participant from Jaffna who is married to an already married man said, *“I married a man. He is a Muslim but I am Tamil. He has a family with three children. Many people talked ill of me.”* A participant from Mullaitivu conceded that she was harassed via phone due to her lack of concern about using a mobile phone with care. *“I am naïve. When someone asks me my phone to make a call I give them my phone, so they get my number. They call me and talk unnecessarily.”* Another participant who gave birth to a boy due an extramarital affair said, *“Yes, my last son is not my husband’s but my cousin’s and he didn’t force me or anything. This happened because of me. It was my fault.”* Another participant who had a love affair with a young boy who is three years younger to her said, *“A boy who was three years younger to me helped us. He was good to my parents also. And soon the villagers got to know about the love. Slowly it became a huge issue in the village. Then the villagers started to believe in the rumor.”*

Another challenge was the fact that some young women failed to recognize the possible negative consequences of their social interactions. *“Whenever I go out people don’t believe that I am married. They ask for my phone number and ask me to speak with them. I have a lot of problems like that in the society. Sometimes, if I like then I will give*

my phone number or talk with them even if they don't like." Loneliness and immaturity are two key factors. Another young participant said, *"I will talk over the phone but will not have any physical contact."*

- **Ill-treatment by community members**

Talking ill of participants was another practice related to the harmful influence of patriarchy. Malicious and sarcastic comments and fabricating stories about women's behaviour were common issues reported by participants from all of the study areas. Even their family members and close relatives talked ill of them. One participant from Kilinochchi said, *"If I go outside alone, they are thinking about me in a different way. Even if I go out for my work, they talk like I go and meet other males. However, I never go the way that they talk. Even my mother-in-law fabricated a story about me."* Another participant from the same study location stated, *"People used to talk badly about me if I happen to talk with anyone. I talk to people secretly. They accuse me of having relationships with people who are older than me or even younger than me. But they don't mind if my father or my brother does something like this. Society keeps sharing rumours. They ask why is she talking to this person for so long? They say she has an illicit relationship with that person."* A participant from Jaffna also conceded a similar experience: *"They would speak ill of me. When we go out, sometimes we laugh with known people, which may be turned into other stories. Because of this, we have to stay at home."* A Muslim woman who faced lots of issues in working outside her home due to patriarchal influences said, *"Those who are not married can work but Muslims will not allow it. They say that you have attained puberty so do not go out and keep us inside the house. This has been a tradition."* Another Muslim participant who was ill-treated by neighbours said, *"If I lived alone all will misunderstand me. If I go anywhere, all will look at me with a skewed eye. They will come with questions. I have to face these types of people and problems."*

- **Negative consequences of patriarchal domination**

Patriarchal dominance was the most destructive experience, which challenged the well being of the participants. Most of the women admitted that patriarchal cultural practices are the key obstacles to their social development. The issues that participants endured included: intimate partner violence, receiving sarcastic comments and double meaning

jokes in public places, being the subject of gossip and fabricated stories, and people creating problems under the guise of helping even knowing their vulnerable family situations. Given these experiences, intimate partner violence was the most crucial issue acknowledged by a majority of the participants. They had to tolerate the violence inflicted by their husbands, male siblings or any other male relatives in order to protect their family prestige or for the future benefit of their children or just to continue with their lives.

- **Negligence of the law enforcement apparatus**

Crimes and violence against women were overlooked by responsible officials. Due to the absence of a strong legal system against the perpetrators, the affected women were not delivered justice and the number of incidents increased. There was an accusation of discriminatory approaches practiced by the police officials with regard to abuse cases and family disputes. The participants believed that they are discriminated against and those officers did not actively function to find a remedy to their grievances. Their state of vulnerability prevented them from talking about this to others. They were afraid of aggravating their existing susceptible condition.

