

# ROLES OF WOMEN DURING ARMED CONFLICT

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Narratives of Jaffna women in Sri Lanka



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Narratives of Jaffna women in Sri Lanka

Doreen Arulanantham Chawade



UNIVERSITY OF  
GOTHENBURG

**SCHOOL OF GLOBAL STUDIES**

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*To my ammamma (grandma) who lived her life in war,  
and to my daughters Tanya and Tina*



# Abstract

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Sri Lanka has been ravaged by the long-running civil war held between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE. The conflict cost thousands of lives, internal displacements and property damage. The results of the war thus have been destructive. Refugees, orphans, war widows, disabled youth and devastated economy have been the consequences of this prolonged conflict. Amidst these ongoing deaths, disappearance and economic crisis caused by the war, women of Jaffna say that they were determined to take up different roles by breaking the cultural barriers. Women claim they took up different roles in order to protect their families and the communities from the war and the violence.

There are many different studies that have been done on Sri Lanka conflict. However, only a handful of them reveal the roles of women in the conflict. This study on the roles of women during the armed conflict in Sri Lanka provides a case study analysis. Presenting Jaffna women as the case, this study explores Tamil women's experiences and understandings on the different roles they took on during the conflict in Sri Lanka. This case study is based on the fieldwork conducted in Jaffna in the years 2004 to 2006, which was also the time of Norwegian facilitated ceasefire agreement in the country. Through the framework of narrative methodology, interviews were held with women who took up different roles in the context of conflict in Sri Lanka. The observation method was also used in this study in order to observe and analyze the situation in the (sample) villages of Jaffna.

Theoretically, this study is guided by gender theories on the roles of women and women's empowerment in conflict times. Empirically, this study reveals women's experiences and understandings on how they took up different roles during the conflict, the motivations behind them taking up those roles, and the challenges they had to face in the process of taking up roles. This study also explores women's perception on women's empowerment and social transformation, which they believe, can be achieved through the process of taking up different roles in times of conflict. This study therefore concludes that the roles of Tamil women are changing. These changing roles of Tamil women increase women's empowerment in the society and thus, transform the society as well.

**Keywords:** Tamil women, changing roles, women empowerment, social transformation, armed conflict, ceasefire agreement, Jaffna, Sri Lanka.





# Abbreviations

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AI- Amnesty International  
AHRC- Asian Human Rights Commission  
BBC- British Broadcasting Corporation  
CFA- Ceasefire Agreement  
CIDA- Canadian International Development Agency  
CJNR- Canadian Journal of Nursing Research  
COHRE - Centre on Housing Right and Eviction  
CLPID- Colombia Laws and Policies on Internal Displacement  
CFWD- Centre for Women Development  
ENI- Ecumenical News International  
EU- European Union  
EUEOM- European Union Election Observation Mission  
FGI- Focus Group Interviews  
GoSL- Government of Sri Lanka  
HUDEC- Human Development Centre  
HRW- Human Rights Watch  
IC- International Community  
ICAP - International Centre for Alcohol Policies  
ICES- International Centre for Ethnic Studies  
ICRC- International Committee of the Red Cross  
IDMC- International Displacement Monitoring Centre  
IDP- Internally Displaced People  
IFT- Informal Talks  
IMADR- International Movement Against all forms of Discrimination and Racism  
IOM- International Organization for Migration  
IPKF- Indian Peace Keeping Force  
IWS- International Women Studies  
JVP- Janata Vimukti Peramuna (Sinhala: People's Liberation Front)  
MoU- Memorandum of Understanding  
NEPC - North and East Provincial Council  
NEPC- National Environment Protection Council  
NGO- Non- Governmental Organization  
OMCT- Organisation Mondiale Contre la Torture (French: World Organization against Torture)  
LTTE- Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam  
RC- Refugee Council

SCF-Save the Children Fund  
SCFWD - Sooriya Centre for Women Development  
SLMM- Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission  
TNA- Tamil National Alliance  
TMVP- Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (Tamil: Tamil People's Liberation Tigers)  
TPI- Telephone Interview  
TULF- Tamil United Liberation Front  
UN- The United Nations  
UNDAW- The United Nations Divisions for the Advancement of Women  
UNDP- The United Nations Development Program  
UNICEF- The United Nation International Children's Emergency Fund  
UNIFEM- The United Nations Development Fund for Women  
UNHCR- The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
UNRISD- The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development  
VoT- Voice of Tigers

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# 1

## Introduction

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Who listens to me? Everyone comes here just to check on how many are dead or displaced and how many tons of rice need to be distributed. Here I am with my stories of pain and sorrow, my secret grief, my suffering and my frustrations. But who listens? My voice always goes unheard (Interview 13, April 4, 2005).

This quotation reflects scholars' claim that women are frequently marginalized in the contexts of war and peace (Enloe 2000, Höglund 2001, Rehna and Sirleaf 2002). Generally speaking, women are not provided sufficient opportunities to emphasize the atrocities they experience in the contexts of war and violence. In particular, the media and academic conflict studies rarely highlight women's voices, making the issue a fruitful field of research.

Against this background, the present study aims to explore what Sri Lankan Tamil women have to say about their experiences from the recent Sri Lankan armed conflict and ceasefire agreement. This task specifically includes investigating how these women understand the different roles they assumed during that period. That is to say, how these women present their conflict roles, the motivations behind adopting those roles and the challenges faced when enacting those roles.

Over the past several decades, scholarly interest in the roles of women in the context of gender and war has boomed (Clinton and Silver 1992, Höglund 2001, Dubravka 2007, Erika 2008, Pankhurst 2008). However, there is further need to make additional in-depth analysis on how women find ways to survive and cope with dramatic life-changing situations during times of armed conflict. Thus, by specifically exploring the voices of Tamil women, this study addresses a research lacuna that has overshadowed theoretical studies on the subject. Therefore, this study provides much-needed analysis showing how women in general, and the Tamil women in Sri Lanka in particular, take up roles and responsibilities and also strain to keep family and community together during times of conflict. Furthermore, this study will demonstrate how Tamil women in Sri Lanka have

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become self-assertive, independent and empowered to carry out the tasks implicit to the roles they assumed during the conflict.

The armed conflict between the government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) severely impacted Northern Sri Lanka. In particular, its destructive forces claimed thousands of lives. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program reports that around 80,000 to 100,000 people were killed between 1982 and 2009 on the whole island of Sri Lanka. It also reports that between 1990 and 2009 around 59,193 to 75,601 people were killed in Sri Lanka during various types of organized armed conflict.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the armed conflict of Sri Lanka caused the internal displacement of local people and extensively damaged public infrastructure and private property. Moreover, the armed conflict led to the conversion of hundreds of square kilometers of agricultural land into dangerous mine fields (Human Rights Watch 2007: 1). Many families lost their loved ones, many were separated from their families and many women became war widows due to this long-running armed conflict on the island.

For various reasons, Jaffna was considered the center of the armed conflict. Firstly, the armed conflict itself commenced in Jaffna in July 1983 with the LTTE killing thirteen Sri Lankan soldiers in an ambush. Secondly, Jaffna was the base for the emerging Tamil armed groups during the 1970s. And thirdly, Jaffna has been the center of Sri Lankan Tamil ethnicity and culture, which gave the civil war a distinct characteristic of being an ethnic conflict. Since the beginning of the armed conflict, Jaffna has become the center of the attention for politicians, journalists and researchers interested in the Sri Lankan civil war (Sabaratnam 2005, Wilson 2000).

The impacts of civil war on Jaffna were severe (Sabaratnam 2005). Jaffna residents faced not only deaths and disappearances but also poverty, and were forced into starvation due to the economic sanctions imposed by the Sri Lankan government (Emmanuel 1996, Parameswaran 2002, Sabaratnam 2005). The permanent closure of route A9 (which connects the district with rest of the country) completely isolated Jaffna from the world. The inhabitants were seemingly confined to a small space and permanently stuck with the war. Additionally, the economic sanctions during the years 1990 to 2002 made life miserable. Due to the shortage of food items, prices rose to more than one hundred times the fixed prices (Emmanuel 1996, Parameswaran 2002, Sabaratnam 2005). It was very difficult to buy a kilogram of sugar—even for one thousand rupees. The one and only functioning hospital, Jaffna General Hospital, was unable to obtain medical and

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<sup>1</sup> This number consists of the death casualties caused by the war between the government forces and the LTTE, the Indian Army and the LTTE, and the Karuna faction of the LTTE and the LTTE.

pharmaceutical supplies. Fuel was scarce and there was no electricity supply (Parameswaran 2002). People had to rely upon the food provided through local cultivation. The only mode of transportation, other than by going by foot, was cycling. The only serving international non-governmental organization, ICRC, took the General Hospital under its care and provided some drugs and medical equipment—notably with the consent of the government, whom they informed of the details about the goods they supplied (Newsletter ICRC 2005).

Prior to the armed conflict in Jaffna, a Tamil woman's role was to be a homemaker and to stay indoors, which, as David (1991) and Wadley (1991) say, was in line with the strict 'norm' of Tamil society. Women mainly worked with taking care of their families and took consideration to them in every step of their lives. Women were also expected to be soft-spoken, restrained and cultured in the way that they dressed—they were expected to wear traditional dresses like *sarees* or long skirts and blouses, golden jewelry and *potu* (a dot) on their foreheads (Thambiah 1973, David: 1991). Notably, ancient Tamil literature asserts that Tamil culture held women in the highest regard, because it was believed that they possessed the power of the goddess Shakti (Thambiah 1973, David 1991, Wadley 1991, Sivathamby 1995). However, this does not mean that women were viewed as being equal to men. Women were admired to the extent that they were modest and shy. In contrast, modern literature on Sri Lanka notes that the chaotic impact of the armed conflict left no option for women but to take on new responsibilities, both in the absence and presence of their men (Trawick 1990, Bose 1994, Coomaaswamy 1999, Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001, De Alwis 2002). Thus, women, who traditionally were passive, became active. They took up various professions and activities, such as running businesses and organizing social activities, and they even entered combat as soldiers (Trawick 1993, Bose 1994, Segaram 2001). Not only were the roles new to women, they were also seen as inappropriate for women (Trawick 1990, Coomaswamy 1999, Segaram 2001, Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001, De Alwis 2002). Consequently, women's roles transformed both in the private household sphere as well as in the public community sphere (Segaram 2001).

Based on the data collected for this study, my understanding is that Tamil women have their own views on war and peace. Furthermore, they actively partook in choosing their roles in the war efforts, sometimes by compulsion and sometimes by their own will. Their choice of role-taking eventually led to changes in both their personal and social lives, which numerous scholars exemplify (Moser and Clark 2001, Bouta and Frerks 2002). For instance, a woman may have been *compelled* to become the household head when her husband disappeared or died.

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In contrast, a woman may have *chosen* to become a political activist or a peacebuilder. Both choices bring transition to a woman's life—a transition from homemaker to household head, or from obedient daughter to activist. This study will demonstrate in detail that such transitions contribute to women gaining increased control over their lives and their decision-making power, which bolsters women's empowerment.

Most of the previous studies on gender and war are focused on describing dreadful events women have experienced (Goodman 1997, Sharoni 1999, Coomaraswamy 2002, Newbury and Baldwin 2001, Newman 2003). These records provide little in the way of deeper understanding of the armed conflicts and the women involved in them—especially since women's experiences of violence and armed conflicts are different from place to place. Moreover, such records may negatively affect the way women look at themselves and even limit their ability to overcome the challenges they face. In this study, various women of Jaffna narrate their wartime experiences, which they believe could help people in reaching a greater understanding of the situations and challenges that women must face during times of armed conflict.

### 1.1 Research Problem

The aim of this study is to explore Tamil women's understanding and experience of the different roles they assumed during the armed conflict and the ceasefire agreement in Sri Lanka. Given the diversity of the roles and the fact that the insightful voices of the Tamil women of Sri Lanka are hardly heard, this study aims to explore women's narratives about the roles they adopted during the armed conflict. Based on these narratives, this study will explore what motivated women to adopt these roles as well as what challenges women experienced in the process of adopting the roles.

The literature on gender and armed conflict states that women are always affected by armed conflict (Cockburn 1998, Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001, Bouta and Frerk 2002, Alison 2003). In these conflicts, women become displaced and are made refugees; they become the victims of strategic tools of war such as rape and sexual violence; and they bear the primary brunt of armed conflict and violence in general (Cockburn 1998, Enloe 2000, Alison 2003). However, women are also powerful family protectors and defenders of peace, and they are capable of actively working to ward off conflicts. That is to say, while armed conflicts inflict the most violence upon women, armed conflicts can also serve to empower

women, offering them greater financial independence, which in turn strengthens their self-confidence (Cockurn 1998, Enloe 2000, Höglund 2001).

Several studies have focused on the armed conflict of Sri Lanka. However, the consequences of this civil war have rarely been analyzed from a gender perspective. Even though many writings indicate how women have been victims of war (not least in other conflict areas like Guatemala and Sierra Leon [Stern 1998, Coulter 2006]), very few studies have analyzed the Sri Lankan conflict from a gender perspective (Trawick 1990, Coomaraswamy 1999, De Alwis 2002, Balasingham 2003, Alison 2003). Although there are certain writings that highlight the roles women have adopted in conflict times, Tamil women in particular have not been intensely analyzed from a role-taking perspective in the context of the armed conflict in Sri Lanka.

Thus there are few studies that explore Tamil women's roles in the context of Sri Lanka's armed conflict. Most of these studies converge on addressing fighter women, rather than addressing civilian women and their living conditions in northern Sri Lanka. These studies also assert that Tamil women became LTTE fighters overnight, causing a sudden and radical change in Tamil society (Trawick 1990, Bose 1994, Alison 2003). Additionally, these LTTE women have mostly been analyzed with the political framework, leaving social aspects largely neglected (De Silva 1994, Jeyamaha 2004, Nadarajah and Vimalraja 2008). Furthermore, the writings on fighter women mainly focus on describing these women as 'perpetrators of war' due to their involvement in killings and suicide attacks; and emphasize their role as 'masculinized armed virgins' due to the belief that they were virgins restricted from marital or sexual life (Schalk 1994, De Silva 1997, Coomaraswamy 1997). Previous studies have also largely overlooked other accomplishments of fighter women, such as how taking up arms redefined the status and image of Tamil women as well as how achievements on the battlefield gave them 'equality' with men. In contrast with those studies, this study will focus on the other roles of women too, by presenting those roles from a broader societal perspective.

The existing literature on Sri Lanka asserts that women assumed different roles during and due to the conflict. However, it is important to note that women have had numerous motivations to assume these different roles. Alison (2003), in her research on warrior women, says that Tamil women in Sri Lanka were motivated to assume the fighter role due to nationalist sentiments, suffering and oppression as well as educational disruption and restrictions. Whereas Rajasingham-Senanayake (2002) claims that women assumed the role of household head as a consequence of the death or disappearance of their husbands. Notwithstanding

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women's motivations for adopting roles, writers have also explored the challenges women faced during the 'change of their roles' (Alison 2003, Hellman-Rajanayagham 2008). Apart from war and violence, the main challenge pointed out by most writers has been patriarchal structures (Trawick 1990, Bose 1994, Alison 2003, Hellman-Rajanayagham 2008).

Like many previous studies, this study also aims to recognize the roles that have been adopted by women during the war. Therefore, this study explores women's understanding of the motivations behind these roles and the challenges they faced in these roles. In order to interconnect women's roles with war and empowerment, this study further aims to explore women's perception of their roles to the extent they supported the processes of women's empowerment and social transformation. Kabeer (2001), in *Discussing Women's Empowerment: Theory and Practice*, says "empowerment refers to the expansion in people's ability to make life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied" (Kabeer 2001: 19). She states that empowerment is an ability to make choices whereas disempowerment entails being denied choice. Empowerment, as Kabeer puts it, implies a process of change that is "inescapably bound up with the condition of disempowerment and refers to the processes by which those who are denied the ability to make choices." Thus, many of us began to consider whether women from culturally dominating backgrounds were moving towards empowerment, particularly in Sri Lanka where women began heading households and making decisions as a result of armed conflict. Against that background, this study aims to explore Tamil women's understanding of their roles by looking at their personal narratives. This exploration of women's narratives might not only give us insight into women in war and peace, but also help us develop ideas and discourses about the roles of women during the armed conflict.

Among the studies that primarily focus on the LTTE women, there are two scholarly writings on the roles of women in the Sri Lankan conflict that attracted me. More specifically I should say they, to an extent, motivated me to research this subject. They are *Ambivalent Empowerment: The Tragedy of Tamil Women in Sri Lanka* by Rajasingham-Senanayake (2001) and *The Changing Role of Women in Sri Lanka* by De Alwis (2002). Rajasingham-Senanayake describes the gender status quo of Tamil women in the context of war and peace, claiming their empowerment is 'ambivalent.' She also describes Tamil women as victims not only of war, but also of caste and culture. She further claims that Tamil women's role is changing from housewife to household head, and from dependent daughter to nationalist fighter. On the other hand, De Alwis (2002) classifies the woman warrior role as a role that genders violence, while the role of the mourning mother

and anti-war agitator counters violence. However, these two studies state that Tamil women were compelled to take up different roles. That is to say, Tamil women took up different roles due to the forceful situation of the armed conflict. For example, women were compelled to assume household leadership due to the deaths and disappearances of their husbands.

While highlighting the adopted roles of Tamil women in the context of the Sri Lankan conflict, these two previous studies also raise questions about the sustainability of these roles. By referring to examples from across the world, these studies claim that Tamil women might abandon their roles adopted during conflict and might return to their previous roles once peace is established or the war is over (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001, De Alwis 2002). For example, in Cambodia and Guatemala, women reverted from their conflict roles back to their previous domestic roles once conflict had ended. These studies therefore assume that the same might happen to Tamil women too, which may result in Tamil women returning to their former societal positions.

This study will address the roles of women in armed conflict in three distinct ways. Firstly, this study will investigate whether Tamil women's roles in the Sri Lankan armed conflict follow the general claims presented in the previous studies on the roles of women in armed conflict. This will include discourses on the nature of women's roles—whether they are permanent or not—and the process of empowerment. Secondly, the exploration of this study's findings will show to what extent they challenge previous researches on the roles of Tamil women in the conflict of Sri Lanka. In this respect, focus will lie on the previous claims regarding the 'forceful situation' under which Tamil women had to assume different roles, the impermanent nature of Tamil women's roles and women's 'ambivalent' empowerment. Thirdly, by drawing upon women's narratives, this study intends to provide perspectives on the discourses about the roles of women in armed conflict in general as well as about the roles of Tamil women in the Sri Lankan armed conflict in particular. This will focus on how the roles of women change in conflict times and how the roles adopted during conflicts increase women's empowerment in society.

## 1.2 Research Question and Sub-Research Questions

The central research question of this study is **how do Tamil women experience and understand the different roles they assumed during the armed conflict and in the period of the ceasefire agreement in Sri Lanka?**

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In order to answer the central research question, three sub-research questions have also been established. Below are the sub-questions and the descriptions of how these questions were intended to be used in the field during the data collection.

1. What are the *motivations* behind women taking up different roles?

The inquiry on motivations touches upon the factors that motivated women to take up different roles. This also explores how women understand the situations or the events that pushed them towards adopting those roles. Moreover, this question intends to specify whether women would ever have been able to take up these roles if circumstances had not aggravated them to do so.

