Abstract ❖

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What possibilities do civil society actors have in contributing to peace in violent conflicts fought along identity lines? What are the problems involved in civil society peace work? This thesis takes on these questions, applying a critical, interpretative and constructivist approach. It draws the attention to actors who are often not visible in war and peace processes, given that a focus on outside intervention has dominated peace and conflict research. The case of Sri Lanka is used to scrutinise the underlying assumptions and possible contributions of civil society peace work, and to highlight and analyse how identification processes form part of peace work in violent conflicts in ethnically divided societies.

The thesis makes its point of departure in the lack of problematisation in current literature about civil society peace work in identity conflict. It argues that 'civil society' and NGOs have often been treated as unitary actors, and that the conflicting struggles in the civil society sphere and the inner dynamics of peace movements have been overlooked. Moreover, the issue of peace work impact, and link between small-scale work and the ending of wars, have often been ignored or treated in vague terms. Additionally, while recognising the importance of identity in contemporary civil wars, peace researchers commonly have a simplistic understanding of the processes of creating a 'self' in relation to an 'other' at work in ethnic conflict, as well as in the mobilisation of protest and in peace work.

This study explores these issues through a theoretical discussion and an in-depth case study of civil society peace work in Sri Lanka. The study builds primarily on qualitative interviews conducted from 1999-2002 with peace movement leaders, participants in peace work and key actors outside the peace movement.

The thesis points to the contradictory forces and struggles in the civil society sphere, and the varied peace definitions and experiences present in the peace movement. It concludes that civil society peace work mainly contributes indirectly to ending wars, by placing pressure on or lending support to key actors, providing small-scale examples of dialogue and pointing to the possibilities of structural change. The role of peace movements endorsing alternative discourses and challenging the normalisation of war and ethnic divides is emphasised. Although actors for peace often claim to promote inclusive identities and defy ethnic polarisation, boundary-making between 'self' and 'other' are also at play within peace movements and organisations. The ethnic, party political, urban-rural and class divides in Sri Lankan society were echoed in the peace movement. However, peace actors were simultaneously engaged in attempts to rise above and to deconstruct the logic of ethnic polarisation.

Key words: peace work, identity, conflict resolution, civil society, peace movement, NGO, dialogue, multiculturalism, ethnic conflict, civil war, ethnicity, nationalism, Sri Lanka.