A participant from Jaffna who was severely affected by intimate partner violence and lost her faith in the police stated: *“When I went to the police station to lodge a complaint, there were some old complaints also against him. Then he also created problems for my children and my family. But the, police did not take strict action against him.”* She further described: *“My son was beaten up by his father and my son got beaten by the police.”* When talking about her bitter experience one participant from the same study location said, *“If you ask me about the police station, I would say going there would be in vain. I faced a lot of problems when I went to the police station. At last, I received nothing”.* Another participant who got humiliated by the police in Mannar said, *“I was afraid that they are not being respectful towards us. I am from a village and sometimes they treat us like we are small, you know . . . sometimes they say that oh you are from that women’s organization and things like that. Even other people say that to us sometimes. Mostly police say things like that.”*

A participant from Vavuniya who was unsatisfied with police action against her husband regarding a transaction, said, *“My mother-in-law’s brother disputed with my husband due to this transaction and he went to the police station. The police warned my husband to give the money to me. However, since then, he disappeared. Therefore, I couldn’t get the money.”* Another participant from the same study location had a similar experience: *“If I go to a police station, they will keep the perpetrator in judicial custody for sometimes and then they will release him. He will do the same thing again after the release.”* Yet another participant from Vavuniya spoke about the difficulties she faced with the police and her longing for justice: *“I went to the Nanaattan camp and inquired about my husband. They told me that his name was not on the list and instructed me to lodge a complaint at Mannar police station. In the police station no one paid enough attention to me.”*

Lack of income and limited livelihood initiatives in the post-conflict scenario and the slim possibility of effective support from both governmental and nongovernmental organizations are the main impediments, which lead to the multifaceted challenges faced by the participants. The women who head households are compelled to scrape out a living that might meet their essential needs but holds no guarantee for the future.

10. Psychological challenges endured by the Participants

This section describes the immediate and long-term psychological challenges encountered by the women who head their households in a post-conflict scenario. In this section, trauma inflicted by armed conflict and incidents associated to it, cognitive dissonance, social stigma attached to women’s current status and social role, stress with multiple and unfamiliar responsibilities, a feeling of being controlled by host family members, and the challenges of emotional immaturity are discussed.

11. Trauma inflicted by deaths and disappearances of family members, relatives, and collective loss of community members

Most of the participants have witnessed the deaths or separation of their husbands, children, parents, siblings, relatives and others who were living around them during the war. Their family members and relatives were arrested, surrendered to the military, or

found dead/subjected to forcible disappearances. Nobody knew what happened to the persons disappeared who included children, women and elderly persons. Participants and their family members suffered severe emotional pain and its negative consequences due to loss of their loved ones. They have been enduring extreme guilt for being unable to cope with their emotional pain and continued looking for their loved ones who were missing. Participants who managed to escape the unfolding human tragedy were separated from their family members and communities, sometimes never to be seen again, and lost all their belongings and assets. It's believed that distressing memories could be changed over time depending on life conditions. However, this is always a challenge among the participants. It was also noticeable that deaths and disappearances were more common among the Vanni participants compared to people from the other districts. When describing her heart-breaking experience, a participant from Jaffna stated, *"My husband was wounded in a shell attack and injured near the lungs during the final battle. He was barely alive for half an hour only with no medicines or treatment available. He was speaking with us for a while and died because of blocked breathing."* Another participant from Jaffna who lost her mother, considered to be a brave and kind woman and believed to have been killed by an unidentified armed group, recalled her dreadful memories and said, *"When we heard the firing sound, we just came out of the house to see that it was our mother. Her brain was outside of the head. She did not do any wrong to anyone. She loved everyone like herself. She helped all. She was never afraid of anything. Even if men made a mistake, she would punish them to change them."*