2. What are the *challenges* women faced during the process of taking up the different roles?

Each role posed different challenges for women. Accordingly, this research question focuses on how women describe the challenges that arose during the course of taking up various roles. Moreover, this sub-research question aims to interpret how the motivations to take up different roles overrode the challenges and in what way women could adjust to everyday challenges in order to achieve their goals.

3. In what way do the women perceive that their roles contributed to *women's empowerment and to social transformation*?

This question enquires into women's own explanations of how their roles contributed to women's empowerment and social transformation. Thus the aim of this question is to gain an understanding of women's own perception of how their roles have promoted women's empowerment and social transformation.

### 1.3 Contributions

First of all, this case study contributes to gender and armed conflict research by analyzing women's narratives about the roles they assumed during the Sri Lankan armed conflict. Most of the existing literature on the context of gender and conflict describes women as vulnerable and weak. Women are depicted as the worst victims of war-time deaths, disappearances, forced combat-recruitment, rape and sexual violence (Goodman 1997, Sharoni 1999, Coomaraswamy 2002, Newbury and Baldwin 2001, Newman 2003). A large body of literature also explores how women have been seized as 'spoils of war' and how sexual violence against women has traditionally been used as weapon of war. In sum, numerous works



explore life stories of women from conflict-ridden areas, demonstrating that women have been the greatest sufferers of war. Correspondingly, women have unique experiences with respect to challenging the conditions of violence and protecting their families and communities from war. These experiences, which have even challenged the consequences of war, have been illustrated by a handful of studies (Cockburn 1998, Collins 2002, Bouta and Frerk 2002, Anderlini 2007). The present study could also be included among them as it offers a different image of women in the context of the conflict. Women might have been the victims, perpetrators and the peacebuilders in times of conflict as portrayed by other studies, journalistic articles and human rights and humanitarian reports. However, this study depicts women's own experience, perceptions and understandings about the roles they assumed in the context of conflict and aftermath. Therefore, the significant contribution of this study opts to explore the stories of women who challenged the conditions of war as well as the patriarchy by assuming different roles.

The empirical contribution of this study explores *the roles of women which are changing under increasing political, social and economic pressure*. Furthermore, this study asserts that these political, social and economic pressures were caused by the violent conflict, where men were not able to perform their duties. In terms of its empirical contribution, the present study differs from previous studies in that it explores the phenomena of women's changing roles by investigates women's own narratives. This study reveals that Tamil women claim that their roles have been shifting from 'traditional' to 'non-traditional.' During interviews, Tamil women expressed this shift when discussing their impetus for changing roles and the challenges they faced in the process. Tamil women's narratives in this study also differ from previous studies, particularly on the issue of the invariable nature of women's roles. That is to say, previous studies on the changing roles of Tamil women in Sri Lanka (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001, De Alwis 2002) raise a question concerning the nature of women's essential roles by showing that women returned to their former roles once the conflict had ended. However, Tamil women's narratives collected for this study demonstrate otherwise. This will be further explored in the following chapters.

This study also provides a theoretical contribution to the research on gender and armed conflict. By specifying Tamil women's roles in the Sri Lankan context, this study offers a perspective that indicates that *the roles of women in conflict increase women's empowerment and therefore transform society*.

Some studies appraise the roles of women in the context of war and peace as the roles of coping responses. For instance, Rajasingham-Senanayake (2001)

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remarks that women take up new roles in times of conflict to replace their menfolk. Rajasingham-Senanayake (2001) further says that in order to cope with militarized situations in which men are often targeted, women assume duties previously held by men. Therefore, Rajasingham-Senanayake (2001) remarks that the empowerment 'supposedly' achieved in this phase is ambivalent and thus impermanent. However, there are other studies that see conflict situations as a space given to women in which they can achieve empowerment. These studies highlight the increasing empowerment measures in conflict-ridden areas across the world. By referring to the examples of Rwanda and Mozambique, Nyakabwa (2009) for instance declares that the armed conflicts in these African countries presented the possibility of women's empowerment. Petesch (2011), who studied a few conflict-ravaged Asian countries, asserts that the forces of conflict led to women's empowerment; while Dombrowski (1999) states that women in patriarchal societies gain empowerment in the presence of a conflict. This study on Tamil women reflects a similar idea that ties armed conflict with women's empowerment, by illuminating the connection between the armed conflict, women's roles and empowerment. However, based on the narratives of women, the present study perceives women's empowerment in conflict as a process. In the empowerment process, women's different roles play the main part in increasing women's empowerment, which eventually transforms society.

### 1.4 Outline of the Thesis

The main content of the thesis is divided into nine chapters.

Chapter one begins with an introduction, thereafter it presents a research problem, a research question and sub-research questions. Chapter two highlights the theoretical framework and reviews the literature. Chapter three describes the research design and methodology, while chapter four highlights the background of the armed conflict and women's status in the Tamil society of Sri Lanka.

Chapters five to eight are empirical chapters. They explore Tamil women's narratives about their different social roles as, for example, warriors, household heads, political activists and peacebuilders. These chapters also explore Tamil women's motivations to assume different roles, the challenges they faced in these roles, and the contributions of these roles to women's empowerment and social transformation.

The concluding chapter summarizes the study, and explores its findings and evaluates the empirical and theoretical implications of this study.

# 2

## Theoretical Focus and Literature Review

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The exiting literature presents various theoretical approaches to the roles of women in the context of gender and armed conflict. The aim of this study, is to explore women's understandings, not only of their roles assumed in the context of armed conflict, but also of how these roles contributed to women's empowerment and to social transformation. However, this study's purpose is not to verify theories set up by various researchers, but rather to present the dominant perspectives that derived from women's narratives about their understanding of the various roles they have taken upon themselves.

Many researchers in the field of social science utilize various theoretical frameworks applicable to various fields. Structural theories, for example, are used in the research related to caste and gender equations of various societies; feminist theories are widely used for the research based on gender, sexual violence, discrimination against women and women's empowerment; and peace theories are mostly used for the research on war and peace, conflict transformation and peacebuilding (Galtung 1996, Arnfred 2000, Johnson 2003). Similarly, this chapter also comprises the perspectives relevant to women's roles in the context of armed conflict.

This chapter is divided into three major sections. In the first, women's roles in conflict are reviewed with reference to previous research relevant to this study. The next section concerns war, women and the social change, in which the concepts of women empowerment and social transformation are elaborated. Finally, this chapter presents the analytical framework for understanding various women's roles in various contexts of conflicts, and the analytical frame work that guided this study.

## 2.1 Women's Roles in conflicts

According to many scholars, gender and war are interrelated. The conduct and impact of conflict are gendered, which is signified by the actors of wars being mostly men and the victims of war being mostly women. Höglund (2001) remarks that women have always been part of armed conflict in different respects and with different male and female role-takings in armed conflict. Goldstein (2001), on the other hand, says armed conflict is constructed by gender. He concludes that armed conflict is constructed as a signifier of masculinity; victory is evidence of male identity, defeat is emasculation. Femininity, Goldstein indicates, is constructed to reinforce the man-as-warrior construction in roles that support the armed conflict, such as nurses, fellow combatants and food and arms suppliers; and in the opposition as peace makers and anti-war agitators.

Against this backdrop of complex and prolonged armed conflicts, scholars also say that women are able to exercise agency in roles such as active participants of armed conflicts and as political agents (Moser and Clark 2001, Goldstein 2001, Bouta and Frerks 2002, Buvinic and Gupta 2014). Scholars further say that women also lead peace initiatives, by which women become the equal participants in the process of conflict, peace and social reconstruction (Moser and Clark 2001, Bouta and Frerks 2002, Buvinic and Gupta 2014).

Gender and feminist theories pronounce that armed conflict in many cases make numerous changes to gender roles and relations in societies. For instance, radical and liberal feminism see these changes, especially the changes to gender roles—such as women being warriors and household leaders—as “representing women’s potential for power” and as “evidence of women’s equality with men” (D’Amico 1998: 120). Feminists like Collins (2000) argue that women’s experience of inequality relates to racism, ethnicity and classism. However, in the recent years, some feminists—especially postmodern feminists—argue that gender roles, which are socially constructed to create unequal status for women in society, go through changes in circumstances like armed conflicts and natural disasters (Freedman and Estelle 2003).

Yet, few researchers contradict with the perspective of changing gender roles in the context of conflict (Gopal 1998, Kohn et al.: 2003, Benjamin and Murchison 2004, Chogugudza 2006, Luke and Munshi 2010). These researchers argue that the social positions of women are ‘static’ even in times of armed conflict or in times of changing social conditions (Gopal 1998, Kohn et al.: 2003, Benjamin and Murchison 2004, Chogugudza 2006, Luke and Munshi 2010). In spite of the changes made to gender roles and relations, these researchers further claim that women never give up their roles as housewives - cooking, caring and looking after

the family. They also remark that women become household heads because women do not have husbands; and even if they become household heads, this household leadership does not bring any changes in their domestic status. These researchers therefore conclude that women may become household heads, but are still housewives in terms of carrying out their household chores and domestic duties (Benjamin and Murchison 2004, Chogugudza 2006, Luke and Munshi 2010).

Though there are different views on women and their role changing in the context of conflict, the recent feminist literature cites that the changes in the roles of women during armed conflicts often result in changes in the societies (Moser and Clark 2001, Goldstein 2001, Bouta and Frek 2002, Munshi 2010, Buvinic and Gupta 2014). These studies remark that women are not merely victims of armed conflict, but they are also active agents of war, peace and even the social change. Women sometimes make choices to take up roles, possess critical perspective on their roles and situations, and function collectively and individually (Mazurana 2012). Nevertheless, these studies also state that the roles of women are short-lived as there are cases from across the world where women go back to their previous roles once the war is over (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001, Handrahan 2004).

Bouta's and Frerks' (2002) study on women's roles in the context of conflict is among one of the interesting studies that depicts in detail the roles of women in conflict. Their study on *Women's roles in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction*, analytically identifies seven major social roles of women in the context of war and peace. This analysis carried out by Bouta and Frerks (2002) discusses different roles that women take up in times of armed conflict and after conflict. According to their study, women take on seven major social roles, such as a) women as victims of sexual abuse which is caused by the general breakdown in law and order and a policy to demoralize the enemy, b) women as combatants who directly and indirectly participate in the armed conflict by being fighters and supporting their men in the war, c) women for peace in the non-governmental sectors who work for resisting conflict itself, d) women in formal peace politics who participate in peace talks and sign agreements, e) women as coping and surviving actors who adapt their existing roles and activities within the conflict environment, f) women as household heads who take up roles in the absence of their men, and g) women and (in) formal employment opportunities during the time of conflict.

The present study on the roles of Tamil women in the Sri Lankan conflict context is similar to the study by Bouta's and Frerks. However, the study by Bouta and Frerks is a study based on a literature review and institutional analysis;

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whereas the present study is a case study that explores the narratives of women in conflict. On the basis of the selected literature and the structures and mechanisms of social order and functioning of the cases of those literatures refer, Bouta and Frerks' study analytically identifies the above seven roles of women in the context of war and peace. The present study, based on the interviews with women and the observation of the researcher in the field, recognize four roles of Tamil women. They are a) warriors who had joined the group called LTTE who fought against the government of Sri Lanka, b) household heads who took up the sole responsibility of households both in the presence and absence of their menfolk, c) political activists who organize and campaign against the discriminative political policies and gender inequality and d) peacebuilders who initiate peace both in local and national levels. While the study by Bouta and Frerks produces a general perception and analysis of women adopting different roles in the context of gender and war, the present study explores a particular case- that is the case of Jaffna women in Sri Lankan conflict.

The changing roles of women in Sri Lankan society, is also analyzed in the study by De Alwis (2002). De Alwis (2002), precisely underlines the changing roles of women in the conflict situation of Sri Lanka, which, in the context of Sri Lanka, is described as a shift from 'traditional' roles to 'non-traditional' roles. While the formulation and content of 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' can trigger debate stating that women's roles may have differed significantly at various historical moments and due to the changing trends of culture, De Alwis (2002) remarks that women claim that primary premise of women's roles, which they call 'traditional' have not changed until the time of armed conflict. In accordance to Alwis (2002), women continued to be the disseminators of 'traditions' and 'culture' until the time of armed conflict. With the commencement of the armed conflict, De Alwis (2002) further reiterates that the 'tradition' and 'culture' have been resisted. This resistance, De Alwis (2002) claims, resulted in changing women's roles from 'traditional' to 'non-traditional.' 'Non-traditional' roles, as explained by De Alwis (2002), are the roles previously held by men and which were meant to be the roles of men. According to De Alwis, women taking up 'non-traditional' roles in the context of Sri Lanka designates women taking up men's roles.

De Alwis' study exclaims the changing roles of women in Sri Lankan conflict context in general. However, the present study particularly focuses upon Jaffna women, for the reason that Jaffna is one of the worst affected districts by the armed conflict in Sri Lanka. Though this study does not stand by the concepts of 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' indicated in the study of De Alwis, Tamil

women of Sri Lanka believed and still believe that they are bound by ‘traditions’ (Balasingham 2003, Fuglerud 2003, Gunaratne and Navaratnam 2013). Nevertheless ‘traditions’ are bound to change over time with changing social situations, wherein women adopt to new roles, which they were ‘traditionally’ restricted to.

In sum, there are a number of previous studies that explore Tamil women’s roles as warriors, household heads, political activists and peacebuilders in the context of armed conflict. These studies in fact have come across with various positions on women’s changing roles based on their own observations and analysis. Even though the observation method plays a part, the present study explores Tamil women’s understanding on their role as warriors, household heads, political activists and peacebuilders through their own narratives. This way, this study intends to bring out a perspective about the roles of women in conflict, which might be different from the perspectives brought out by the previous studies.

## 2.2 Roles of Women, War and Social Change

Studies reveal how social representations and practices are shaped by war and violence (Nyakabwa 2009, Ishizu 2011). These studies in fact draw attention to how most people in conflict-ridden areas have to endure and cope with war and the dramatic social changes resulting from war. According to these studies, war and mass violence have a role not only in de-structuring society but also in re-structuring it, and thus, war eventually becomes a “determinant of major changes” (Beckett, 1985, p. 27).

Marwick (1988) says that there is a causal relationship between war and social changes; that war is a driving force for rationalization and modernization. Based on Marwick’s viewpoint, war leads to social changes in four different dimensions. ‘The destructive and disruptive dimension of war’ is the first one. Destruction and disruption urge people toward the reconstruction of society that at times builds a society better than the previous one. For example, disruption may result in the replacement of traditional behavioral patterns with new behavioral patterns. This may give people a new situation or an opportunity that cannot be encountered in peace time, for instance women being present on the labor market in wartime (Ishizu 2011).

The second is ‘the test dimension.’ In this system, not only is the military directly related to the conduct of war, but also the entire social, economic and political systems are put under test and tested to prove whether they can endure the conduct of war. Marwick’s argument describes that war brings about

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tremendous stress and strain to the military, social, political and economic systems so that those systems have to adjust to their situations. Of course, the various stress and strain associated with the conduct of war do not always bring about desirable social changes, however, the “change” pointed out by Marwick does not necessarily mean ‘the progressive change’ (Marwick 1988, p xv–xvi)

The third is ‘the participation dimension,’ which means armed conflict creates conditions that allow people to participate in various but new activities—be they military activity, political activity or an activity that could encourage them to survive the moment of destruction. Marwick says that the fourth dimension is ‘the psychological dimension.’ In this dimension, people start to gain the sense that armed conflict ought to lead to something new as a result of their suffering (Ishizu: 2011).

Though Marwick describes the different dimensions of social change directed by war, he does not mention gender being one of the changing aspects in the context of war. He does not specify or even remark how gender can play a role in social changes that are clearly caused by war. Still, Marwick’s perspective on armed conflict and its four dimensions that foster social change seems quite relevant to gender in the context of armed conflict. As this study’s theoretical contribution is focused on the contributions of women’s roles to women’s empowerment and to the transformation of society, Marwick’s theory of war and social change is therefore applicable to this study as well.

If we apply Marwick’s four dimensions of war to the context of women, war and social change, we see that in the psychological dimension of war, women gain the sense that they cannot rely upon their men anymore for safety or even for survival. Women thus begin to understand that war overpowers the power of patriarchy in society. Women, under these circumstances, sense that they have to do something new in order to survive. As a result of a strategic decision, they take up new social roles. The roles taken up by women in war direct them towards their direct participation in war, either as survivors or as perpetrators and negotiators. This is created by the participation dimension of war in which women become partakers in the conflict. Women become partakers of the conflict by participating in the conflict either with their knowledge or without their knowledge. For example, by becoming a household head due to the involvement of her husband on the battlefield, a woman takes part in the war by supporting her husband at war. This, in fact, is the participation of a woman in war—with or without her realizing it. At the same time, the involvement of a combatant woman on the battlefield is definitely a participation of a woman in war. The difference however between the



former and the latter is that the former is indirect participation in war and the latter is direct participation.

Al-Araimi (2011) comes up with two types of social change in the context of women in military and armed conflict: one is material social change and the other is non-material social change. Material social change refers to a sudden transformation and a massive change of the living condition and the standard of living. On the other hand, non-material social change affects values and beliefs and manipulates the thoughts and actions of a society. Such change that Al-Araimi (2011) says is slow and difficult, and often follows material change. In the context of armed conflict in the north of Sri Lanka, the roles taken up by women were claimed to have played a huge role in material and non-material social change. The roles of Tamil women, particularly the roles of warriors and household heads, made a sudden transformation in the gender structure of the Tamil society which is indicated by many scholars as well (Trawick 1990, Bose 1994, Alison 2003, Hellman-Rajanayagham 2008). This sudden transformation or material change (in Al-Araimi's words) in Tamil society was due to women's adopted roles that had not only affected the values and beliefs of the society, but eventually had shaped up society's thoughts towards women and their capacities as well.

## **Motivations and Challenges**

Social change is embedded with motivations and challenges. In a practical sense, 'change' is a process. To achieve change one needs to have motivations and to override challenges as well. Motivation is defined as the process that initiates, guides, and maintains goal-oriented behaviors. Motivation is what causes us to act towards achieving something (Sears 2008). There are two types of motivations: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation (Sears 2008, Gerring 2010). Intrinsic motivation refers to motivation that is driven by an interest or enjoyment in the task itself, and exists within the individual rather than relying on any external pressure. Extrinsic motivation comes from outside the individual. Common extrinsic motivations are rewards like money and grades, coercion and threat of punishment (Lenski and Patrick 2005, Gerring 2010). Human behavior is of course controlled by internal and external factors. However, a motivation is essential for a person to make a choice and to exercise it. This motivation, as per Keller (1983), is offered by the factors like attention, confidence and satisfaction (Lenski and Patrick 2005).

Challenges are considered 'threats' (Sirsch 2003). Nevertheless, a challenge is the most important factor in social change, as a change can never be achieved without experiencing challenges (Sirsch 2003). According to Marlone and Lepper

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(1987), these challenges should be adjusted so that they are neither too easy nor too difficult. Adjusting difficulties, according to Marlone and Lepper (1987), improves the engaged process throughout (Burke 2006). Challenge in fact is a relevant factor of motivation, because challenging the task involves challenging the motivation.