A participant from Kilinochchi recollected her horrendous memories on her daughter who went missing and the challenges she faced in providing treatment for her daughter's illness: *"We almost lost our daughter during the mass displacement. She was lost in the camp when she was nine. She was separated into a different camp with her grandmother while she had chicken pox. We thought she was going to die. It was very hard to get food or medical services. It was really hard, and it is hard to explain the struggle."* Another participant from Kilinochchi had a similar experience: *"There were times we starved and lost my children in the crowd, it was all so emotionally scarring for us. We even lost my father in-law in the crowd. He is not yet found. We searched for*

him for years and he hasn't come back yet, so I believe he is dead. We lost so much not only him and the properties as well, but a lot more than that." Another participant from Kilinochchi spoke about the forcible conscription of her son by the LTTE: "My son went missing. The younger one went with the church itself. We all were hoping that the church would save him. However, the church people said my son was taken by the LTTE." A participant from Kilinochchi who lost her two sons and husband is struggling to meet her family's daily needs: "If there wasn't a war, I wouldn't have lost my husband and sons. My two sons would have looked after me well. Why are we in this situation? My sons would have been income earners and they would have definitely looked after me in a better way." Another participant from the same location had still not received any financial compensation from the government for her son's death: "For the past seven years not even a cent was given for my son's loss. I have gone to so many places, each time they record something but nothing happens." Another participant from Kilinochchi who lost her husband and faced challenges in protecting her children and cattle, and was unable to go out to work leaving her children behind said, "I do not have any one to help at home. So I have to be at home. I have to protect my daughters. I can have cattle or goats. But, there are lots of thieves. If there is a man in the house, no one would dare to come. There is a difference in a house where there is a man and a house without a man."

12. Multiple displacements and its repercussions

The unpleasant experience of multiple displacements of participants since 1990 ensued in emotional distress. It was a common phenomenon that people had to flee from one place to another during continuous fighting and heavy bombardment. People embarked on their deadly journey with their valuable belongings and ended up with nothing. They were deprived of food, medical assistance, drinking water and a proper place to sleep. The devastating armed conflict left them empty-handed and they had a feeling of incompleteness. Their entire hard-earned investments were destroyed during the last battle. All of the participants' experiences were alike in this regard. One participant from Mullaitivu evoked her upsetting memories: "We were displaced many times when we sought protection from shelling and aerial strikes. Many of us witnessed deaths, and starved for many days with our children. We had to hide in the hastily prepared safety

bunkers. We did not even have an extra dress to change. It is really a pity to think about our past memories.”

A participant from Jaffna described multiple displacements: *“First, we were displaced from Maviddapuram in 1989 and stayed in Suthumalai and then moved to Thavady. We stayed until 1996 there. Finally in 1996, we went to Visuvamadu in Mullaitivu. We were living in Vanni from 1996 up to the final war in 2009. Then we were sent by the military to the Vavuniya refugee camp and we stayed there for around three months. After that, they brought us to Jaffna. They handed us over us to the Jaffna Divisional Secretariat. After that we stayed in Manipai at our elder brother’s house for one year. After one year we rented a house and stayed there for two years. Finally we came here.”*

Participants invariably recollected the devastating consequences of multiple displacements. This was perceived to be an obvious reason for their current situation. One Jaffna participant, who experienced multiple displacements since 1990, explained, *“My mother would take us from place to place. She brought us to Colombo and then took us to Puttalam. I did not know where else she took us when we were kids.”* Some of them had to stop their education or were compelled to get married due to constant displacement. One participant from Jaffna said, *“While studying for my O/L examination, my mother took us to Anuradhapura because she wanted to go abroad. She left us at our aunt’s house. I had to marry because my aunty did not look after us properly. Then we came back to Jaffna.”* Similarly, another woman who stopped going to school due to multiple displacements said, *“I was born in 1989 and displaced in 1990 and left school in 1998 after studying up to grade 9. Another Kilinochchi participant who lost all her belongings and valuables said, “We have lost everything due to the war and displacement.” I think in 1996 we lost everything. Even our clothes. We just ran with whatever we were wearing.”*

Another participant from Kilinochchi with similar experience explained: *“We lost everything and we started from zero to get where we are now. We would have had a better life if we didn’t have to be displaced at least.”* One participant described how her family lost their belongings and valuables: *“We took most of the things with us on a tractor to one place, when we moved from that place to another we took the things by a*

land master and by cycle to another place. When we finally went in to the army controlled area we were only able to take things in a plastic bag—mostly documents and things like that, not even knickers for my children.”

The participants refrained from reminiscing about the enjoyable moments of their past. Most of them worried about their present living conditions and social status, were pessimistic about their lives, and had negative thoughts. The challenges they currently face make them unsure about their future. They believed that the harassment and violence inflicted on them was due to anomic social situations created by the war. Most of the affected women are still pessimistic of their ability to lead a meaningful life.

Most of the women who head households are young and they are unable to properly respond to different situations. They usually do not have the ability to recognize the coping strategies needed to deal with their emotions and they are also unaware of that. In their case, basically, their behaviours are controlled by their emotions. They do not know how to efficiently control their feelings and safe guard themselves. They are simply trapped and their age may be one of the major reasons. However, it may be, they are not prepared to learn from their past experiences. Some of the girls are subject to multiple sexual abuse and pregnancy. The unsatisfied sexual need is a problem among the women who head households as they belong to a very young age group. They do not even talk about that since it is a taboo in our traditional society. However the negative impact of sexual problems and suppressed sexual needs reflect on their day-to-day lives.

13. Summary of findings on psychosocial challenges

The findings revealed that the social challenges faced by women who head households include lack of income, multiple and unaccustomed responsibilities, health issues, patriarchal dominance, sexual harassment by men in general, the negative implications of sexuality, new communication tools, especially mobile phones, being abused for the purpose of sexual coercion, and negligence of officials and law enforcement apparatuses.

As for psychological challenges, the participants acknowledged that they experienced trauma inflicted by the death and disappearance of family members and relatives or the community due to constant and prolonged displacements. The findings also showed social stigma and stress with multiple responsibilities and emotional immaturity.

14. Strategies adopted by women who head households to cope with psychosocial challenges

The findings showed that participants had adopted various strategies to handle the psychosocial challenges created by the complete destruction of their family and social life. The views of participants are presented as they were expressed. The strategies that adopted fell into two major categories—thought processes and sets of activities. These two categories are predominantly emerging from the theories of Coping Strategy, Community Empowerment and Adjustment.

15. Social coping strategies

Social coping strategies are presented under two main categories: survival strategies, and strategies adopted to triumph over patriarchal dominance and sexual harassment in the Sri Lankan post-conflict scenario. Survival strategies consist of resorting to formal resources and informal resources.

16. Strategies adopted by women who head households to cope with livelihood challenges

Coping strategies adopted by women who head their households to manage survival challenges are mainly categorized into two aspects: informal resources and formal resources. Under informal strategies, support obtained from family and relatives, traditional labour, menial labour and child labour have been discussed. The formal strategies included: receiving support from the government, non-government sector and non-governmental individuals.

17. Resorting to informal strategies to cope with survival challenges

The informal resources resorted to by the participants to deal with their survival challenges include agriculture and menial labour, sending their children to work, borrowing money, and making use of traditional resources to enhance their livelihood.

18. Multiple livelihoods as an informal survival strategy

To supplement the household income they took up various initiatives including poultry and goat rearing; cooking and selling food items; making garlands; beauty culture; household work; menial labour; selling margosa chips (*vadakam*), snacks like mixture, patty, tapioca chips, fried and salted peanuts and fryums; selling dried fish; collecting and selling coconuts; vegetable cultivation; sewing; rolling *beedis*; going abroad for work; and making palmayrah leaf mats and palm products like candy and crafts.