The literature on gender and armed conflict narrates that the roles, which women take on and which also cause changes in societies, are motivated by several forces—be they personal, political or socio-economical (Trawick 1990 and 1992, Bose 1994, Enloe 2000, Moser and Clark 2001, Bouta and Frerks 2002, Alison 2003, Hellman-Rajanayagham 2008). In applying the theory of motivation in the context of gender and armed conflict, one can understand that women take on different roles driven by both intrinsic motivations and extrinsic motivations. Intrinsic motivation, for example, drives women to become political activists or peacebuilders because of their interest and inner commitment to the cause, apart from their enjoyment of their tasks as peacebuilders and political activists. Extrinsic motivation on the other hand drives women to become household heads, because women in most cases become household heads due to the external pressure of the deaths and disappearances of male family members.

Women are motivated to take on different roles, at the same time women face challenges too (Enloe 2000, Bouta and Frerk 2002, Moser and Clark 2004). To achieve their goals or interests, women have to adjust to challenges. For example, in the case of Tamil women of Sri Lanka, women took up the role of household heads to protect the family. However they have not given up their previous role as housewives (Trawick 1990, Bose 1994, Alison 2003). Although women's roles changed when they become household heads, women did not give up the values ordering that a woman should be a domestic caretaker (Trawick 1990, Segaram 2001, Philips 2005). In this way, women adjust to challenges so that they can achieve their goals or interests. Therefore, motivated by different factors and by adjusting to the challenges that arise along the way, women adopt different roles, through which women believe they can lead society towards positive change (Enloe 2000, Bouta and Frerk 2002).

### 2.2.1 Women, War and Women's Empowerment

Armed conflicts are considered a manifestation of social change in terms of empowering women; though whether the empowerment translates into fundamental changes in the structure of patriarchal society is controversial in the context of gender and armed conflict studies (Nyakabwa 2009). Nevertheless, conflict-ridden African countries like Rwanda and Mozambique exemplify that

women's post-war political activism and social and economic advancement as women's progress in the process of empowerment (Nyakabwa 2009).

The term empowerment is used in many different contexts and by many different organizations. Due to its widespread usage in the field of psychology, social work, education, etc., there are a variety of understandings regarding the term empowerment. However, empowerment is a cultivated concept that is often used to indicate both a process and the outcome of that process (Datta and Kornberg 2002).

The empowerment discourse that emerged in the feminist literature during the 1970s was based on the conflict theories of power as 'power over.' Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Third World feminists used empowerment as a tool to expose gender differences in the control over and distribution of resources (Kabeer 2000, Troutner and Smith 2004). These feminists conceived of power as relational means, that is 'who has power over whom' and 'who has power to influence whom' (Datta and Kornberg 2002). However, the ultimate goal of empowerment for feminists was not to gain power over men, but rather to reduce and eventually eliminate the power differential between men and women (Troutner and Smith 2004). Datta and Kornberg (2002) explain the understanding of empowerment as manifesting a redistribution of power, whether between nations, castes, classes, races, genders or individuals. They further identify the goals of women's empowerment: to challenge patriarchal ideology and to transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and social inequality.

In feminist scholars' description, the idea of power therefore is at the root of the term empowerment. They identify empowerment as the process of accumulating power, which entails having power over something or having the power to make choices and affect changes (Budden and Oxaal 1997, Kabeer 2001, Ghimire 2006). "This power can be understood as operating in number of different ways" writes Budden and Oxaal (1997: 14), citing those different ways as being 'power over,' 'power to,' 'power with' and 'power within.' 'Power over' relates to domination and subordination, 'power to' involves decision-making authority, 'power with' involves people mobilizing with common purposes to achieve collective goals, and 'power within' refers to self-confidence and assertiveness of the people involved in activities (Budden and Oxaal 1997).

The literature on gender and armed conflict constantly remarks that women living in conflict-ridden areas rate more highly in empowerment measures compared to women living in communities that have not experienced conflicts (Höglund 2001, Nyakabwa 2009, Petesch 2011). According to this literature, the

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women's life stories reveal that armed conflicts and their aftermath, while bringing great suffering, also presents new opportunities for many women (Höglund 2001, Nyakabwa 2009, Petesch 2011). Petesch (2011), by referring to Colombia, Indonesia, Philippines and Sri Lanka as case studies, asserts that forces unleashed by conflicts can lead to moments when pathways for women's empowerment seem to enlarge. The norms and structures that subordinate women are shaken up and become confining due to armed conflicts. Women are exposed to new ideas and skills and are propelled into new interaction with the public as the result of armed conflicts. Therefore Petesch (2011) concludes that empowerment is a product both of women's agency and of the opportunity structure that surrounds women.

A similar point was presented by Dombrowski (1999), who says that an important gain women can experience and achieve during armed conflict is empowerment. Dombrowski further states that the empowerment gain that women achieve is indicated by women's active participation in fighting forces, their control over family resources, their participation in the market economy and their establishment of women's networks.

When applying the power theory of empowerment to the roles of women in the context of armed conflict and afterwards, women gain the 'power to' engage in warfare. They engage in warfare through the roles of caretaker, supplier and combatant. Although the reasons for women's engagement in armed conflicts vary, in many cases women engage in armed conflicts because they view armed conflicts as a mean of empowering them and achieving a status equal to men (Dombrowski 1999). Women gain 'power over' economic resources and decision-making. Due to the absence of men caused by armed conflict, women take on the responsibilities of families as household heads (Manchanda 2001). As household heads, women take on the power of responsibility for household finances and decision-making. Women also gain 'power with' their political activism and peacebuilding efforts. Women, as politicians and peacebuilders, engage in public activities in order to achieve a goal common for all in society (Budden and Oxaal 1997). Finally, women gain 'power within' themselves, which is related to their self-confidence, self-awareness and assertiveness. Through this, women recognize and analyze their experience of how power operates in their lives.

Although women empowerment is often cited as a positive product of war, there are views that questions the stature of empowerment during conflict (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001, De Alwis 2002, Boesten 2014). While few writings claim that women's achieved empowerment during conflicts is 'temporary' and 'ambiguous' (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001, De Alwis 2002), scholars like Boesten (2014) raises questions about the success of empowerment

at war. Boesten cites that there cannot be a proper empowerment for women as long as the escalation of rape and other forms of violence against women are there. Boesten (2014) further remarks that many women in conflict-ridden areas who are politically, socially and economically ‘empowered’, still go through the shame and stigma caused by sexual violence during conflicts. Boesten (2014) therefore concludes that empowerment for women are at a great distance in a context when violence against women often persists or even increases after conflict.

In the Sri Lankan context, Tamil women’s empowerment has been a widely spoken about subject in academia. A few writings on the context of women and war in Sri Lanka describe Tamil women’s empowerment ‘ambivalent’ (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001, De Alwis 2002). Though these writings define Tamil women’s empowerment as being gained as a result of their adopted roles in conflict times, they on the other hand claim that this ‘unintended’ empowerment is achieved at the expense of their menfolk. These writings further question the permanent stature of the roles adopted by women, as numerous feminist analyses have pointed out the impermanent stature of women’s empowerment in the context of war and peace. According to Rajasingham-Senanayake (2001), in periods of violent conflicts, women are often constructed as bearers of threatened national culture, values and traditions. Hence, a return to peace is often indexed in the return to the stereotypical gender status quo. Therefore Rajasingham-Senanayake (2001) concludes that Tamil women may push back into the kitchen once peace is achieved or war is over—as has happened across conflict-ridden areas of the world.

This study on the roles of Tamil women during conflict in Sri Lanka, emphasizes the ‘power’ in the ‘empowerment’ concept (‘power over,’ ‘power to,’ ‘power with’ and ‘power within’) in order to explore the empowerment process of women. As the process of women’s empowerment is explored in this study in connection with the roles of women, this study applies the notion of ‘power’ in empowerment to various functions of the roles adopted by women. Hence by using the concept of empowerment, this study deploys the idea that in conflict times, women adopt different roles through which women’s empowerment is increased.

The concept of empowerment in this study is used to explore the concept of social transformation as well. Social transformation is inevitable when women who were once dependent and subjugated are empowering or empowered. Therefore, this study employs the concept of empowerment as a mechanism for social transformation as well.

### 2.2.2 Women, War and Social Transformation

Palinkas (2013) in his article, *The Difference between Change and Transformation*, defines the term social change as “a change that uses external influences to modify actions,” and social transformation as “something that modifies beliefs so actions become natural and thereby achieve the desired result” (2013: 1). In Palinkas’ (2013) words, social transformation is an internal fundamental change in people’s beliefs of why people perform certain actions. According to Palinkas, this does not require any external influence to maintain, and because of its fundamental nature, social transformation is more likely permanent.

The process of social transformation can be explored at both the personal and structural levels (Akman 2008). Structural change in the context of social transformation is seen to be an automatic result of personal change by few scholars, because individual and structural transformation are intimately related (Akman 2008, Foladare 2008, Kaufman 2009). The individual’s inner life shapes his or her social environment, and that environment, in turn, exerts a profound influence on one’s well-being (Foladare 2008). Therefore, the individual, the institutions of society, and the community are the primary actors in the processes of social transformation (Foladare 2008). In this light, empowerment can be said to involve assisting individuals to manifest constructive capacities in creative and disciplined ways, institutions to exercise authority in a manner that leads to the progress and upliftment of all, and communities to provide an environment in which culture is enriched and individual wills and capacities combine in collective action (Akman 2008, Kaufman 2009).

Contemporary researchers assert that conflicts across the world have produced a significant process of social transformation in the respective societies. Notwithstanding the humanitarian consequences and loss of assets, conflicts have also generated important shifts in the socio-economic sphere. These shifts have been observed primarily in the context of people’s access to power and economic resources.

Social transformation in the context of armed conflict is often seen from a gender perspective. Turshen (1988), referring the civil war in Chad, says that the conflict has had a positive impact on women by empowering them in unexpected ways. Turshen and other researchers claim that aside from the important and unexpected social transformation that could be occurred by conflicts, society experiences a change in gender roles and relations. Many cases of conflicts declare that the roles—which formerly had been very fixed for women in their societies—were suddenly shifting as the result of war. Many life stories of women in wartime

have revealed the unexpected changes in gender relations as well, as a result of war. In the study done by Turshen (1988), it is noted that during the civil war in Chad in 1979 many men went into exile or were unable to provide for their families. Women partly took over this role to provide for their families, which gave them a feeling of independence and changed their self-image from one of dependence to independence. A conflict situation can thus enable women to leave the private sphere and participate in the public domain (Turshen 1988: 118). Another example comes from Sudan. Julia and Duany observe that gender roles are shifting among displaced families in Sudan. They observe that men are less prepared than women to take on manual labor in order to earn an income for their families. Many displaced Sudanese men stay at home with the children while women go to work (Julia and Duany 2001).

One more example on the changed gender status and relation in the context of conflict is Bulgaria. In Bulgaria, the evolution of gender relations started after the political transformations at the end of 1980s, with the change in *zadruga*<sup>2</sup>, an extended family system where the leader (called ‘old man’) had power over everything and was respectfully treated as the wisest. After the decline of the *zadruga*, the patriarchal system continued its existence in smaller families; however, the situation gradually started changing. The relations between men and women were put on equal footing and women became valuable companions for men. They gained voting rights, established female schools and women’s groups, and took part in the revolutions as well. Therefore, gender relations and roles can be changed in a society where there is a change in the pattern of life. This change in the pattern of life can be caused by the conflict conditions that literally motivate women to take on different social roles and demonstrate capacities for decision-making (El Bashura 2004).

In this context, women are encouraged to step in the public sphere, through the roles they take up during conflict (Manchanda 2001, Bouta and Frerks 2002, Handrahan 2004). The roles that women have adopted—such as combatants, household heads and community leaders—literally help women to play a role in transforming society (Freedman and Estelle 2003, Benjamin and Murchison 2004, Chogugudza 2006). Therefore, women contribute to social transformation through their roles taken during the time of war and aftermath, and through using their experiences in conflict and their capacity for peacebuilding (Manchanda 2001, El Bashura 2004, Handrahan 2004).

Manchanda (2001) says women are most visible when the struggle is most spontaneous, thus their contribution to social transformation is inevitable. The

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<sup>2</sup> *Zadruga* is an extended family composed of ten to twenty small families who lived and worked together.

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conflict experience of women, their community reconstruction service and their psychological and emotional support to each other, literally contribute to a transformation in society (Manchanda 2001, Sir-Leaf and Rehn 2002, Chakarova 2003). Such contribution can be provided by women household heads, political activists and peacebuilders. Women, as the people who have often had to cope with direct and indirect effects of conflict in families and communities, have the capacity to offer commitment to secure their family members in times of violence. They also struggle against all odds to make little income to support their families (Sir Leaf and Rehn 2002). Along the same line, women have an empowering experience to build trust within and between the societies through building peace and reconciliation exchange (Manchanda 2001).

During conflicts, women are more exposed to insecurity due to violence and gender-based violence, like rape and sexual abuse against women and domestic violence. To ensure attention to this issue, women have to tell the stories and work hard to reduce these things in post-conflict situations (Turshen 1988). Therefore, maximizing gender security should be an important agenda in the process of social transformation, and women contribute to it through taking up different roles (Anderlini 2000, Moser and Clark 2001, Dudink et al. 2004, Handrahan 2004, El Bashura 2004). Against this background, woman political activists and politicians work hard to reduce violence against women in society, eliminate discrimination against women and train women to become economically independent by educating them with new income-generating mechanisms. The existing literature states that such mechanisms used by women politicians lead to social transformation (Dudink et al. 2004, Handrahan 2004).

The impact of war in Sri Lanka on women however is on the one hand described as a very personal and painful experience having a long-term social impact, whereby the conditions and prolonged suffering, force women to take new steps and responsibilities both in the family and in the community (Somasundaram 2007). Before the outbreak of the civil war, the status of Tamil women in Sri Lanka had been confined to biological and social reproduction (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001, Hellmann-Rajanayagham 2008). The social disorder brought about by the war transformed not only the roles of women but gender relations in society too (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001, Somasundaram 2007). Through the war that had changed the social situations, women have also unexpectedly become active in the public spheres by taking up public roles, such as by spending more time outside the home, organizing, protesting, etc. This places great pressure on them as many of these new steps are socially unacceptable, and women run the risk of being stigmatized and marginalized by the family and the community.



However, women's roles and responsibilities have also changed from being the 'nurturer' to the breadwinner—or from being inside the house, to outside the house. One way or another, women have begun to participate in the 'public sphere'—be it as the family breadwinner, as a mother searching for her son, or even as a combatant (Manchanda 2001, Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001, Somasundaram 2007).

## 2.3 Analytical Framework

In the narrative framework, the metaphor of the story refers to the idea that the most important means, with which individuals give meaning to an experience consists in inserting it in a narrative structure (Bruner1986). This idea has been developed in various ways in different approaches, but comes from two basic ways of thinking about the functions of stories: on the one hand, it has been found that narrative constitutes one form of interpreting actions, and on the other, there is the fact that by means of narrative the individual constructs the continuity of self on a temporal level, bringing together the past, present and the future (Bruner 1986).

In such context, the present study brings out memorable, interesting knowledge that brings together layers of understandings about women, their culture and how they have created change. The narratives of this study help organize information about how women have interpreted events; the values, beliefs and experiences that guide those interpretations; and their hopes, intentions and plans for the future. Therefore, the knowledge gained in this way in this study is characterized by multiple voices, perspectives, truths and meanings.

The reflexivity of narrative analysis as far as this study is concerned had been a dynamic process of interaction within and between ourselves (the researcher and the respondents), and the data that informs decisions, actions and interpretations. However, a narrative inquiry requires trust and openness in research relationship, high levels of ethical and critical engagement, and mutual and sincere collaboration.

The only consequence I faced for having chosen a narrative approach was related to my experience in the field. I was going through additional strain in dealing with ethical issues, for example, every time I had an appointment with my respondents, I had to ask myself: 'Do you really feel like interfering in her life? Will you be able to live with the guilt or consequences....?' etc. When I asked one of my respondents if she had any anxieties interacting with me, she told me: 'my greatest anxiety is whether you will undercover my identity'.

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The idea of analyzing the roles of Tamil women in times of conflict and ceasefire agreement in Sri Lanka was deduced from the previous literature. Nevertheless, categorizing Tamil women's roles as warriors, household heads, political activists and peacebuilders was obtained from the empirical material. In the beginning of the field work, I had considered to incorporate 'victims' and 'perpetrators' as roles in this study as well, that they are, in the previous studies, described as roles taken up by women during conflicts. However, the idea was later discarded for the following reasons.

In the first place, the definition for 'victims of war' or 'victimhood' is not clearly quoted in any of the writings. Many feminist writings assert that the victimhood of women and also men in war as their 'experience of war' (Ristanovic 2000, Höglund 2001, Moser & Clark 2004, Coulter 2009). In the analysis on women and war of Sierra Leone, Chris Coulter (2009) finds the victim/perpetrator dichotomy quite complicated especially in the humanitarian discourses. In Sierra Leone, as Coulter writes, most of the fighter women are victims of violence because most of them are forcibly abducted, raped and tortured by their male counterparts. Thus, her work on *Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers: Young women's lives through war and peace in northern Sierra Leone* indicates how the presence of female fighters in the war of Sierra Leone was interpreted differently in the international media while local population had a different view upon it.

The similar situation is seen in Sri Lanka too, as the fighter Tamil women are described as perpetrators and killers by some scholars, journalists and terrorism experts, while others hold a view that is different from the above narration. Scholars like Trawick (1990), Bose (1994) and Alison (2003) specify how Tamil women of Sri Lanka were victimized by the war and therefore chose to take up the role of warriors. This indeed generates complication in the connotation of phrasing the concepts victim and perpetrators, as someone who is raped is a victim and someone who is a fighter is a perpetrator (Coulter 2009).

Secondly, the terms victims and perpetrators are more descriptive in my opinion. This study on Tamil women's roles, after all a narrative analysis that does not employ any descriptive approach. Thirdly, Tamil women do not comply with the terms victims and perpetrators. In their opinion, applying these two terms in their context will characterize Tamil women either as weak or as hostile in general.

Therefore, by presenting women's roles as warriors, household heads, political activists and peacebuilders, this section presents the analytical framework that is used to guide this study in order to understand the roles of Tamil women in Sri Lanka Conflict.

## Warriors

Women warriors are women soldiers serving in fighting roles in uniformed or irregular military forces (Goldstein 2001). Women across cultures and through time have rarely participated in war as combatants. However, when they have fought, women have performed in a way that was widely spoken in the media or discussed in the academic forums. “Women have fought in wars rarely,” says Goldstein (2001: 4), “but effectively on numerous occasions.” However, women are not encouraged to be in combat; Goldstein (2001) further states the reason may involve protecting the norms of masculinity that often motivate men to participate in war (Goldstein 2001).

The feminist school of thoughts on women in combat expresses diverse views. For example, D’Amico’s work *Feminists’ Perspectives of Women Warriors* (1998) shows different feminist views on warrior women at different angles. In D’Amico’s words, ‘anti-feminists’ view the image of a woman warrior as distressing and compelling, saying it destroys both family and the fabric of civil society while damaging military efficiency. In the view of ‘anti-feminists,’ gender differences are natural and inherent, and women being warriors is totally a symbol of being unnatural. However, radical, liberal and critical feminists have contrasting views on the image of a warrior woman. Radical feminists, in accordance with the author of the *Feminists Perspectives of Women Warriors*, see the image of a warrior woman as representing women’s potential for power, as lingering evidence of ancient matriarchy or woman centered society’ (Amico 1998: 120). Liberal or equal rights feminism also displays this image of women as the “evidence of women’s equality with men.” Again as said by D’Amico (1998) “in liberal feminists’ view, the goal of women’s militarization is women’s equality and women’s entry into the military will gradually transform it into a less hierarchical, more democratic and egalitarian social institution” (Amico 1998: 120). Nevertheless, critical feminists warn of the danger of women being warriors, stating that the image of a warrior woman is drawn from a ‘warrior mystique’ promoting marshal and militaristic values rather than redefining gender-based social values (D’Amico 1998). These feminists in fact argue that women’s militarization provides no substantive feminization of the military as a social institution; instead, it allows women to be militarized but not to be empowered.