Some women helped fishermen separate/segregate fish and sell them. They also helped clean the boats. In order to expand their livelihood, they prepared a variety of edible items and adopted different strategies to sell their products among fishermen. It was also observed that some of them opted to send their children to work at mechanic shops, for fishing or daily wage work and participants also obtain their children's support in livelihood activities and household chores. A participant from Jaffna who engaged in multi livelihood tasks elucidated, *"I grow crops such as onion, chilli and paddy cultivation. I am doing it myself without hiring labourers. I have taken the land on lease to do cultivation. I am doing this from the time I separated from my husband. I have done cultivation previously, so I managed to do it. If I have free time I would work as an agricultural labourer."* Similarly, when talking about her multiple livelihood activities, another participant from Jaffna said, *"I farm poultry, do some sewing; make flower garlands and "Gowri Kaappu" thread (A religious thread worn on the hand)."* Performing multiple livelihood tasks is a common phenomenon acknowledged by the participants from other study locations as well. One Kilinochchi participant said, *"I sell grocery items sometimes. Then I work as a labourer on a daily income basis. I know all the work. I can cook. I go to cut grass. It was only after we were resettled that I started poultry farming."* Another participant from Kilinochchi who sent her children to work and performs livelihood activities at home stated *"I raise cattle, before that I did*

poultry rearing, but all the birds died because of disease. My son and daughter are working. That is how we are running our lives.”

Some participants are skilful in handicraft such as knitting mat box (Jaffna), making thalikody (Mannar), making garlands (Jaffna) and sewing handbags with banana fibre. It was also observed that some of participants (Kilinochchi) are able to make dresses and prepare food and snacks such as mixture in a large scale and provide employment opportunities to others as well. A participant from Mullaitivu makes concrete posts and blocks and sells them to building contractors. Another participant from Mannar works as a handicrafts trainer. However, the results show that the most common practice among the participants is getting involved in agricultural and daily labour.

19. Traditional resources as a positive measure of livelihood

Some of the women heads of household are generously supported by their family members in many ways, including by the provision of material support and support for their livelihood activities, considerably reducing their financial burden. They receive physical support from their parents, siblings, relatives and people living around them. They receive money to start their livelihoods, educate and provide treatment to their children, and build or repair their houses. Some of the respondents involved in preparing foodstuffs received support from their parents especially from their mothers, siblings and children. The demand and the market for their products are promising since these items are quite popular among the locals. Their products are mostly fast-moving in nature and involve traditional techniques. Participants representing different study locations admitted that their family members and relatives were very supportive and helpful in many ways. A participant from Jaffna said, *“We were under our elder sister’s caretaking for three years. Her husband was pretty good. He looked after us. Then he too was killed in a shell attack after two years of our sister’s marriage. After that, she didn’t get married again as she wanted to look after us.”* Another participant from Jaffna had a similar experience: *“My first elder sister is a person who faced all difficulties. The second elder sister too helped us a bit. She was separated from her husband. The younger sister also got married and she also helps my family in many ways.”* One participant who was financially and physically supported by her friend said,

“It was difficult at that time. I brought cosmetic items from the shops and sold them. My friend paid regularly. She also cooked for me every day. She was very helpful.” A participant from Jaffna whose mother and aunt are very encouraging and thoughtful of her livelihood activities and the well-being of her children acknowledged their support: *“As I have children, I cannot go for outside work. My mother and aunt stay with me and assist us. So I do all these income-generating activities at home. I don’t have problems. If I go outside, my mother and aunt will cut fodder and feed the goats.”* Another participant from Mannar recalls her mother’s support: *“My mother grinds and sells flour. She cooked for orders. My mother sold dried fish at the beginning. Later she started to deal with Indian business people. She supported me financially.”* One participant remembers her neighbour's generosity: *“My husband sometimes goes for work. Sometimes we eat, sometimes we don’t. Known people would give something to eat when we don’t cook meals at home. We manage with that.”* An Islamic priest supported a participant by meeting the costs of her daughter’s medical treatment: *“I approached a Moulavi from our area mosque and he pledged a small monthly financial donation for her medical needs.”*

Another participant who manages her daily needs with the support of a pensioner currently staying with her said, *“This old man is with me for five years. He is receiving a pension. I managed my household needs with his payment of 5000 rupees.”* Another participant who receives support from her mother said, *“My mother also supports me. My brothers provide for my mother. Since I have a small child, my mother helps me from what she earns.”*

20. Learning a livelihood by themselves or from an individual/organization

Most of the participants are involved in traditional livelihood activities and they learnt them either on their own or from someone from their family or neighbourhood. They prudently make use of indigenous recourses to initiate a new livelihood or enhance the existing one. Some participants conceded that their living condition and serious economic challenges compelled them to learn a livelihood on their own or with others'

support. NGOs or GOs also provided them with opportunities to get them trained in various livelihood tasks including bridal makeup, sewing, making handicrafts, and computer skills. A participant from Jaffna who learnt how to roll *beedi* on her own said, *“It was by observing the others who roll beedi at home. Because of poverty we all learnt this by observing. My younger sister, elder sister and other sisters we all did it.”* Similarly, another participant from Jaffna stated, *“My mother sews. My mother looked after us by making money from sewing. I learned from her. Even now, she is the one who cuts the material for us to sew.”* Making garlands is one of the multiple livelihood tasks performed by another participant from Jaffna: *“I learned making garlands at school by myself while studying. During day time, my mother would pluck flowers needed for garlands and showed me how to make garlands at home. I also learnt how to make “gowry kappu” (a holy thread tied during fasting observed by Hindus) when we were living at the house near the temple. I am doing this as a source of income after shifting here.”* A participant from Mannar who became a trained teacher in making handicrafts said, *“I had to earn. Then, we were staying in the Madu camp. My mother can do handicrafts. I learnt from her then learnt some extra skills from a teacher at the Madu camp. Then they wanted to train the girls in the Madu camp. They had an interview. I came first. So they appointed me as a teacher.”* Another participant from Mannar cuts and styles the hair of the poorest people for free and makes cakes as a part-time income generation task: *“I learnt making icing cakes from my sister when I was 13. And, I learnt how to do hairstyle from a friend. I learnt it for free. I didn't do it for money. Still I do it for the poorest. But free.”*

21. Resorting to formal strategies to cope with survival challenges

The formal resources participants opted to use to deal with survival challenges include receiving support from the governmental and non-governmental organizations and financial entities. Different programmes implemented to support war-affected women were the frequent focal points of the interviews. *“We do not get the work every day. Only if there is work we go. The rest of the days are very hard. We use to pawn earrings at banks. Then redeem and then pawn. We are managing like that”.* Another participant who took a loan from a private entity said, *“I took a 50,000 loan for the business from the LOC bank for 15 months. So far I have paid five months.”* One participant who took

a loan for poultry said, “I took a Rs. 5,000 loan and in the coming month I should pay 2000 and 100 interest and it’s useful that way. When the chicks lay eggs, I will be able to pay back”. One Kilinochchi participant said, “I took a loan and struggle very much to repay. I feel that no one is struggling as much as I am, right now. However, I engage in rearing hens. I would pay back once I sell them.” Another participant said, “I took 40,000.00 rupees from a bank. “It is for business. I gave this loan money to my brother-in-law, who takes care of us. Every day he gives me 200 or 300 rupees for the loan repayment. I save the money and every Tuesday I pay the instalment.

22. Progressing with NGO support

Some women without any relatives’ support have achieved a respectable social position because of their dedication and hard work, with minimal support from NGOs. They also engage in small-scale home-based products like poultry and goatery. The women who head households sold their products and used them for their household’s consumption as well. Therefore, they were able to give their children nutritious food like milk and eggs. They had to put forth their best effort to compete with men and maintain its sustainability. Almost every participant was the recipient of *pichaisampalam* (Public Assistance of Monthly Allowance—PAMA) worth Rs. 500 a month. However, it was not worth their time to claim it because they had to travel far to claim it from the Department of Social Services. Most of the participants were also receiving a *monthly financial assistance from the Samurdhi* programme. They borrow money from their relatives, siblings or friends to meet their needs. Some of them pawned their gold ornaments and jewellery and redeemed them once they received some income. Though they did not like to be in debt, their family situation forced them to borrow money. They preferred not to borrow an amount of money that exceeded their repaying capacity.