Some of the literature attests to how women of Sri Lanka were actively and directly involved in armed conflict (Trawick 1990, Coomaraswamy 1999, De Alwis 2002, Balasingham 2003, Sornarajah 2004). In contrast to the very few women who were part of the government forces in Sri Lanka, there have been several Tamil women who were active combatants in the rebel group called the

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Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or the LTTE. The LTTE, which was directly involved in the conventional and guerrilla warfare with the government forces and the other paramilitary groups, was also engaged in carrying out a number of suicide attacks (Skaine 2006, Gunawardene 2006). Nonetheless, with the 'elimination' of the group called LTTE in May 2009, the role of warrior women in Sri Lanka has vanished.

However, some writings have specific accounts on the LTTE women. These writings observe that the growing number of woman cadres in society indicates the nature of a 'militarized society,' and thus Tamil women being warriors was militarizing Tamil society (Coomraswamy 1997, De Alwis 2002). Scholars also address the fighter women of LTTE as the 'masculinized warrior virgins' while describing them as perpetrators of armed conflict and violence (De Silva 1994, Coomaraswamy 1999, De Mel 2001, De Alwis 2002,). They further remark that the militants' form of masculinity that these women were engaged in, and the 'sexual discipline' that forced these women to be virgins, eventually made them 'masculinized virgin warriors.'

Some psychological writings explain masculinization as something that female biology and behavior is converted into male physiology and behavior (Nordeen and Yahr 1983, Koocher and College 2002). This, they name 'defeminization,' claiming that masculinization is a male-typical morphology and behavior, which can be observed in some females as well. However, in contrast, some gender perspectives refer to the term 'masculinization' in a woman as a 'personality trait' that shows her empowerment and strength (Oakley 2005, Riviere 2005, Parpart 2008). The psychological claim of masculinization being the male-typical morphology and behavior is strongly dismissed by the feminist scholars like Ann Oakley (2005) and Riviere (2005). According to Oakley, masculinity and femininity are defined not by biology but by social, cultural and psychological obtain, which deliberately picture men as physically powerful and women as weak. Reviere (2005) also asserts the same point through the term 'womanliness.' Womanliness, according to Reviere, is a natural side of a woman that consists of both masculine and feminine characteristics. Womanliness, Reviere states, consists of the double action of a woman exploring both her masculine and feminine characters. Quoting many case studies in her paper *Womanliness as a Masquerade*, Reviere says that the possession of masculinity in women is hidden in the mask of womanliness, which is to be out in the open in case of requirement and at times customarily. That means "womanliness could be assumed and worn as a mask that women usually wear both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if a woman was found to possess it" (2005: 73).

Chris Coulter (2009), in her research on fighter women in Sierra Leone, states that compounding the picture of the peaceful women is the fact that in many wars and violent conflicts, women's capability of being fighters or aggressors has never been seen as obvious, except in the case of Rwanda. For this reason, Coulter further reveals, a woman soldier in the armed forces is still conceived of as a man, because the idea of being aggressive or a fighter is similar to "becoming like a man" (2009: 232). Parpart (2008) too remarks that the 'notion of womanhood' has been changed by women carrying weapons and participating in war. The perception of 'warrior males' as 'protectors' and women and children as 'protected' had thereby been fading away with women becoming combatants.

According to Banerjee (2003), masculinity is something socially constructed which includes values, beliefs and customs of society. Through analyzing the relationship between masculinization of Hindu nationalism and female political participation in India, Banerjee interrogates how Indian women have created a political space for themselves in a very 'masculine narrative.' Coulter (2009) has also described women's masculinity in terms of the social roles that women have taken upon themselves during the conflict in Sierra Leone. According to her, rebel women are attired with 'military masculinity,' whereas civilian women hold the character of 'civilian masculinity.' Thus, masculinity, as Coulter and others claim, neither defines the biological aspect of a woman nor applies to military women only. Instead, it entails the social and personal characteristics of a woman, or women in the context of war and peace.

Scholars who have researched the LTTE, however, assert that the LTTE women's outer body was marked as 'masculine.' "While the LTTE woman's internal make up is expected to be 'pure' and virginal, her outer body is marked as masculine" writes Coomaraswamy (1997), stating that the women of the LTTE had short hair, wore boots and combatant fatigues, and wore cyanide capsules around their necks like their male counterparts, which showed their desire to be masculine (Coomaraswamy: 1997, De Alwis 2002).

Contrasting to what some of these writings assert, other academic writings pertaining to the context of Tamil women in Sri Lanka also explore different views on the LTTE women. Magarett Trawick (1990), whose study is one of the first about women members of the LTTE, describes LTTE women as the transformers of Tamil society, while Schalk (1994) depicts the LTTE women's martial activities "for the establishment of a new state in which women attain civil rights" as "martial feminism" (1994: 18). In spite of various arguments of women in combat, some writings approve the battlefield achievements of the LTTE women, citing that these women were not lesser than the men (Trawick 1990, Balasingham 1994,

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Segaram 2001, Sornarajah 2004, Hellmann-Rajanayagham 2008). The account of Adele Balasingham (1994) speaks of the military competence of these warrior women in the LTTE. Dagmar Hellman-Rajanayagham (2008), states that “Tamil women join the Tigers not to die, but to fight.” She further writes that the “death is taken into account for these women, but not necessarily anticipated” (2008: 5). Moreover, Hrdlickova calls Tamil women’s entry into fighting roles as a “new phenomenon” in Sri Lankan Tamil society, claiming that the existence of Tiger women had shattered gender stereotyping in Sri Lankan Tamil culture (2008: 467).

Studies express different accounts on Tamil women being warriors, however concur that the LTTE women have had presented a great challenge to the traditionalist ideas about the gender roles in the society. LTTE women, as observed in the existing literature, played significant ‘non-traditional’ role that subsequently challenging women’s ‘traditional’ roles in the Tamil society of Sri Lanka. Though widespread influence of women in the LTTE might have caused scholars, journalists and even the public to divulge their importance to social changes of the Sri Lankan Tamil society, these women were still positioned in, and focused within a political framework. In such academic context, the present study looks at these LTTE women warriors with a different perspective. Despite the fact that the role of warrior women was very much politically significant in the history of Sri Lankan conflict, this study, will explore the role through a socio cultural set up; the set-up, which was very traditional, rigid and was believed to be unchanged.

Therefore, this study will highlight the motivations for Tamil women to become warriors. The study will analyze how women became warriors due to some personal reasons, how political situations motivated women to take up the role of warriors and how social and economic conditions supported women to join the fight. This study will also underline the challenges women faced as warriors and will highlight their status as warriors both in the society and within the movement. Finally, this study will analyze warrior women’s understanding on the issues like equality, empowerment and social transformation.

### **Household Heads**

Though there are several academic definitions of household heads given in the existing literature, the arguments say there is a lack of clarity in respect to the use of the term female household heads (Hedman, et al., 1996: 64/B, UN/DESI, 1991: 17/B). The United Nations, for example, says “prevailing cultural assumptions and methods of data collection in most countries, (where) women are not usually enumerated as heads of households unless they are either living alone (that is, one-

person households) or there is no adult male in the household” (UN/DESI, 1991: 17/B). The United Nations further records that “the presence of an adult male tends to mark a household as male-headed regardless of women’s economic contributions” (UN, 1995: 33/B). Hedman et al. also point out the same fact, saying that the number of women who are the actual authority in the household and the main economic support are overlooked and underestimated due to the conception that household heads are males (Hedman, et al., 1996: 64/B).

This study will adopt the UN’s definition for women household heads. According to the report of the United Nations, this definition of women household heads was adopted through the survey conducted across the world. The United Nations defines female heads of households as “women (who) are financially responsible for their families,” who are the “key decision-makers and household managers,” who “manage household economies on behalf of an absent male head,” or who “are the main economic contributors” (UN, 1995: 32/B). As per the UN definition of household heads, the breadwinners, who are financially responsible for their families and the main economic contributors of their households, are accounted as household heads as well.

Violent conflict increases the responsibilities of women within households and changes the gender division of tasks through its impacts on household composition (Shemyakina: 2009). And thus, household leadership of women is usually taken under forced situations caused by violence or as a coping mechanism to survive under war (Kumar 2001, De Alwis 2002). The percentage of women-headed households often increases during conflict due to the loss of the male household heads and forced migration during conflict (Kumar: 2001, Menon 2003, El-Bashura 2004, Shemyakina: 2009). Therefore, woman household heads, first of all, have to overcome the emotional and psychological pain of the loss of their husbands, fathers, sons and brothers, in order to take care of the households’ economic needs, and to look after the dependent family members such as children and elderly (Deere 2005). The lives of women therefore adjust dramatically in response to changes in their household and their communities in context of armed conflict.

Women-headed households are not a new phenomenon in Sri Lanka (Thiruchandran 1999). Women have been widows, deserted and separated since the time the civil war had started. They have become the heads of the families by providing necessary support to the families they belong to, both financially and emotionally. What is new to Sri Lanka is the dramatic increase of female-headed households in recent years (Thiruchandran 1999).

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In exceptional situations, such as a conflict or a natural disaster, the Sri Lankan experience suggests that there was an increase in the number of women headed households. For instance, a study done by the Suriya Women's Development Centre in the district of Batticaloa revealed that there was an increase in the number of women-headed households in the aftermath of the tsunami. The report says "[S]ome women have become the head of household due to the tsunami, others due to the war and the fact that their men had gone to the Middle Eastern countries as migrant workers, or left the communities due to death threats related to the war, or had deserted them" (2005: 03). Also, the recent assessment of the Ministry of Child Development and Women's Affairs of Sri Lanka reports that the armed conflict has increased the number of war widows up to 89,000 in northern and eastern parts of the country, and the northern region had approximately 59,000 women-headed households—including more than 20,000 in Jaffna District (Alaiwah 2013).

The present study will look at this women's role as an opportunity for women to show off women's capacities for leadership, economic management, negotiation and empowerment. In this context, this study on Tamil women's roles in the conflict of Sri Lanka will take up a perspective which is quite different from the perspectives of other literatures on women household heads. Some previous studies on women household heads in the context of conflict describe them as victims and survivors of armed conflicts (Haeri & Puechguirbal 2010); while other few perceive the role as a consequence of the armed conflict which is exercised as a coping strategy to survive in the midst of violence (Kuloglu- Karsli 2013). Against this backdrop, the present study will explore the narratives of Jaffna women household heads, that reveal how women have become the household heads, how women household heads who are husbandless were isolated in the society, how have these women challenged the social isolation enforced upon them and how have they become successful household leaders who also contributed to the upliftment of women in the society. This study will also look at women household heads who are involved in illegal activities, by exploring the reasons behind them being illegal breadwinners.

### **Political Activists**

A political activist is someone who is involved in the political process for the sake of promoting, impeding or raising awareness of a certain issue or set of issues (Collins 2000). Political activism typically involves engagement beyond just voting, whether it be through protest, demonstration or even lectures (Collins 2000, Norris 2007). In this context, political activism involves taking a clear stance



on an issue, voicing an opinion and working to ensure that the change desired by the political activists comes to take place (Nelson and Chandery 1994, Riley 2006).

“Political activism is most effective when done with large groups,” says Norris (2007: 628). He further states that community organizers and political leaders see the most sweeping change when the demonstrations and activities are unique enough that the voices of the demonstrators draw a great deal of attention. This is why Norris further reveals that creative acts of resistance by political activists tend to be so powerful (Norris 2007).

Political activists can engage in community work too, but not all women who engaged in community work are willing to be involved in political work (Ghimire 2006). Even some of the most dedicated social activists, such as Medha Patkar of India, are not interested in taking up a political role due to the criminalization in South Asian politics that often targets politicians and political activists (Vig: 2014, Ghimire 2006). The criminal politics such as corruption, mafia and manipulation do not motivate many women to take part in any politically related activities (Grimier 2006). Women also feel discomfort with political engagement due to structural factors. Structural factors like patriarchy and male dominance rule the institution of politics in South Asia, where women are considered to lack the capacities to engage in politics or in political activism (Ghimire 2006).

Young women of Jaffna, who have grown up with activists shooting at each other in war time and hearing of widespread corruption and roguery, have found involvement in political activism to be cruel and deceitful (Gunaratna and Navaratnam 2013). Moreover, the gender-insensitive masculine political culture of the region of South Asia, which systematically tries to drive women away from politics, deters these women from political activism (Ghimire 2006). Under these circumstances, the role of women in political activism or even in formal politics has been severely absent in the north of Sri Lanka especially during the time of the armed conflict (Tamil Net April 2003).

The role of Tamil civilian women in formal politics and political activism in Sri Lanka had hardly been discussed by the previous studies or researches. Most of the studies and scholarly writings exclusively report about the political wing of LTTE women, their political activism and their participation in the peace process. The present study, however will analyze how Tamil women have become political activists; how they have become active voters and electoral candidates both in the local and in the national elections and, how they voice against the prejudice, discrimination and segregation meted out towards Tamils in the country and as

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well as towards women in the Tamil society. This study will also explore women political activists' understanding on social equality and women empowerment.

### **Peacebuilders**

In his 1992 report, *An Agenda for Peace*, former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali introduced the concept of peacebuilding to the UN as “action to identify and support structures, which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict” (A/47/277 – S/24111, para. 21). Many examples from across the world cite that women have taken part in the peace movements and protest movements against war. These objectives of women to build peace and broaden the parameters of peacebuilding, have resulted in women gaining prominent places as peacebuilders in peacebuilding processes (Porter 2008). However, there are arguments that say women are not given enough opportunities to take part in formal peacebuilding efforts (Höglund 2001, Handrahan 2004).

Feminist theories say ‘a woman of peace’ has three identities: *mater dolorosa* or mother of sorrows, the outsider who stays out of war, and the peacemaker. According to these theories, in the context of armed conflict and violence, these identities contribute to build peace in various ways by preventing women from becoming involved in war, violence and armed conflict or violence-related events (Ruddick 1998, Porter 2008).

The identity of ‘*mater dolorosa*’ is deeply rooted in war, because the characteristics of a mother of sorrow is to mourn, weep, search for lost children and keep living children alive. In this view, a woman is seen as sorrowful and weeping, not because she is weak, but because war is bitter. Thus, she weeps for good reason and through weeping and mourning a woman expresses the need to end the war and the violence (Porter 2008). ‘Outsider’, on the other hand, is the second identity of a woman of peace who “acts against the war by being a stranger to men’s war” (Ruddick 1998: 217). In this view, a woman is an outsider of war or war-related events and expresses her hatred towards war. The third and the final identity defines a woman as a ‘peacemaker’. While the other two identities of a woman describe a woman as someone against war, the peacemaker identity defines a woman as someone builds peace. This third identity of a woman as a peacemaker reflects a woman who works for peace directly, including participating in negotiations. (Ruddick 1998, Porter 2008).

In the context of Asia and South Asia, in peace work, more women belong in the informal sectors and in the informal spaces of politics, rather than directly in the formal peacebuilding processes (Menon 2003). Menon (2003) states that the

ceremonial cursing of the mothers' front, and indeed the public mobilization of women and mothers for the cause of peace, is common in this part of the world, which she names as 'womanist form of peace activism.' By its very nature, this protest activism of women against armed conflict and violence directly and indirectly challenges the political and social practice, says Menon (2003). During the Vietnamese war, for example, women in the Buddhist Peace Movement constituted the critical core of Buddhist efforts to end the war. Buddhist women participated in demonstrations, placed family alters in the streets, led students out of class to protest and made efforts to restructure the human impact of the conflict. Women who joined the protest for peace also "risked prison, defied social norms and endured enormous pain" (Lawrence 2008: 155).

Manchanda (2001) says that conflict in Sri Lanka "produced a rich outcrop of women's groups, ad hoc coalitions and broader civil society mobilizations" (2001: 474). She further remarks, Sri Lankan women have been active in lobbying and campaigning for an end to the war, for respect towards the rights of all communities, and for peaceful and negotiated settlement to the ethnic conflict during the initial stages of the armed conflict. There are many instances in which women as groups demanded peace. The Women's Action Committee (WAC), the Mothers' Front, Mothers and Daughters of Lanka and the Muslim Women's Research and Action Front are such groups of women who campaigned for peace and ethnic harmony in Sri Lanka (Abeyesekera 2000, Manchanda 2001).

In the north of Sri Lanka, Mothers' Front of Jaffna, which was established in 1984, has been the voice of Tamil women in an increasing climate of fear fostered by ethnic divisions. This women's movement grew out of necessity to provide an alternative to violence within society (Joseph and Najmabadi 2005). This group of 'mother politics' stood against the human rights violations, including the arbitrary arrests of Jaffna youth throughout the district (Abeyasekere 2000). However, this group was subjected to hostility and the members were threatened and harassed by the 'weapon carriers.' The group of mother politics was therefore disbanded a few years after its formation. Thereby, the emergence of new woman peace movements was made inactive and completely suppressed in the north by the extreme, violent and militarized environment.

Under this backdrop, the present study will open up a perspective indicating that the grass-roots women peacebuilders have a wealth of wisdom about the shaping of everyday, peaceful coexistence. They have experience in dealing with outbreaks of violence and its brutal effects. They are almost always culturally appropriate. Unlike political stakeholders or outside mediators, such actors may be risking their very lives for the sake of peace. Through the narrations of women,

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the present study therefore will explore the formations of small woman groups in the villages that work for peace. This study further highlights how the mobilization of women for peace strengthen the capacity of women, while exploring their challenges and successes in building peace.

As presented in the first chapter, the present study aims to explore Tamil women's understanding about the roles they have taken during the time of armed conflict in Sri Lanka. That is to say, how these women present their roles in conflict, the motivations behind adopting those roles and the challenges faced when enacting those roles. Therefore, the analytical framework for this study was chosen and designed based on the literature review and the field test. The following table summarizes the analytical framework used as a guide for my study.

Roles of Tamil Women	Analytical Issues
Warriors	The motivation for being warriors; status and challenges faced as warriors; Equality, empowerment and social Transformation.
Household Heads	The motivations for taking up household responsibilities; illegal means of breadwinning; challenges faced by the household heads; Household leadership, empowerment and social transformation.
Political Activists	The motivations for being political activists; challenges faced by the activists; political activism of Tamil women; Social security for women, empowerment and social transformation.
Peacebuilders	The motivations to become peacebuilders; challenges faced by peacebuilders; peacebuilding activities; women's empowerment women and social transformation through building peace.

# 3

## Research Design and Methodology

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The purpose of this chapter is to present the research design and as well as the research methodology applied in this study. This chapter will provide an overview of the methodological considerations and research design that guided this study. This study is qualitative in nature and considers the case of Jaffna women of Sri Lanka. The study is based on the narratives of Tamil women of Jaffna district with different backgrounds. This study contains narratives in order to understand how women understand the roles they assumed in times of conflict and the ceasefire agreement in Sri Lanka.

This chapter contains eight different sections. Starting up with the epistemological positioning of the research, this chapter will elaborate the research (case study) design, data collection method and data analyzing. It continues by defining the terms that are specific for this study, discussing the field experiences the researcher faced and, explaining the issues related to reviving the data. Finally, the chapter describes the delimitations as well.