23. Strategies adopted to combat patriarchal dominance

In this section, coping strategies adopted by women who head households to deal with sexual harassment and patriarchal dominance are presented. To combat sexual harassment, participants adopted strategies based on their individual abilities. These include avoiding contact/interactions with men, using cultural measures as a buffer,

being prepared to face any adverse situations, and having relationships with men out of wedlock.

24. Avoidance as a strategy of combating harassment

Women who head their households avoided talking to strangers, officials or even with men living in their neighbourhood. Though they maintained a healthy relationship with the neighbourhood women, they were cautious with the men. Strong family ties also helped them to ward off sexual harassment. Women who are economically independent were not affected and they normally refrained from interacting with unknown men. They built a virtual safety zone around them to avoid interference from the outside men. In some cases, with their family members' support, the participants were able to challenge traditional barriers that limited their mobility. Some of the women have extra-marital relationships with men. They sometimes maintained this to protect themselves from sexual harassment from other men living around them.

25. Using negative experiences as a strategy for empowerment

The war, displacements and their negative experiences and the appalling impact of patriarchal domination have considerably strengthened the resolve of the participants in many ways. It seems that women who head households are able to lead a meaningful life and make an effort to improve their present economic, social and psychological condition amid all the challenges they are faced with. They admitted that they are prepared to face even more challenges due to the constant changes taking place in their lives. A participant from Kilinochchi stated, *"I have gained so much confidence. You can put us anywhere and through any kind of situation, and we will survive. We can get through all of it and survive. I think that's what the war experiences have taught us."* Another participant from Mannar also spoke of a similar experience: *"Displacement must have been a bad thing for some people, but for me it has taught me many lessons and I have learnt a lot about human beings. My husband left me. However, his presence and absence are the same. There's no problem. I had the thirst for knowing and learning."* Similarly, another participant from Kilinochchi also felt the same way: *"Sometimes I feel like we have more things to do than men. But most of the time I am so*

happy that I am a woman.” Another participant from Kilinochchi who got empowered by a self-help group stated, *“We gather every Sunday at 4 at my house under this tree. We talk about everything, we share our happiness, sorrows and everything and we save money as well.”* In the same way, another participant from Kilinochchi) said, *“We have formed little groups in this village with people who are victims, abandoned, elderly and needy. Her small group has 20 members and I am the secretary. We divided ourselves into different groups to do different things. Even last month, I went to Kandy for a workshop and received a certificate.”* Another participant from Kilinochchi involved in social activism said, *“If there are children who are not going to school, we will meet their families and talk with them. If there is intimate partner violence or domestic abuse we would meet and talk about that and take it to someone who can help.”* Another participant from Mullaitivu who was pregnant when her husband died of shelling and didn't have moral support *“There was no husband and even mother died as well. My brothers also got married. I have a differently-able child. I wanted to die. But I thought why should I die? I had strong confidence that I could earn for my living. And I was pregnant. I thought of the unborn baby and changed my mind”*. Some participants performed much better than earlier even though their husbands or partners tended to be violent and unsupportive. Most of them are not discouraged by these difficulties and work single mindedly to overcome the challenges. Another participant from Jaffna who also bravely tackles her husband stated, *“I have to face these types of people and problems. If I listen to these gossips I have to sit on a corner and have to cry. But, I won't do like that. I have to bring up my daughter without considering my husband's words. So, I'll come out bravely for my daughter.”* When talking about the way she tackled men after her husband became disabled by the war a participant from Mullaitivu said, *“I do not accommodate any men in the house, so no one really talks negatively about me. Since my husband is sick we do not allow men in the house, my mother is helpful in that.”*