### 3.1 Epistemological Positioning

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge (Marsh and Furlong 2002). One's epistemological position reflects the "view of what we can know about the world and how we can know it" (Marsh and Furlong 2002: 18-19). In brief, epistemology is concerned with providing a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and we sure it is adequate and legitimate (Maynard 1994). Epistemology is related to ontology, 'the study of being' or 'the nature of reality'. As Marsh and furlong (2002) note, an ontological stance implies a particular epistemological stance and vice versa.

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The three overarching philosophies of social science: positivism, social constructivism and critical theory have epistemology with different concerns about the knowledge. In the context of gender roles and war, positivists may argue that gender roles are meant, given and therefore is the 'reality'. In contrast to the 'reality' of gender roles that positivists may argue, is precisely socially constructed for social constructivists. In view of critical theorists, gender roles are constituted by patriarchy. For them, there is a world of human beings (men and women), and also there are deep structures (gender structure/patriarchy) in this world that can produce and reproduce gender roles and identity accordingly to the changing social situations.

This study on Tamil women's roles in times of conflict and ceasefire agreement in Sri Lanka accedes to social constructivists and critical theorists. The roles of women in conflict, epistemologically and ontologically is socially constructed, as the focus for social constructivists is rather on the 'disclosure' of how social phenomena are socially constructed. Critical theorists too offer different understandings on women's roles in conflict. For them, women assuming roles in conflicts is progressive, but regressive (they may get back to the previous roles after the war) and destructive (as some roles engage in violence and illegal activities) too. However, this study on Tamil women's roles in the times of conflict and ceasefire agreement in Sri Lanka is a narrative analysis and empirically based. Therefore, the focus primarily was to bring out or to create meaningful connections between events or experiences of women in conflict, rather than analyzing the epistemology.

### 3.2 Research (Case Study) Design

A case study is an in-depth study of a particular real life situation and of a particular group (Benard 2002). It allows the researcher to explore phenomena, such as feelings or thought processes that are difficult to extract or learn about through conventional research methods (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006). Moreover, cases are bounded by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time (Horton et al. 2004). Therefore, case-study methods are often considered the best approach when studying phenomena in their natural settings (Marczyk et al. 2005), and when striving to understand social processes in context (Myers and Avison 2002).

This is a case study-based research project. This case-study research narrows down a very broad field of research, which is 'the roles of women in armed

conflict,' into one easily researchable topic by referring to Jaffna (Tamil) women of Sri Lanka conflict as the case. Briefly put, the case of Tamil women in Jaffna is the case of all women in areas ravaged by the conflicts. The roles adopted by women, the motivations behind adopting those roles, the challenges that the women face in those roles, and their contributions through those roles to women's empowerment and to social transformation that Jaffna women declare in this case study, reflect the cases of all women who are going through similar situations in conflict-affected areas across the world. In this context, this case study provides much more detailed information about the case in narrative form than what is available through other methods. This provides practical knowledge about the roles of women during the armed conflict, which could be useful in generating hypotheses for any future researches in gender and armed conflict studies.

As case-study methods emphasize the researcher's role as active participant (Horton et al. 2004), I, the researcher of this study, was the key instrument in data collection and the interpreter of data findings.

### 3.2.1 Field Area: The District of Jaffna

As mentioned above, the field area chosen for this study is the district of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. Jaffna District in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka is divided into four sub-divisions. These are the Islands, Valikamam, Vadamarachi (northern part of the district) and Thenmarachi (southern part of the district), which overall includes fifteen administrative divisions and four assistant government agent divisions (Census Population Report 1999).

Though both the northern and the eastern provinces of Sri Lanka are the conflict-affected regions, Jaffna, which is the capital of Sri Lanka's Northern Province, has been chosen to be studied. The reasons are:

- Jaffna faced several military operations and armed battles since 1983. The armed conflict itself had started in Jaffna in 1983.
- Jaffna has been one of the districts most-affected by the civil war. Different villages in Jaffna are situated in different geographical locations and have different socio-economic situations, which has had varying impacts on the conflict.
- Jaffna is one of the districts which solely represent the Tamil community of Sri Lanka as the majority of the population is Tamil-speaking. Jaffna has been and still is the center of the language, cultural and religious heritage of the Tamils of Sri Lanka.

Though Jaffna has been the larger field area of this study, this study also consists of few smaller field areas as sample villages as well. These sample villages belong to Valigamam division of Jaffna District (as shown in the map below).

### 3.2.2 The Sample Villages

I chose to study Valigamam division, which consists of Jaffna city and the Nallur area. I selected six villages from Valigamam, namely: Gurunagar, Evinai and Mylankaadu, Poompuhaar, Saavalkaadu, Pandatharippu and Nallur. The reason that I chose these villages is that all of these villages have been affected by war but are set in different geographical locations. These villages therefore explain the significance of war in diverse ways as described below.

#### **Gurunagar**

Gurunagar is a fishing village, located along the coastal line of the Jaffna peninsula. Most of the families in this village are Catholic. Therefore church has a greater influence over the activities of this village. Women groups formed with the support of the organization HUDEC appear to be active in this village. Though, these groups do not carry out any major activities.

This village consists of people who with both university education and primary school education. The educated younger generation works in private as well as government sectors, while people with only primary education engage in fishing.

Alcoholism, poverty, illegal liquor manufacture and domestic violence are the major social problems in this village. Prominent in the area is caste struggle (especially between two groups) that has often led to severe violence.<sup>3</sup>

The restrictions on fishing imposed by the security services damaged the economy of this village on a larger scale. Due to this security restriction many men became unemployed, which led women to become the family breadwinners. As a part of breadwinning caused by the unemployment of their men, few women in this village engage in producing illegal moonshine alcohol called *kasippu*. Since this is a coastal village, it is often used to come under the canon fire of the Sri Lankan Navy. In order to escape from naval artillery, these villagers used to leave their houses in the evenings, spend their nights in the public places like churches, and return home during the day.

#### **Evinai and Mylankaadu**

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<sup>3</sup> Mainly two caste groups, the karava and the paraya, are involved in these clashes. Karavas are fishermen claiming they are dominant to the parayas. The parayas are the most-oppressed group in the society, working as scavengers.



Evinai and Mylankaadu are the neighboring re-settled villages located in Valigamam north. They are the villages placed between the higher security zone and the public living zone.<sup>4</sup> Most of the villagers are agriculturists; some are farmers and some are minor employees working in the paddy fields, earning LKR 150 a day. Villagers were internally displaced for several years living in the camps and had been re-settled during the time of the ceasefire agreement. Most of the villagers are Hindus by religion.

The education level is very low in these villages. Only two girls from each village have passed the national ordinary level examination and are working as pre-school teachers. Others are mostly uneducated or have primary school education.

The main social issue in both villages is domestic violence. Domestic violence is said to be a kind of sub-culture of this village, which is not looked upon as bad or criminal behavior. Elopement and child marriages are also quite common among the people in these villages. People marry early here and legally register soon after they have reached the legal marriage age. Disputes in relation to the dowry system are very often observed, which is the main cause for the domestic violence against women in these areas. Women are under dowry harassment even after several years of married life. Married women are frequently harassed by their husbands, and their in-laws and asked to bring in more cash, jewelry and other properties as dowry. The wages these women earn through their jobs are forcefully picked up by husbands and then counted as dowry. Therefore, few young families in these villages are separated owing to dowry disputes.

Internal displacement has been a severe consequence of war faced by these villagers. These villagers bore the brunt of the multi-displacement caused by the war. They were refugees for several years and when they were resettled, these villagers had to start their lives from the scratch. Without adequate support from the government and other agencies to start a new life, these villagers still remain the bearers of the consequences of war, even though they are 're-settled'.

### **Poompuhaar**

Poompuhaar is another small village off to Ariyalai area located towards the south of Jaffna District. This is the remotest village among the sample villages of this study. The village is geographically isolated from rest of Jaffna as it is located amidst bareland and farmlands. The communication gap between this village and

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<sup>4</sup> A higher security zone is a military occupation zone from which people were evacuated over the last 20 years.

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the city is huge, which makes the village backward. Most of the villagers are minor employees in farmlands. The village consists of both Christians and Hindus.

The education level is low; villagers are either uneducated or educated at primary school.

The main social problem in this village is poverty. People here live under the poverty line. Aside from producing illegal liquor, excessive alcoholism and domestic violence are the issues that these villagers face.

The impact of war in this village is quite severe as anyone can see that at least one member from each family of this village has either disappeared or been killed. Therefore, disappearance is the significant issue that singles out this village as being badly affected by the war. These villagers said that losing their loved ones on a daily basis has become part of their 'terrible' life. These villagers always used to live in fear of disappearing anytime. The village was unknown to many in the district of Jaffna until the rape and murder case of Krishanthy Kumaraswamy<sup>5</sup> came to light. NGOs and civil society organizations consider this village to be one of the areas most affected by the war.

### **Saavalkaadu (Aanaikottai)**

Saavalkaadu is located around six kilometers north of the city of Jaffna. It is also a coastal village and many inhabitants engage in fishing. The village is mostly Hindu, however, it consists of Catholics and Protestant Christians as well.

The education level in this village lends to a good deal of optimism. Most of the people have gone through secondary education. The younger generation goes to school and the existence of a few university students in this village was observable.

This village faces issues like poverty and domestic violence too. Poverty here was caused by the restriction imposed on fishing, as many of these villagers survive on fishing.

Like 'disappearance' in Poompuhaar, Saavalkaadu is known for its war widows. Out of 200 families living in this village, 95 families lost their men and are headed by women. Almost all the husbands of these widows were shot at sea while fishing. The security restrictions on fishing, and the fishermen risking their lives by going out to fish for their livelihood, have been the reasons for an increased number of war widows in this village. The 'Widows' Centre', initiated

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<sup>5</sup> Krishanthy Kumaraswamy was a schoolgirl who was gang raped and murdered by the Sri Lankan military near Poompuhar when she was on the way home from school.

by Shanthigam and HUDEC,<sup>6</sup> is internationally known for its work for peacebuilding. Many women in this village including the war widows are active peacebuilders.

### **Pandatharippu**

Pandatharippu is a village placed to the north of Jaffna town. It's a suburban city, quite developed and relatively moderate. The village consists of Protestant Christians and Catholics; however there are Hindus as well.

Villagers are mostly educated and work in the governmental and private sectors. The leading schools located in the area seem to be a hallmark for the villagers' educational level.

Pandatharippu has been one of the host villages for the people internally displaced from the 'higher security zone.' However, it has often been targeted by the military artillery, often fired at from the 'higher security zone.'

### **Nallur**

Nallur is located 3 kilometers south of the city center of Jaffna. It is often described as the heart of Jaffna District. In terms of its historical importance Nallur was the capital of the old Jaffna kingdom, where places of political, religious and cultural importance for Sri Lankan Tamils were built.

Nallur is one of the sophisticated areas in Jaffna containing the educated and 'elite'<sup>7</sup> Hindu Tamils. Nallur temple is said to be a socially important institution for the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu identity of the North of Sri Lanka.

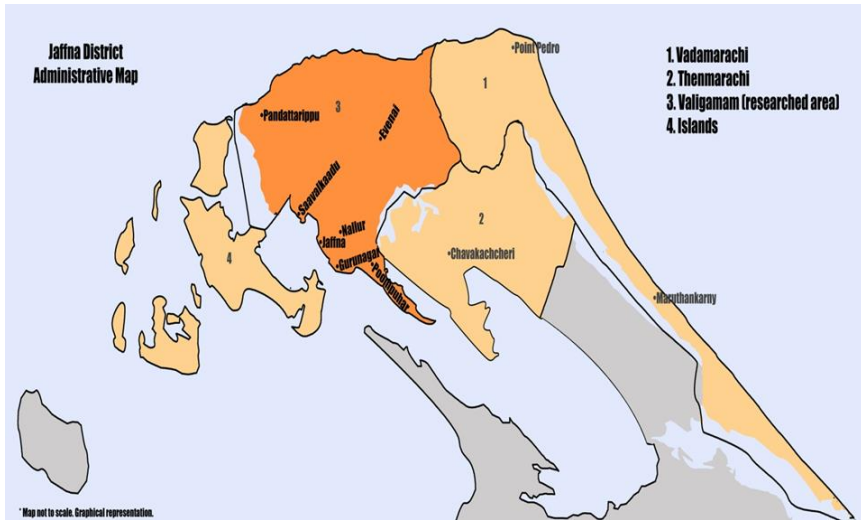
As it is one of the sophisticated and educated areas of Jaffna Peninsula, social problems like alcoholism and poverty are comparatively milder in Nallur than in the other villages. Nallur has been the center of the LTTE propaganda and thus has often been targeted by aerial bombardment. During the IPKF period, Nallur was considered one of the main hideouts of the LTTE. Therefore, it was often the center of cordoning and searches, arrests and intimidation.

(Source: Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies: 2004, Field Observation 2004, 2005).

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6 Shanthigam is a psycho-social center functioning in Jaffna, while Hudec is a church-influenced non-governmental organization.

7 'Elite' in this context implies the group of people who are the higher caste, with a higher educational level, who hold higher professional positions and who are wealthy.



Source: Jaffna District Secretariat (2014).

### 3.3 Methods of Data Collection

Considering the aim of this study and in order to seek answers on the experience of women on their different roles, I used two main research methods for collecting data. They were: interviews (in-depth interviews, focus group interviews, telephone interviews) and observation. I used these two research methods, because, as per the previous research, interviews are optimal for collecting data on the personal histories, perspectives and experiences of individuals. Observation, on the other hand, is appropriate for collecting data on naturally occurring behaviors in their usual contexts (Hoepfl: 1997, Myre and Avison: 2002, Kvale and Brinkmann: 2009).

I used informal talks as a data collecting method as well. Informal talks were in fact used due to the time constraint of the informants and of the respondents.

#### 3.3.1 Interviews

The interviews with this study had specific purpose which was to gain in-depth information directly from Tamil women and subsequently interviews were used as the primary method for data collection for this study.

The interview is an interpersonal situation, a conversation between two people and a specific form of human interaction in which knowledge evolves through a dialogue (Kvale 1996, Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Therefore, three different interviewing strategies have mainly been recognized as helpful to collect the desired data on the research question of this study. They were in-depth individual (face-to-face) interviews, focus group interviews and interviews by telephone.

### **In-depth Interviews**

This study utilized semi-structured interviews. Unlike structured interviews, semi-structured interviews are flexible. Semi-structured interviews have a sequence of themes to be covered, as well as suggested questions (Kvale 1996). At the same time, semi-structured interviews are open to forming new questions in order to follow up the answers as well (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Consequently, semi-structured interviews are often in-depth and sole data source for qualitative data (Bloom and Crabtree 2006). Therefore, semi-structured interviews were mainly used as an interviewing format in this study, and occurred with both individuals and groups.

This study consists of two categories of interviewees: informants and respondents. Informant interviews were collected from a wide range of people who were local citizens and, who had firsthand knowledge about women and Tamil society in the context of armed conflict. They were academics, government officials, NGO officials, religious clergy members, social activists, local residents, journalists and minor employees. These informants, with their particular knowledge and understanding, provided insight into the nature of the Tamil society, problems of Tamil women, and the status of Tamil women in society prior to war, during war and in the aftermath of war.

Altogether, 17 interviews were held with informants. Of which three were with government officials, three were with NGO officials, three were with local residents, three were with academics, two were with religious clergy, two were with social activists, one was with a journalist and one was with a minor employee. The informants, who belonged to different social, religious and educational backgrounds, depicted different opinions and standpoints on the issues concerning the problem and research question of this study. Except one government official, one social activist and one NGO official (who are females), all informants interviewed for this study are males.

It was quite important to classify women (respondents) according to their social background during the collection of data. In order to regulate how the armed conflict played a role in the lives of women regardless of their social and personal

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background, the respondent interviews were conducted among women from various social contexts. Therefore, the 36 respondents of this study were selected for the in-depth interviews on the following basis.

*(1) Social position such as widows, women whose husbands have disappeared and were abroad, and women involved in illegal activities:*

This criterion was considered for respondent selection for the reason that these women were either household heads or the powerful financial contributors of families. However, their socio-economic status differed on personal grounds. For example, an academic woman and a daily wager woman can have the same social position as a widow and the family position as a household head. Nevertheless, they have different socio-economic backgrounds due to their educations and professions. An academic woman can still be respectful in society even though she is a widow, which is not the same for the daily wager woman. Similarly, widows and women whose husbands were abroad bear household responsibility. However, their social status differed because widows lost their husbands and became 'inauspicious' while the other women still had husbands though their husbands were living abroad. Therefore, this criterion was selected in order to understand how the statuses of women were differentiated on the basis of their personal background, even if the armed conflict affected these women in the same way.

The criterion of women involved in illegal activities was used to estimate what social roles women with a criminal behavior background took up, and in what way the armed conflict has been the cause of their criminal behavior.

Women who involve themselves in illegal activities are mostly masqueraded and hidden in society, and therefore are hard to recognize. Even if they are recognized, these women will never be ready to reveal or admit anything. Accordingly, a researcher has to spend a longer period of time first, recognizing a woman involved in crime and second, getting acquainted with her in order to collect information. Unfortunately, I did not have much time to spend with this type of woman since I had to utilize the time I was allotted for fieldwork. Apart from meeting up with a few of these women, I also visited a prison to obtain a larger number of cases of women involved in illegal activities.

The reason why I also went for the profiles of these women filed with the police is important as well. The police documentation on these women only mentions why, how and under what accusations these women were in the prison. However, the interviews with the women reveal circumstances under which they became involved in criminal activities and were imprisoned. According to the police, a mother-of-four, for example, was imprisoned because she produced illegal liquor.

Nevertheless, the interview with that particular case says that she produced illegal liquor because she had to feed her children whose father was killed in armed conflict, which was not found in the police report. In total, thirty-six interviews were carried out with the respondents.

(2) *Membership of various organizations:* Women, being members of various organizations motivated women to take on different roles in society. For example, women members of the organization called the LTTE became warriors, women members of politically affiliated organizations became political activists and women members of widows' associations and NGOs became local peacebuilders. This criterion was chosen to understand the different roles of women through the organizations they were members of.

### **Focus Group Interviews**

“Focus groups arguably provide researchers with more surprises” write Nancy and Beverlyn (2004: 1) According to them, individuals who participate in focus group sessions are not restricted by one, two and three choices. Nevertheless, they are supportive and to some extent honest in providing information. Moreover, focus group interviews are effective in eliciting data on the cultural norms of a group and in generating broad overviews of issues of concern to the cultural groups or subgroups represented (Nancy and Beverlyn 2004).

This study has 12 focus group interviews. My field experience found individuals were more vocal in the group interviews rather than in the face-to-face interviews. For example, the issues of widowhood and remarriage were freely discussed by most of the women because they were in a group. The group consisted of the same category of people (widows) and the people in the group faced a common issue like widowhood. Women were relatively expressive and honest in the interview groups. The so-called socially vulnerable women, for example, were comfortable discussing the conflict-related social issues, such as women being breadwinners and women being the leaders of households.

As the discussion progresses, women felt more secure in expressing their opinions on women-related social issues. The opinions revealed from these women in discussion groups cannot be counted as the opinion of any individual woman. This might prevent individual women from ‘public’s blame,’ in case these women said something against the traditional way of living. For example one woman, who was a war widow, said in the group discussion that she would have remarried after she lost her husband at a young age if she was not born in a society

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like Jaffna. She said she would not have stated this fact if she had been interviewed personally.

The focus group interviews of this study were held only with the respondents—women who took up various roles in war from Jaffna District. Nevertheless, I was not able to conduct focus group interviews with LTTE women as I was not granted permission.

Overall, 12 focus group interviews were held. Of which, five were with women of all categories, two were with women whose husbands were dead and disappeared due to war, one each with unmarried women, peace activists, refugee women, disabled women, and women from the border villages. The point to be stated here is that some of the widowed, unmarried and refugee women were also political activists and peacebuilders.

### **Interviews by Telephone:**

I used telephone interviewing as well. I used this method when the respondents were not available in the field. Telephonic interviews were relatively shorter interviews, which took around 15 to 20 minutes.

I had only one telephonic interview and that was with the woman parliamentarian of Jaffna. Moreover, I used the telephone to revive data as well, while I was writing the thesis in Sweden. Since the war was going on in Sri Lanka from 2006 to 2009, I could not re-visit the area I researched in order to revive data. However, I could contact some of my respondents by telephone, so that I could develop and refresh the previously collected data.

### **Informal Talks**

I also used informal talks for collecting data. I used these methods to gather data when the respondent had a busy schedule and therefore could not allocate time for an in-depth interview.

I had 18 informal talks, nine with the informants and nine with the respondents. Among the 18 informal talks I had with the informants, three were with NGO officials (two females and one male), two with male religious workers and one each with a male activist, a female government official, a male village council leader and a male police officer. On the other hand, four informal talks with the respondents were held with four politically active women, two women whose husbands had disappeared, one LTTE woman, one ex-LTTE woman and one local resident. Informal talks with respondents were also conducted in situations where women were reluctant to give an in-depth interview which they said due to 'personal reasons.'



### **Interview Guide, Recording Equipment and Interview Duration**

As said earlier, I used a semi-structured interview guide which had sequence of themes such as the experience of Tamil women in the armed conflict, the roles they took up during the armed conflict, the challenges they faced during their role-taking, the changes in their social status and their contribution to women's empowerment and to the transformation of the society. The context for the interview was first introduced with a briefing. The purpose of the interviews and the use of tape recorder were also revealed to the interviewees.

Though my interviews had sequence of themes, the interview guide was quite open to additional questions. The interview guide was set off to change the questions as well, in order to follow up the answers given by the interviewees. My interview questions were therefore brief and simple so that the interviewees knew what I was asking about and why I was asking such things.

The interviews entailed both open-ended as well as close-ended questions. For example, in a respondent's interview, the close-ended question like "Would you like to remarry?" was asked especially to a widow with the open-ended questions like "If not, why you are not inspired to remarry?" and "If yes, why you are not yet remarried or what is stopping you from remarrying." Due to the cultural and 'moral' reasons that widows are not encouraged to remarry in this society, the questions that seek the ideas from the widows themselves on that particular issue of 'remarriage' also gain importance in this study. These types of questions in the interviews, simply and briefly reveal the answer to what widows themselves think of their lives after the loss of their husbands and why they should oblige the conditions of society. Moreover, these open-ended and close-ended questions have, on many occasions, systematically led to the discussions of the issues that people usually avoid discussing, such as 'widow's remarriage.'

In brief, my overarching guiding research interviews had introductory questions, thematic questions, follow-up questions, direct questions and indirect questions. For example, introductory questions, such as 'Can you tell me about your experience of war?' were asked in order to introduce the topic. To bring out a particular theme, thematic questions, like 'What was important for you in life during war?' were asked to the interviewee. Depending on the answers given by the interviewee, the follow-up question was asked. For instance, when the interviewee answered 'peace was important for me in the life during war' to the question asked before, the follow-up question then was 'Did you take any initiatives to build peace?' Moreover, direct questions, in the interview guide, were used to introduce a topic and dimensions. 'Would you like to become a peacebuilder?' was a direct question, but depending on the 'yes' or 'no' answer of

the interviewee, the topic and the dimension of local peacebuilding would be brought up. Indirect questions used in the interview guide were asked to learn the attitudes of others on issues, such as ‘Do you think society would support you in your peacebuilding efforts?’

I used tape recorders to record my interviews with the consent of the interviewees. Nevertheless, when I was prohibited from recording, for instance in prison, I took notes instead. I first translated all the recorded interviews from Tamil to English and transcribed them word for word. On an average, I conducted one to three interviews a week with the duration of one to two hours for each interview.

However, the interviews with women prisoners offered me a different experience. I had a very restricted number of visits to prisons to meet these women. I was not granted permission to conduct any focus group interviews or long interviews with the women living in the cells. And so, I had to employ the given opportunity by meeting and talking to those prisoners. Therefore, only 30- to 40-minute interview were made with each due to the constraints of visiting hours and the inadequacy over the number of visits. As I was restricted to four prison visits at one hour each, I only could make interviews into parts. In order to gather reliable information from the prisoners as well as to make them familiar with me, I had to talk to all the prisoners I had chosen for the interviews on every visit. Thus, I spent 10 to 15 minutes with each prisoner on each visit. I had four visits to prisons and altogether I had 30 to 40 minutes of interview time with each prisoner.

### 3.3.2 Observation

Observation was used in this study in order to understand the contexts of the researched areas, especially the sample villages. As said by Hoepfl (1997) and Horton et al. (2004), observational data are mainly used for the purpose of description of settings, activities, people, and the meanings of what is observed from the perspective of the participants. The observation of this study in fact led to deeper understanding by providing knowledge of the context: the family and social events, gender relations within the family and in the community, and the social issues created by the armed conflict. Simultaneously, my observation in the field concentrated on the roles of women both in the households and in the community, their relationship with men and with others in society and the reaction of society towards the changing roles of ‘traditional’ Tamil women in the district of Jaffna.

Observation may enable the researcher to see things that participants themselves are not aware of, or that they are unwilling to discuss (Marczyk, G. et al. 2005). However, I also faced difficulties in using this method. In observations,

people sometimes know that the researcher is watching them. I sometimes felt that there may be a risk in using this research method as well, if people from the field were reacting to me. My concern during the fieldwork was that people may change their actions rather than showing you what they are really like. This is not really bad however, because the contrived behavior may reveal aspects of social desirability; how they feel about sharing their feeling in front of others or in a private relationship. As my fieldwork was long-term, lasting almost two years, I found my observational study significant because of the reasons that even the most contrived behavior is difficult to maintain over time and long-term observational fieldwork will often catch a glimpse of the natural behavior (Montgomery and Duck 1991).

There are several observation strategies available. In some cases, it may be possible and desirable for the researcher to watch from outside without being observed. Another option is to maintain a passive presence without interacting with participants. A third strategy is to engage in limited interaction, intervening only when further clarification of actions is needed. Or the researcher may act as a full participant in the situation, with either a hidden or known identity (Bernard 2000, Horton et al. 2004, Marczyk et al. 2005). I used all these strategies depending on the situation. Besides being a researcher watching from outside, I used participant observation in some of my sample villages. I stayed for some days in those villages, particularly the villages that have social issues like domestic violence and illegal liquor production. At times, I participated in some of their cultural and social events, such as puberty ceremonies for girls, kindergarten sports meetings, etc. I talked to people at all levels; young and old, men and women, married and unmarried, and employed and unemployed. I also engaged in limited interaction as well. I had correspondence with the parents of disappeared sons/daughters; wives of missing, unemployed and abroad-living husbands; widows and community center leaders; refugee women and others. Also, I had to use my passive presence without interacting with participants with the LTTEers. Apart from the interviews I conducted with some of the warriors, I intended to notice how warriors live their lives. I visited three women's rebel bases in order to interview women cadres. I observed living conditions of the cadres while interviewing them; in addition I lived in an area where many rebel camps were located. Moreover, I visited the courts, banks, law college, military schools and orphanages run by the LTTE.

## 3.4 Analyzing Data

I began my analysis after the first few interviews. My initial interviews have been helpful to determine whether the research question is still relevant, to assess whether interviews answer my research question, and to plan future interviews based on the early interviews.

As the first step of data analysis, I wrote down the important realizations that I had during the interview and summarized the themes that I had noticed in the interviews.

I then coded all the interviews into categories which resulted into finding out how Tamil women of Sri Lanka understand the different roles they took up during the armed conflict.

At the first level of coding, I was looking for the background information about the researched area: the Tamil culture, the Tamil society, how women are placed in the society and the changes that occurred in the lives of women during the armed conflict. Thereafter, I categorized how Tamil women see themselves in relation to the context of armed conflict and after the armed conflict ceased in 2002. This analysis on the perceptions of Tamil women about themselves in conflict further leads towards the analysis of how women understand the influence of the armed conflict on gender roles and relations in Tamil society.

## 3.5 Defining the Terms

‘Social transformation’ and ‘ceasefire agreement time,’ ‘political activists’ and ‘peacebuilders’ are among the frequently used terms in this study. The term social transformation is especially emphasized in this study as the study explores women’s narratives on how their roles played a key part in transforming the society. Ceasefire agreement time, on the other hand, refers the temporal period of this study, while political activists and peacebuilders are identified as the roles adopted by women in conflict time. Nevertheless, these terms are needed to be defined in order to provide an understanding of the contexts that involve these terms.

### **Social Transformation**

Social transformation is an academically used term which is different in vocabulary from everyday spoken Tamil. When I explained the context of social transformation through different phrases of words, people I interviewed began to give their own words and phrases to describe and to express the concept of social

transformation. The term social transformation is defined as the ‘reconstruction of society’ in the local Tamil context. Even though I used the academic term ‘social transformation’ in this study in order to communicate with the other academic literature, the empirical chapters and the interview quotes of the respondents carry the term ‘reconstruction of society,’ which technically refers to the term ‘social transformation,’

### **Ceasefire Agreement Time**

The period of this study is the official period of the latest ceasefire agreement, which is from 2002 February to 2008 January. However, the war returned in the latter part of 2005 and went on as a final and full-scale war from mid-2006 to mid-2009. The ceasefire agreement on the other hand was officially withdrawn by the government of Sri Lanka in January 2008, which means the war was going on while the ceasefire agreement was ‘alive’ and on paper. Furthermore, the fieldwork for this study was done from June 2004 to January 2006. Therefore, the data of this study reflect the time from June 2004 to January 2006,<sup>8</sup> though the study considers the official ceasefire agreement time as its temporal period.

In the context of Jaffna, the ceasefire agreement was described as the post-war time. The ceasefire agreement in the context of Sri Lanka is indeed comparable to the time of after the war, because the war had been completely stopped for the first time in the protracted civil war. Even though the agreement was short-lived, within that span of time, the country was peaceful and there were no killings, no abductions and no bombing and shelling. The A9 route that connects Jaffna to Colombo and other places of the country was opened after nearly two decades. The economic sanctions which were imposed on Jaffna for more than a decade had come to an end. The district of Jaffna which was gripped by 16 hours of curfew every day, had been lifted and people took the liberty to move freely everywhere. The state of emergency was lifted, resettlement of internally displaced people took place to some extent, international donor money was spent of reconstructing the infrastructure damaged by the war and the international NGOs started to establish and expand their functions in Jaffna and as well in Sri Lanka. People from the south of Sri Lanka started touring to the north and vice versa, which created an interactive atmosphere across the ethnic divides. Once isolated, Jaffna became the center of tourist attraction. Above all, the ban on the LTTE was lifted by the government of Sri Lanka. In this context, the ceasefire agreement secured some

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8 In sum, the study covers one and half years, out of three and half years of the ‘proper’ ceasefire agreement.

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peace in Sri Lanka, even though peace was not officially in place.<sup>9</sup> For these reasons, this study, as its respondents claim, considers the latest ceasefire agreement time of Sri Lanka as post-war time.

### **Political Activists and Peacebuilders**

Another term used in this study to be defined is the term of ‘political activist.’ Political activists in the temporal context of this study refers to women involved in informal and local political activities. They are not politicians or parliamentarians (except for one) and they do not officially belong to a national political party and they are not even recognized as formal politicians. These women in fact support the policies of a political party called Tamil National Alliance (TNA) with the intention of promoting Tamil nationalism, which is the agenda of TNA as well. However, these women mostly carry out the political agenda of the Tamil woman politician cum parliamentarian who was attached to TNA. These women political activists function as groups, have their own principles and goals and fight to achieving those goals. These activists may become politicians and parliamentarians in the future.

I also want to clarify the difference between the terms peacebuilders and political activists used in this study. In the context of this study, peacebuilders and political activists refer to two different and separate groups. They both work to reach different goals. For example, the peacebuilders aim to initiate peace, whereas political activists aim to promote Tamil nationalism and to voice and demonstrate against the discrimination meted out on Tamils in the country and on women in Tamil society. Political activists engage in women-related projects in Jaffna, whereas peacebuilders engage in peacebuilding through reconciliation. Peacebuilders extend their support to widows’ upliftment, but only at a group level in that they support the war widows who are peacebuilders. Women peacebuilders work for peace both at local and national levels, whereas women political activists engage in political and social activities, mostly within the district.

## 3.6 Field Experience

According to Sharoni (1999), in order to understand the complexities when working on gender and conflict in particular community, one must be occupied with a context-specific approach and work closely with people on the ground. However, I approached the field experience quite differently. Being an indigenous

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<sup>9</sup> This peaceful situation prevailed in Jaffna from Feb 2002 to mid-2005. After that the war was slowly returning and turned into full-scale war in mid-2006.

researcher from Jaffna—both Tamil and a woman, and being already known to the context of the community—I was forced to challenge some practical issues. This section of the chapter reveals the field experiences that I had during the aftermath of my field survey in Jaffna and in Kilinochchi.

### 3. 6.1 Researching under a Threatening Political Context

I was engaged with my fieldwork between the years 2004 to 2006, and the latter part of the year 2005 was crucial, as the armed conflict in Sri Lanka broke out ‘unofficially.’<sup>10</sup> My fieldwork therefore was done in a context where the armed conflict was ‘returning.’

During the last phase of my data collection, the security situation of Jaffna peninsula changed dramatically. Owing to the weak implementation of the signed Memorandum of Understanding between the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE, along with the declaration of the state of emergency law,<sup>11</sup> led to an ‘undeclared’ war in Jaffna and other parts of north and the east of the country (Uthayan Dec. 4: 2005). In substitution of the security forces killed in claymore and grenade attacks, many Tamil civilians were arrested, beaten up and even killed by the military and the paramilitary groups. A self-imposed curfew, which gripped the peninsula, conceptualized the uncertainty of day-to-day schedule in the city. This tight security situation and the implementation of the state of emergency law hence disrupted my work in the field.

Apart from the reluctance of the community in responding to the field questions under such militarized circumstances, my own security, due to being a local resident, was under threat as I carried out the fieldwork. Facing this kind of situation, I would say, constituted a restriction for collecting the data during the process of my study. Still, the process went well and the respondents were cooperative. The only alternative phenomenon for which I needed to expand my data was to spend more time in the trust building process with my respondents.

### 3.6.2 Building Trust

It is necessary to maintain confidentiality of the respondents when doing research (Bernard 2002) and especially in the research allied to gender and women’s issues. In societies like Jaffna, particular issues like women’s marriage and sexual life are not supposed to be disclosed in public. Therefore, anonymity of the respondents

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10 The truce between the government and the LTTE was formally broken in January 2008.

11 The declaration of the state of emergency law was brought back by the government after the assassination of the foreign minister in 2005, which severely affected the mobility of Tamil people in Sri Lanka.

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had to be maintained throughout the research. In addition, building trust among the field respondents seemed to have been another big task for this research.

Most of the interviewed women of Jaffna said they were facing severe restrictions in every aspect of society. The system of dowry determined the family life of women. A few women said that they remain unmarried due to the dowry custom. Moreover, the observation on virginity/chastity or *karpu* was still dominant in society. As many women respondents of Jaffna said, social observations on their sexuality prevented them from going outside the household and being outstanding at all level of social activities. Therefore, the political violence and the subjugation of the society combined together made women's situation very sensitive and fragile.

For these reasons, women interviewees of Jaffna said they keep silent on many issues related to their personal lives. Many cases of rape and sexual violence against women during the conflict have not been reported due to these cultural reasons.

Under these circumstances, being in the field as a native researcher is another limitation I was confronted with. Many people are very open with foreigners bearing the disclosure of their private matters in mind. At the same time, they do not welcome inhabitants to ask them their stories. I therefore needed to spend more time on building trust with the people. Building trust was not easy though and it took a very long time for me to make myself acquainted with the villagers—especially with the women who are widowed, separated from their husbands, whose husbands had disappeared and who were or had been sexually harassed.

I was in need of developing a reputation in order to build a relationship with my respondents and the villagers. Therefore, I had to live with them in the villages to show commitment to the community before starting the process of data collection. Living in the villages also helped me find the right individuals to interview. Often, it was important for me to have someone from the community vouch for my presence in the village. In that regard, some of my informants—such as a female lawyer, a male NGO official who worked for the development of these villages, and a human rights activist who was very familiar with the people of my research area—helped me build web of relationships with the villagers as well as with the respondents.

Prostitution in Jaffna is another issue of concern in the thesis. No woman would like to be labeled 'bad' and a woman is therefore hesitant to come forward to divulge anything when she knows that she will be considered a 'bad woman' for doing so. I was also bit cautious so as not to get a 'bad name' myself, due to my special connections with these concerns. My field tactic on this particular issue



was unconventional. To meet these women, I allocated the ‘unusual’ times when the general public relaxes in their homes after their daily activities. I would meet them early in the morning around five and in the evening after seven when the populace finishes off their daily work and goes to rest.

### 3.6.3 Interviewing the LTTE Women

Interviewing the LTTE women was rather challenging, especially in the context when the war was returning. Firstly, reaching out these women was the top-most challenge, apart from choosing the top-level LTTE women as respondents of this study. This was somehow sorted out after making great effort through the Association for International Students of Tamil Eelam.

Secondly, the LTTE women I interviewed all come from Jaffna. However, they refused to reveal me which area or village of Jaffna District they were originally from. I was told that revealing an LTTE cadre’s personal details to anybody out of the movement was against their rule. I, therefore, did not get the liberty to choose LTTE women who come from the sample villages of my study.

Thirdly, it was rather difficult to get the facts from the LTTE regarding their human rights violations. In fact, I was aware of this methodological concern of having ‘free’ and ‘fair’ interviews with these women on certain issues. For example, I raised the issue of enforced recruitment of women to the movement, which has constantly been highlighted by the International Human Rights Organizations. The LTTE women were in denial. They said that the allegations of enforced recruitment were baseless caused by misperceptions. The LTTE women continued to say that many women joined the fight right after the LTTE’s propaganda meetings on the same day and at the same spot, which was perceived as enforced recruitment by some organizations. Though the LTTE women’s responses were not convincing enough to override the reports of the international human rights organizations that were presented with concrete evidence, the truth is, it was practically impossible for anyone, including me, to get the facts right from the LTTE on the issues related to their human rights violations. Therefore, the interviews carried out with the LTTE women were not as ordinary as the interviews done with the other women.

### 3.6.4 Antagonism of People over Researchers

The foremost thing I have to mention here is the enmity of people towards researchers. It appears that the war-affected people had antipathy not only towards researchers but also towards other visitors and journalists. Many people of Jaffna, as I noticed, hold antagonism against reporters and researchers, who they describe

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as people who often come and go, asking questions, writing stories about their sufferings and earning money and fame. Many people I talked to also indicated that the researchers who often visited them never had any intention of helping the people at war. Basically, their writings about people in armed conflict in Sri Lanka had done nothing since the situation in the ground stayed the same: unimproved and undeveloped.