26. Coping strategies adopted in relation to the behavioural domain

Almost all of the participants are focused on and predominantly occupied with their household responsibilities. The overburden and constant involvement in household chores made them mentally engaged. Most of the participants accepted that their day-to-

day life is flooded with multiple responsibilities. In the beginning, their parents and relatives were taking care of these families and they had enough time to grieve. Now, the tendency is completely different and it would be difficult for them to find time to worry about what happened

27. Conclusion

Three decades of protracted armed confrontation resulted in deaths from all three major ethnic groups, displacement of persons, and devastation of infrastructure mainly in the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. It has also created a new social phenomenon called women who head their households. This new vulnerable community includes households with family leaders who were killed, disappeared, physically or mentally disabled, and in rehabilitation institutions and detention camps.

The research study found that the war-affected women who head their households endured different challenges including lack of income and limited livelihood opportunities, problems inflicted by patriarchal dominance, and discriminatory policies and practices. They also adopted some coping strategies to handle with the social and psychological challenges. The support which was provided by the government entities and non-state actors to them was not sufficient and not much appropriate. With the problems of inefficient support and inadequate policies and practices to improve the quality of life of women who head their households, they faced challenges within the households, from their relatives and neighbors. They were marginalized in many ways and their problems remained unfocused. All these factors caused a perilous situation in their social lives since their psychosocial well-being was ignored and challenged.

Although the government is expected to be the principal actor in enhancing the psychosocial well-being of women who head their households, its role has largely been downplayed and women who head their households could not receive any sustainable support from the government to restore their lives. The government was only liable to providing livelihood support, which was insignificant. Since the psychological challenges and protracted grievances were acknowledged as crucial issues, it is the government's responsibility to take appropriate measures to empower the affected women psychologically and motivate relevant stakeholders to promote the mental well-being of the war-affected women. It is, therefore, the government's responsibility to reduce the presence of the military and create an environment without fear in order for women to be better involved in livelihood and social activities.

To restore their psychosocial well-being and lead a sufficiently good social life the women heads of households require effective support, including material and knowledge empowerment/sensitization from the government, NGOs, and the international community. Furthermore, an intervention model also has to be proposed to highlight the potential roles that could be played by various stakeholders, including GOs, NGOs, non-governmental individuals, religious institutions, the community and the Tamil diaspora to alleviate the negative impact of the psychosocial challenges faced by this community.

- **The role of host communities**

It's the responsibility of the host communities to accept women who head their households and their children instead of humiliating them because of the stigma attached to their social status. The impact of patriarchal influence and cultural norms heavily affected these women's personal affairs. The personal conduct and the daily activities of women who head their households were closely watched by men and women living in their neighbourhood and sarcastic comments were passed on them. The host/own communities should realize their responsibilities and embrace these women and their children without discriminating against them. Mainstreaming former fighters and their families and empowering men to respect the women would in turn greatly contribute to women's recuperation and empowerment in a post-war scenario.

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WAR AND RECOVERY: PSYCHOSOCIAL CHALLENGES IN NORTHERN SRI LANKA

Women living in the northern and eastern provinces became a driving force of the socio-economic development of the country after the termination of three decades of armed conflict. A huge network of women's groups such as NGOs, associations, and the CBOs at the grassroots level played a crucial role in providing livelihood and empowerment initiatives.

State and non-state actors use socio-economic development as an entry point for empowerment and reconciliation. Since 2009, women have participated in income-generating activities that contributed to building their socio-economic empowerment, which in turn is paving the way for the sustainable development of the country.

The socio-economic empowerment of women in the post-war context has brought tangible changes to the perceptions of women in a traditional community. Specifically, it has redefined roles and responsibilities for women. This working paper is an examination of the current evidence on women's socio-economic empowerment in the Northern Province.

Jeevasuthan Subramaniam is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Sociology, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka.



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