Sukumar, president of Sabapathipillai Refugee Camp<sup>12</sup> in a field interview said:

They do not exhibit any keenness in identifying themselves with the feelings and emotions of victims caused by the great devastation. People are, in fact, tired of responding to them, thinking that the researchers virtually have nothing to show except promoting their actual achievement. (Interview 44, April 1, 2005)

The Sabapathipillai refugee camp consisted of the people who were forcefully evacuated from their homes which were located in the so-called higher security zones. These people have spent fifteen years of their lives in this refugee camp. They have not been provided good rehabilitation services. Although it was mentioned in the ceasefire agreement that the evacuated and displaced people are to be settled in their own homelands, these refugees grieved that they still had to lead a camp life.

Under this situation, carrying out the survey was challenging for me. Moreover, the importance given to tsunami victims during that time made the people affected by armed conflict isolated from the rehabilitation and reconstruction programs. In this regard, people internally displaced by war, were aggrieved and frustrated over their status of 'being cornered' by the local and international non-governmental organizations.

However, I had my own ways of dealing with them. Since I am a native Tamil-speaker, they were quite liberal in bursting out all their frustration on me. I patiently listened to them, showing them that whatever they say is acceptable. At the same time, I kept my conversation neutral, explaining to them that tsunami victims are also victims of a natural disaster and that they should also be taken care of. Nevertheless, I accept the reality of who they were and what they were

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<sup>12</sup> The Sabapathipillai Refugee camp is a refugee camp consisting of the people of the villages occupied the military for decades. This includes the villagers from my sample villages Evinai and Mylankaadu. Though Evinai and Myalnkaadu are border villages, (situated between higher security or military occupied zones and public living areas); people of the villages were allowed to resettle in their respective villages, yet many were hesitant to do so for security reasons. Thus, quite a large number of people from my sample villages Evinai and Mylankaadu were living in this refugee camp run by UNICEF, when the fieldwork was carried out.

going through. Through this approach, I could ease out of the gap between the people and myself, which supported me in further data collection.

## 3.7 Reviving Data

One more major issue of this study has been reviving the collected data. I was supposed to go back to the field to re-establish my data during the time of writing this in Sweden. Unfortunately, the political situation back in the field was very discouraging. Apart from personal security concerns, the main obstruction in this regard was that the field area had been completely cut off from the other parts of the Islands from August 2006 to 2010. The means of transportation to enter the region were very much restricted due to the full-scale armed conflict between the parties. In that situation, it was impossible for me to visit the field area to refresh the collected data. However, during that time I was able to conduct some data assessment through telephone communication with some of the people—mainly with my respondents.

## 3.8 Delimitations

### 3.8.1 Temporal Delimitations (the 2002–2008 ceasefire period)

I carried out my fieldwork for more than a year in Jaffna, which was from mid-2004 to early-2006. The war was ‘returning’ at the end of my fieldwork, though the peace agreement still existed on paper. Even though, the full-scale war was resumed in mid-2006, the ceasefire agreement was officially withdrawn in early-2008 by the government of Sri Lanka. Therefore, this study considers the official ceasefire agreement period, which is from 2002–2008 as its temporal period.

Even though the research covers the period of 2002–2008 ceasefire agreement in Sri Lanka, the interviews and other data describe the events of armed conflict as well. This signifies that the field data contain the revelations of the respondents and the informants on the events of armed conflict occurred previously or right before the ceasefire agreement, whereas the fieldwork was done during the ceasefire agreement time.

I use the term ‘ceasefire agreement period’ in this study as this term is more relevant within the context of Sri Lanka, due to the fact that conflict and armed conflict had existed between warring parties even though the agreement was in

effect on paper.<sup>13</sup> Simultaneously, the four years between the years 2002 and 2006 was almost like an ‘after-war’ period. The armed conflict is now over though the peace is yet to prevail. Nevertheless, the period of 2002 ceasefire agreement time is quite vital in the history of the Sri Lanka civil armed conflict, which is between the years of 2002–2008. When the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE entered into the ceasefire agreement in 2002, they put an immediate stop to 20 years of fighting in which tens of thousands of people lost their lives (Tamil Guardian: Jan. 9, 2008). Silencing the guns stopped the bloodshed and significantly alleviated human suffering. However, the situation gradually started to change in the latter part of 2005, which put an end to the peaceful lives of the people who had suffered throughout the years due to the conflict. Although the Norwegian-facilitated ceasefire agreement between the parties prevailed on paper, the full-scale armed conflict proceeded in Sri Lanka, which alone had taken additional tens of thousands of lives in these years, and led to an increased number of disappearances, abductions and other human rights violations (Report of Human Rights Watch: March 2008 [20: 2]). Finally, the cessation of hostilities reached an official end with the official withdrawal of the government of Sri Lanka from the agreement in January 2008 (TamilNet: Jan. 14, 2008). And the armed conflict had ended in May 2009 with the elimination of the LTTE. Though the decades of civil war had come to their end game, it has left a deep scar in the minds of Tamils who had lost almost everything (Dickson 2009). The current stage of the conflict of Sri Lanka is therefore at a crossroads with no peace, no armed conflict and no political solution to the ethnic struggle.

### 3.9 Conclusions

In this chapter, I described the case-study research design that was chosen to use in this study. Apart from defining the case study method, I also described why I have chosen to use the case-study method as my research design. As I explained at the beginning of this chapter, I believe that case-study method provides detailed information about a case in narrative form, and thus was chosen as a research design.

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<sup>13</sup> The latest broken peace process had been on the debate after the change of SL Government in November 2005. The Government claimed that the peace process was contrary to the constitution and the law of the state whereas the LTTE wanted a constructive implementation of the peace process signed in Feb. 2002. Since the change of the government from Nov 2005, the armed conflict erupted between the parties which took thousands of lives and damaged properties. However, the four year period during 2002 to 2005 seemed to be ‘no war’, because the full-scale military operations had started in mid-2006. The ceasefire agreement was officially withdrawn in January 2008.

I then described the field area chosen for this study. As explained before, I chose Jaffna district as my field area. As I explained at length in the chapter, Jaffna has been the theatre of the conflict since 1983. Though Jaffna has been the larger field area of this study, I chose few smaller field areas as sample villages in order to explore the impacts of war on women in diverse ways. These sample villages belong to Valigamam division of Jaffna District.

Then I elaborated the data collection methods I used, which includes interview method and observation. This is followed by how the collected data were analyzed. I also explained the terms that have specific connotations in the context of this study. Thereafter, I described the experience I had in the field as a researcher, which is followed by explaining the issues related to reviving the data and the delimitation of the study.



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## Women, War and Tamil Society

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The exploration of Tamil women's understanding and experience of the different roles they assumed during the armed conflict and the ceasefire agreement in Sri Lanka, requires an understanding of the general context of the Jaffna Tamil society, including its geography, political history, community issues, culture and women's status in it. Accordingly, this chapter aims at presenting the Jaffna context in relation to this study's research problem. This is done in two ways: literature review and interviews/informal talks with informants.

The chapter begins with an overview of Jaffna's geography. Additionally, this chapter proceeds with an overview of the political history of Jaffna including the armed conflict. As the sample villages of this study are located in the district of Jaffna and therefore represent Jaffna, this chapter elaborates the impacts of war in the district and women's roles during the war as well. This chapter further discusses gender-related issues of Jaffna society: issues like marriage and family life, the system of dowry, virginity and chastity of women, community isolation of widows and husbandless women, and domestic violence against women. Finally, the chapter's concluding remarks are provided.

### 4.1 Jaffna

Jaffna (*Yaazhpanam* in Tamil) is the capital city of the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, and is one of the largest cities in Sri Lanka (Abeyasinghe 2005). Jaffna District has a Tamil-speaking majority. It has a high literacy rate of 93.4 percent and a linguistically homogeneous population (Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka 2001). Jaffna is the cultural center of the Tamils of Sri Lanka and was the second largest metropolitan area in the country prior to the civil war. Because of the civil war, the Tamil districts of Sri Lanka were only partly enumerated in the 2001 Sri Lanka census, when Jaffna was estimated to have a population of 128,000

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(Carpenter 2008). Valikaaman division,<sup>14</sup> which includes Jaffna city, was the most Tamil-populated division of Jaffna in the island of Sri Lanka with more than 700 persons living per square kilometer (Sarvananthan 2007). However, the population has since been reduced due to the armed conflict (Sarvananthan 2007). Geographically, Jaffna is a peninsula. Both the topography of the peninsula and the limestone soil and brackish water are features that differentiate it from the mainland. Jaffna was a highly populated and an industrious place with cement production and salt production prior to the civil war.

From the thirteenth century, Jaffna was the main center of the Tamil kingdom in Northern Ceylon/Sri Lanka.<sup>15</sup> Nallur, a suburb of Jaffna, was the capital of the Jaffna kingdom which lasted over four centuries. While most of the island's population was Sinhalese and Buddhist, the Jaffna kingdom was Tamil and Hindu (Carpenter 2008). Most Tamils in Jaffna are Hindus and amount to over 83 percent of the Jaffna population. Christians are 16 percent, including Roman Catholics, Protestant Christians and the other Christian congregations (Department of Census and Statistics 2001). Jaffna also consists of people called Moors, who are Muslim. Around 70,000 Tamil-speaking Muslims were expelled by the LTTE in 1990. However, quite a number of expelled Muslims returned after the ceasefire agreement in 2002. The Muslim population in Jaffna, according to the latest census and statistics report, is 0.5 percent (Department of Census and Statistics 2012). Hinduism has been and still is the dominant religion among the Jaffna Tamils. Since Jaffna Tamils worship Lord Shiva, Arumuga Navalar describes their culture as Saiva, or Shivite culture.<sup>16</sup> Even though people of Jaffna follow various religions, most of the people follow Hindu beliefs, such as astrology, auspicious days and times, etc.<sup>17</sup>

Apart from the religion, the overriding institution among the social organizations of the people of Jaffna has been, and to a limited extent still is, the system of caste. Inequalities among castes are considered by those of Hindu faith to be part of the divinely ordained natural order (Sivathamby 1995, David 1991). Therefore, the caste structure in Tamil society is seen as being vital to hierarchy (Suseendrarajah 1970, Sivathamby 1995, Nithyanandam 1987). Despite the fact that the caste system in Jaffna exhibits some common features of the caste

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14 Valikaaman is one of the administrative divisions of Jaffna District where the sample villagers are located.

15 Sri Lanka was called 'Ceylon' during the British colonial period.

16 Arumuga Navalar was a well-known Tamil scholar who translated the Holy Bible into Tamil.

17 There is a long-established and widespread belief in astrology in Jaffna. It is commonly used for daily life, particularly in matters concerning marriage, careers and other family-related events. People also believe that activities started on an auspicious day in an auspicious time would bring success, happiness and good luck.



structure of South Indian Tamils, it has many characteristic features of its own. The dominant caste among Sri Lankan Tamils is the Vellalas/*Vellalar* who own land and are agriculturists by occupation. Unlike in Tamil Nadu and in other parts of South India, Brahmins do not exercise social control in Sri Lankan Tamil societies. Though they are considered to be one of the highest castes, Brahmins/*Piramanar* do not have the necessary power and authority like Vellalas/*Vellalar* in Jaffna (Sivathamby 1995). The caste system also describes many key features of Tamil social and economic life, as it assigns people to occupations and regulates marriages. Brahmins are mostly the employees at temples with well-defined duties and are paid by Vellalas/*Vellalar* (David 1973). In addition, other castes like *Vellalar*, *Karayar*, *Nattuvar*, *Nalavar*, *Pallar*, *Vannaar* and *Ambattar* are mostly occupationally based (Sivathamby 1995). Apart from *Vellalar*, who are agriculturists and own land, *Karayar* do fishing and *Nattuvar* do traditional music, whereas *Nalavar*, *Pallar*, *Vannar* and *Ambattar* are defined to be toddy trappers, scavengers, washermen and barbers.

The economy of the area of Jaffna is largely dependent on agriculture, fisheries and remittances from abroad (Save the Children Fund 2007: 17). Tertiary activities are significant in Jaffna and in the district towns. The fisheries sector prior to armed conflict had accounted for more than 25 percent of the national catch. This trend has declined over the years due to the civil war, displacement of fishermen, lack of investment and several restrictions on fishing enforced by the security services (Save the Children Fund 2007).

Jaffna was under colonial rule when Ceylon/Sri Lanka was a European colony. The Portuguese and the Dutch who took over Jaffna in 1658 administered Jaffna as a separate unit known as the Jaffna Commandary. The Portuguese and Dutch era was a time of religious change as people converted from Hinduism to Christianity, and European education and healthcare were introduced in the city. Nevertheless, it was the British who handed out the system of separate administrations and transitioned all of the then-Ceylon into a single, integrated administration in 1832. This was how the independent entity of Jaffna became part of a united Ceylon (Thambiah 1973, Sivathamby 1988).

Under British colonial rule, Jaffna developed as a commercial port and cultural center for northern Ceylon/Sri Lanka. British missionaries built almost all the schools that eventually played roles in the high literacy achievement of Jaffna's residents. Under British rule, Jaffna enjoyed a period of rapid growth and prosperity, as the British built the major roads and railway lines connecting the city with Colombo, Kandy and the rest of the country. The prosperity of the city's

citizens enabled them to endorse the building of temples and schools, and the library and museum (Alden 1996, De Silva 1997).

Events of the post-independence period fostered an armed conflict in Sri Lanka. After decades of non-violent struggle to regain lost rights, the Tamil people demanded a separate state and also started turning towards armed struggle. Jaffna in this context became a major base for the LTTE and in 1985, Sri Lankan forces lost control of Jaffna until 1995 (Carpenter 2007).

The tsunami that occurred in December 2004 destroyed what the war had left behind. The north coast of the peninsula was totally destroyed by the waves that resulted in more deaths, property loss and internal displacements. The people of the northern coastal areas have aggrieved their double sufferings caused by both the war and the tsunami. When the people were recovering from the bitter experiences of war during the ceasefire agreement time, the tidal waves of 2004 brought further major disasters to their lives. As the report of the UNDP states, “Sadly, tsunami victims from this district have already been the victims of an ethnic war that has disrupted their lives to a level beyond imagination. While the war had taken its toll on the people over a period of nearly two decades, the ravages brought on by the tsunami had been instantaneous” (The Webhamumba Report of UNDP: 2006: 57).

## 4.2 The Armed Conflict

The root of the conflict in Sri Lanka exists in the British colonial rule when the country was known as Ceylon (Wilson 2000). There was initially little tension among the two largest ethnic groups of Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Under the British rule, English was the official language of the island. Education in the English language was the preserve of the subaltern elite. A disproportionate number of English-language schools were located in the mostly Tamil-speaking north. Thus, the English-speaking Tamils held a higher percentage of coveted civil service jobs, which required English fluency (Wilson 2000). This tension started to grow further as Tamils were appointed as the representatives of Sinhalese in national legislative council by the colonial British government (Sabaratnam 2005). Most Sinhalese harbored the view that the Tamils had enjoyed a privileged position under the British (Sabaratnam 2005).

The independence of Sri Lanka from the British gave the rule to the Sinhalese majority in 1948, from which Sinhalese started to enjoy civil rights, while Tamils felt they were losing their rights (Sabaratnam 2005, Wilson 2000). The ethnic struggle between Tamils and the Sinhalese, according to most of scholars,

escalated with the language policy of the government passed in 1956. S.W.R.D. Banadaranayake, the then-Prime Minister of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and his government passed the Sinhala Only Act (De Silva and Wriggins 1989, Ghosh 1999, Wilson 2000, Sabaratnam 2005). The act replaced English as the official language with Sinhala, which failed to give official recognition to Tamil. As a result, the civil service-based selection, which had previously largely helped those speaking Tamil, became entirely Sinhalese, with thousands of Tamil civil servants forced to resign due to lack of fluency in Sinhala (Wilson 2000, Sabaratnam: 2005). This has primarily led to the confrontation between the two ethnic communities in Sri Lanka, which, in fact, later developed as an armed conflict in 1983. As armed confrontation developed in 1983, Jaffna became the theater of the conflict. Since then, Jaffna had started losing its population due to internal and international migration (Wilson 2000).

There have been many attempts to halt the armed conflict in peaceful ways (Crisis Group: Asia Report 2006). Many ceasefire accords were signed and all have failed. The latest ceasefire agreement was signed in 2002 between the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE with the facilitation of the Norwegian government. In February 2002, a pact on cessation of hostilities was signed between the Leader of the LTTE Pirabakaran and the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, Ranil Wickramasinghe, which could only last until 2008 (Deegalle 2006, Nadarajah and Vimalarajah 2008). The ceasefire was successful in ending most direct attacks by the LTTE or government forces on each other, at least until late-2005 (Nadarajah and Vimalarajah 2008). A multinational monitoring force, the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), was established, with some seventy personnel from Scandinavian countries based in offices around the northeast. It was tasked with recording violations of the ceasefire agreement (Crisis Group Asia Report 2012). However, the violence escalated right before and soon after the Rajapakse regime took over the government and the situation was initially illustrated as a 'low-intensity-war'<sup>18</sup> (Nadarajah and Vimalarajah 2008). In various ways, the ceasefire agreement was constantly broken by both parties during this period. The LTTE launched a wave of attacks on police and the army in the north and east. The government began brutal counterinsurgency efforts, while the government-backed Karuna faction (split-off of LTTE), now renamed Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Puligal (TMVP) continued guerrilla attacks on the LTTE in the east. After the failure of the Norwegian attempt to resume ceasefire talks in

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<sup>18</sup> In the situation in Sri Lanka of early-2006, the fighting between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam was termed as a 'low-intensity war' by Major General Ulf Henrikson, the head of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission.

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Geneva in February 2006, the government launched a military offensive in July, capturing strategic towns in the east. The ceasefire agreement, nevertheless, was officially withdrawn by the government of Sri Lanka in January 2008 and the war ended in May 2009 with the total military defeat of the LTTE (Deegalle 2006, Nadarajah and Vimalarajah 2008).

In the context of Sri Lanka, during the 2002–2008 ceasefire agreement and the time prior to it, the two main actors of the conflict were the government of Sri Lanka and the rebel group called the LTTE (Gopinath and Sewak 2003, Deegalle 2006, Nadarajah and Vimalarajah 2008). The political views of these two actors differed on the basis of ethnicity, religion and language and homeland concept. For the government, the sovereignty of Sri Lanka rests mainly on language and religion from which ethnicity logically derives (Time lines: Conflict of Sri Lanka 2000). The LTTE, on the other hand, forwarded their ‘homeland’ dominion stating that the north and east parts of Sri Lanka are the traditional homeland of Tamils (Balasingham: 2003). In refuting the homeland concept, the government emphasizes the unitary state view claiming that everywhere in Sri Lanka is the land of majority Sinhalese. These contrasting worldviews of the languages (Tamil and Sinhala), religions (Hinduism and Buddhism) and ‘land’ theory (traditional homeland of Tamils and Sinhala Buddhist nation of Sinhalese) had hence been used to mobilize the communities against each other and to foster conflict escalation in Sri Lanka (Gopinath and Sewak 2003).

In between these two parities, other groups—like the Sinhala and Tamil diasporas, Sinhala and Tamil media, religious groups (especially Buddhist monks) and the victimized civil population—were also taking on the ‘actor’ role in the conflict (Gopinath and Sewak 2003, Satyendra 2006). The diasporas, especially the Tamil diaspora, while said to be promoting the armed conflict through funding the LTTE, was also said to have provided financial assistance to reconstruct the armed conflict-ravaged north and east of Sri Lanka (Satyendra 2006). Additionally, their role in peacebuilding was also prominent in the phase of negotiation in which they also took part (Nadarajah and Vimalarajah 2008). Along the same line, civil society in Sri Lanka had also taken a major role as actors in the conflict of Sri Lanka in two different ways: one by supporting the ‘liberation struggle’ and the ‘war on terrorism,’<sup>19</sup> and two by promoting peace activism by organizing campaigns against the armed conflict through performing arts, such as street dramas and dances and reconciliation exchanges (Orjuela 2007).

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<sup>19</sup> Most of Tamil people sympathized with the LTTE and their ‘liberation struggle,’ while the majority Sinhalese were on the side of the government’s ‘war on terrorism’ against the LTTE.

Muslims play a different role in the conflict between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils in Sri Lanka. When the war was between these two major ethnic groups of Sri Lanka, Muslims defined themselves as neither Sinhala nor Tamil. Although most Muslims are Tamil-speakers and mainly live in Tamil-speaking areas of the north and east of Sri Lanka, Muslims deny any shared identity with the Tamils, mainly due to their distrust on the LTTE (McGilvary and Raheem 2007). Muslims therefore took a stance—a coalition with the Sri Lankan (Sinhala) government—as a strategy that sought to protect Muslims in Sri Lanka. Muslims, in this context opted to side-step from ethno-nationalist involvements, but chose to focus on developing the Muslim community through their alliances with the dominant Sinhala political parties (McGilvary and Raheem 2007).

#### 4.2.1 The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, commonly known as the LTTE or the Tamil Tigers was a Tamil rebel group based in Northern Province of Sri Lanka. Founded in May 1976 by Velupillai Prabhakaran, it waged a campaign to create an independent state in the north and east of Sri Lanka for Tamil people. This campaign evolved into the Sri Lankan civil war, which ran from 1983 until 2009 when the LTTE was defeated by the Sri Lankan Military (Bandarage 2009).

The LTTE, concentrated operations predominantly in Sri Lanka with the goal of achieving a separate state for the majority Tamil regions located in north and east of Sri Lanka. Using conventional war, guerrilla tactics and suicide attacks, the Tamil Tigers' operations have targeted both military and political objectives since the early 1980s (Narayan Swamy 2010). The LTTE's suicide attacks have often targeted state leaders, higher level politicians, military forces and civilians (Deegale 2006, Bandarage 2009, Narayn Swamy 2010). The LTTE's suicides attacks in public places not only killed several civilians, but assassinated two state leaders as well: one was the President of Sri Lanka, Premadasa, and the other was the former Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi. This resulted in an international ban on the LTTE as a terrorist organization (Deegalle 2006, Bandarage 2009). The United States, the European Union, Canada and India all consider the LTTE a terrorist organization. The LTTE and its sympathizers however argue that LTTEers were freedom fighters (Balasingham 2003, Narayan Swamy 2010).

The LTTE began its campaign of attacking the military with the killing of 13 army soldiers in Jaffna in 1983. This incident led to the communal violence in Colombo, which resulted in the killing of thousands of Tamil civilians. This ambush, along with the subsequent rioting in Colombo, is generally considered the

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start of the Sri Lankan Civil War (Wilson 2000, Sabaratnam 2005, Deegalle 2006, Bandarage 2009).

The LTTE grew to become one of the world's well-known rebel groups (Subramaniam 1999, Jeyasekera 2007, Narayan Swamy 2010). Apart from a military unit that consisted of an elite fighting wing called the Charles Antony Regiment, the LTTE expanded its organization by creating a naval unit called 'Sea Tigers' in 1984. The LTTE's suicide squad, known as 'Black Tigers', was formed in 1987. Furthermore, the LTTE had its Air Wing, which was initiated in early-2000, Political Wing and a highly secretive intelligence group (Narayan Swamy 2010, Sabaratnam 2005).

Jaffna was the stronghold of the LTTE from 1985 to 1995. The group controlled most of the Jaffna peninsula for nearly a decade. When LTTE lost its control over Jaffna to the Sri Lankan military, Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu had become the northern territories of the movement. The LTTE ran a de facto state during the time of its rule in Jaffna. The LTTE's de facto government controlled schools, hospitals, police stations, courts and other municipal services (Sabaratnam 2005, Stokke 2011).

The LTTE has been accused of human rights violations (Amnesty International 2007, 2008). The LTTE was often accused for recruiting child soldiers, using human suicide bombers, and killing civilians, civil rights activists, politicians, political rivals and people who opposed them (Human Rights Watch 2006, Human Rights Watch 2011). The movement has also been accused by the United Nation's Human Rights Commission for using civilians as human shields during the military operations (UNHRC Reports 2009, 2010 2012). Nevertheless, with less than one-tenth the troop strength of Sri Lankan government forces, LTTE cadres fought the combined arms of the Sri Lankan military to a bloody stalemate. The LTTE developed its dominance and effectiveness through both consolidation of power within the Tamil community of Sri Lanka and the effective conventional and asymmetric warfighting (Jeyamaha 2004).

### 4.2.2 Women's Wing of the LTTE

Tamil women entered the armed struggle as combatants in 1983. However, they mostly took up supportive logistical role such as propaganda work, medical care, information collection, fund raising and recruitment. But it was in mid-1984 that woman cadres were militarily trained, and a well-organized women's guerrilla unit was established (Voice of Tigers Bulletin Feb 1990, Balasingham 1994). The recruitment of women to the LTTE combat units expanded during and after the

IPKF or Indo-Lanka accord period<sup>20</sup> The Women's Front of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which was later called as the Women's Wing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam was established as a unit within the group of LTTE in 1989 (Balasingham 2003). However, some of the researchers say that women's inclusion in the LTTE was clearly more for military operational needs than any drive to empower Tamil women (Jeyamaha 2004, Alison 2003, Coomaraswamy 1999).

While women have regularly shored-up war efforts in many parts of the world and have occasionally taken combat roles in various struggles, the Tigers are said to have raised women to a new status (Trawick 1990, Schalk 1994). The Women's Wing of the LTTE, also called the 'Birds of Freedom,' was integral to the LTTE and run by a separate but parallel administrative structure to that of the male fighters (Balasingham 2003, Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2008). The women lived in their own camps and trained to fight against Sri Lanka's military forces. The 'Birds of Freedom' started with a handful of women in 1986 but later became well-trained, well-equipped, and deadly [Balasingham 1994, Coomaraswamy 1999, Jeyamaha 2004]. The first few women fighters were trained in India with covert assistance from the Indian government in 1985 (Balasingham 1994). Like men in the LTTE, women went through extensive training in the use of weapons and explosives. They specialized in various combat and combat-support roles (Trawick 1990, Balasingham 1994, Jeyamaha 2004).

The LTTE's Women's Wing consisted of military units, political units and suicide units. Military units engaged in conventional battles, suicide units engaged in suicide attacks and political units engaged in political and social activities. The Women's Wing of the LTTE had two main military brigades, namely Malathy brigade and Sothiya brigade. Malathy brigade was named after the first woman Tiger, Malathy, who was killed during operations against the Indian Peace Keeping Force in 1987; while Sothiya brigade was named after Sothiya, commander of the first women's unit formed in 1989. She died of meningitis in 1990 (Balasingham 2003, Voice of Tigers Feb 1990).

Women Tigers of the LTTE participated in several armed confrontations, particularly in Jaffna. Significant among them were the attacks on the Jaffna telecom army camp, the commando raids on Mayiliyathani and Kankesanthurai camps, and the attacks on the Kurumbasiddy and Nellyyadi army camps (Balasingham 2003, Voice of Tigers Feb 1990). Balasingham (1994) says that the

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20 IPKF (Indian Peace Keeping Force) or Indo-Lanka period consists the years from 1897 to 1889. The Indo-Lanka accord was signed in 1987 by the then-president of Sri Lanka, the late J.R. Jeyawardene and the then-prime Minister of India, the late Rajiv Gandhi.

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LTTE women manned several check points and defense bunkers around Sri Lankan army camps in the north and east of Sri Lanka.

The LTTE women were often criticized for their suicide attacks. Of the 200 or so suicide bombings carried out by the LTTE, at least 60 are thought to have involved female attackers (Khan and McCarthy 2009). The first, and the most politically devastating suicide mission of a female LTTE suicide bomber, was in May 1991 in which the former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was targeted and killed. The Black Tigers, as the Tamil suicide bombers liked to be known, introduced suicide belts to make their task easier and female volunteers were said to have been enthusiastic about wearing them, with dozens putting their names forward for each mission (Khan and McCarthy 2009).

The armed cadres of the Women's Wing were also involved in the task of political work. They were part of the Norwegian-facilitated ceasefire agreement; they were given access to the negotiation table and therefore took part in Geneva talks on behalf of the LTTE. Moreover, these LTTE women were prominent members of the Sub-Committee for Gender Issues, a committee which was established to address gender issues in the latest ceasefire agreement of Sri Lanka (Samuel 2003, Sabaratnam 2005, Viso 2005).

Apart from achieving the national liberation which was the main goal of the Women's Wing of the LTTE, achieving woman liberation was also an important objective of LTTE women (Trawick 1990, Alison 2003, Jeyamaha 2004). The LTTE women believed that they achieved liberation from male dominancy to some extent by joining the fight. Therefore, the aim of these LTTE women was to make the women of Tamil society aware of the social restrictions they face. Hence, they organized campaigns against gender discrimination in society, implemented laws against the customs that discriminate against women, and encouraged women to be independent, to live alone and to be confident (Jeyamaha 2004, Alison 2003). The LTTE women encouraged civilian women to engage in self-employment (Balasingham 1994, Alison 2003, Jeyamaha 2004). The Women's Wing of the LTTE arranged various projects that especially helped women affected by the armed conflict. Miranda Alison, one of the researchers who interviewed LTTE women combatants, was told by an LTTE woman that women of the LTTE organize training programs in auto mechanics and small-scale businesses for women (Alison 2003: 50).

Women of the LTTE have equally contributed the LTTE's armed struggle with the government of Sri Lanka. The Women's Wing indeed contributed to the group's startling military success on the conventional battlefield and in suicide strikes. Nevertheless, the women of the LTTE were about more than just war and



women combatants. In fact, they made the LTTE's struggle a well-known one. Moreover, women helped strengthen the LTTE claim to be the sole representatives of the Tamil population of Sri Lanka. And in the intellectual debate about the role and status of women in Tamil society, female fighters made the LTTE central to the formation of ideas about future Tamil society with gender equality (Alison 2003, Jeyamaha 2004).

### 4.2.3 Tamil Women and Armed Conflict

The existing literature says Tamil women have highly been subjected to war and violence which made their positions volatile in society. While Somasundaram (2003) explains how 'widowhood' or the nature of being 'husbandless' and the compulsion of remaining silent over their husband's deaths and disappearances make women's situations extremely difficult to receive social support, Rajasingham-Senanayake (2001) affirms that women who are widowed and sexually harassed are particularly vulnerable to the "double complex of a stigmatized victim." "They had no say over when the war started, neither in the decision-making process, nor in the efforts to achieve reconciliation" writes Rajasingham-Senanayake, stating that "the roles of women were those of the recipients of the consequences and the outcome of the war" (2001: 32). Citing this situation as "double oppression", Trawick (1990) explains this dual nature of oppression as the result of both the government policies and the social rules. A similar situation is also explained to have been seen in many other societies where conflicts prevail. For example, the Mayan women in Guatemala who have been affected by a long-term conflict claim that "they are insecure in multiple ways as women, as members of an ethnic group and as members of socio-economic class who struggle for survival" (Stern: 1998: 03). The research on these women explains that Guatemalan women have lived in a situation of hardship in a war-torn society where they had to suffer, not only because they are women, but also because they are Mayan and poor. Like Mayan women who have been facing "triple oppression or discrimination" (Stern, 2001), Tamil women in Sri Lanka, both as Tamils and as women were described to have faced the "double complex of a stigmatized victimization" (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001) and "double oppression" (Trawick 1990).

In accordance to Abeysekera (1999), women as survivors of the conflicts are always burdened with risks and vulnerability in times of war. Abeyasekera (1999) further points out that the impact of war on women is determined by their ethnicity, because the ethnicity of a woman in conflict context decides over her survival of sexual assaults. Abeysekera (1999) reveals that Tamil women who are the ethnic

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minority in Sri Lanka have always been the majority of sufferers of the brutal armed conflict. Due to them being women of an ethnic minority, Abeysekera (1999) continues to say, Tamil women had to lose their family members, properties, homes and hometowns, and are compelled to carry on the labels of 'husbandless,' 'war widows' and 'vulnerable women' throughout their lives.

Though several scholars have revealed the destructive implications on gender discourses, they have also brought to light the constructive approach created by war towards building a gender balance in society. Segaram (2001), for example, argues that the Tamil women of Sri Lanka were given the opportunity to change their status in society during the time of armed conflict. De Alwis (2002) explores four different roles of women within the conflict of violence in Sri Lanka, dividing them in the category of gendering of violence and countering of violence. De Alwis (2002) illuminates war widows and women warriors in the gendering of violence, citing "while war widows are grim reminders of the destructive capabilities of war, women warriors are the troubling reminders of women's active participation in war" (De Alwis 2002: 680). On the other hand, De Alwis (2002) includes mourning mothers and anti-war agitators in the countering of violence. These women, in De Alwis's (2002) description, have sought to counter violence in that they have collectively and publicly spoken for peace, as women, and more specifically, as mothers and feminists.

On the other hand, the people of Jaffna consider women's roles in the armed conflict from a societal point of view. These people view women as agents of social change in the context of armed conflict, who caused changes in society through their different initiatives. Some of my informants in the study describe those initiatives of women and the events of the changes from various referring points. They, first of all, point out how 'bicycling' has helped women to expand their communication outside the household. Since the security situation had especially 'disempowered' the lives of men, it was said that women had to do all the external work by using bicycles. For this reason, bicycles have become the main mode of transport for women, not only for their own business, but also to establish a good communication network across society.

An academic who was my informant in the study told me:

Women develop their mobility through cycling. Initially the average rural women could not even own a cycle, now you see there is no woman without a cycle. They are highly mobilized.(Interview 40, February 17, 2005).

He further said this situation of women being mobilized through bicycling as an “enriched change to social attitudes.”

They were cycling before and now they ride motorbikes too.....it’s a fast development.

The informants of this study also indicated that women played another role in the armed conflict, which was connected with the economic sanctions imposed in the district. The informants believed that the economic sanctions also assisted women in entering the public domain. As described in the first chapter, the district had been in economic crisis for more than ten years prior to the ceasefire agreement. As a result, every adult in a house was in need of earning money to survive in the midst of starvation and women were in no way excluded. Hence, women had to earn money for the survival of their families as the cost of living was so high at that time. Women, from rural to urban, although they are not educationally qualified enough to hold a job either in the government or in the private sectors, had to start running their own businesses, like small shops, doing home gardening and animal husbandry, in order to balance the economic crisis that their families were going through. This subsequently led women to take on the role of income generator even in the presence of their earning male family members.

However, it was not solely through war that women’s roles were changing in Jaffna. A few of my informants were of the opinion that the process of globalization also contributed to the change in society of Jaffna. They also claimed that the Tamil diaspora has influenced the people greatly and due to that, society was influenced by modernization as well. According to these informants, Tamil society was losing its traditional grip, partially due to the processes of globalization as well as modernization.

Still, the views from the religious clergy (both Hindu and Christian) in the district seem skeptical of the changes wrought by women in the context of armed conflict. Having admitted that there have been changes in society, the parish priest of a Protestant church questioned the stability of these changes. He says that those changes were ‘temporarily’ created by an emergency and unavoidable war situation. The priest also says that he could still see women being subordinated in society amidst of the changes in women’s roles and relationships.

Still, I am in a dilemma whether this can be called change, because women are still considered second in society (Interview 47, August 10, 2005).

Citing his church administration as an example, the Reverend further added that even in the churches women hold administrative memberships; nevertheless, they

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are members for name's sake. He also said that women do not make decisions, and if they try to make a decision, men do not listen to them. Moreover, women do not oppose the decisions taken by men.

A Hindu Priest too admitted the changes. He, however says those changes were made only on social levels and not on the religious level, because Tamil women are still not allowed, and are still seen inferior to conduct a (Hindu) religious ritual. The role of a Hindu woman in the religious practice, then and now, is to be a devotee because a woman can never conduct *poojai* (the act of worship) in the temples.

It is unexpected seeing our girls as warriors and leaders of the community—of course it is a positive move, but sadly on the social level and not on the religious level. A woman is never allowed to conduct *poojai* in the temple only because she is a woman and she was born as a woman (Interview 48, August 28, 2005).

The priest believed that women could have taken up new roles on social level; nonetheless, the role of a (Hindu) woman has not changed a bit.

Though Tamil women played a key role in bringing about changes in the context of the armed conflict, a question that remains to be answered is: 'What is their status as women in Tamil society?' Women make changes in society when there is war and violence. Nevertheless, women still face issues like dowry and domestic violence. The following section of this chapter will elaborate women's position in Tamil society.

### 4.3 Tamil Society and Women

Generally, in Tamil culture, men are considered superior and women's position is subordinate to them (Pandian 1987, Mukund 1992, Segaram 2001 Shanmugalingan 2002, Gerhaz 2014). The primary function of women preached by Tamil customs is reproduction and homemaking, while men are the principal decision-makers and breadwinners (Wanasundara 2006: 14). Women are taught to value their culture more than their lives. They are taught to revere their men by providing services to them (David K 1991, Mukund 1999, Gerhaz 2014).

Tamil society is patriarchal (Pandian 1987, Mukund 1992, Shanmugalingan 2002, Kamala 2006). A Tamil woman, as a daughter, is under the care of her father; as a wife, of her husband; and as a widow, of her son or parents or a male relative. This dependency has created the servitude of women, and men deciding over women as if women were incapable of decision-making (Kamala 2006). Moreover, morality is 'gender-specific' in a Tamil society, which means the

morality of a woman is conceptualized as the morality of her family and therefore of the community (Mukund 1992). Consequently, the purity of a Tamil community is believed to be at the hands of the moral behavior of women (Sornarajah 2004). Tamil women are supposed to follow four moral codes given by tradition; they are *achcham* (fear or timidity), *madam* (innocence), *naanam* (coyness or shyness) and *payirppu* (aversion) (David 1973, Mukund 1992). These are called the essence of femalehood in Tamil society. *Achcham* is fear, but not in the same emotion one feels in the face of imminent danger. It encompasses fear of strangers, fear of talking to unrelated men, fear of offending others and other fears. *Madam* is the case of extreme innocence, ready to believe her man implicitly without question; while *naanam* refers to women's 'natural' shyness in public, or the coyness that inevitably overwhelms a woman in intimate settings. *Payirpu* is aversion, which is related to any kind of contact with men outside the family. Even the mere thought of these other men is supposed to produce a sense of unbearable revulsion in the woman's mind (David 1973, Pandian 1987, Mukund 1992). Without any reasoning, Tamil culture lays down these codes of morality which deny Tamil women to do whatever they are capable of (David 1973, Mukund 1992, Wanasundara 2006, Kamala 2006). These four fundamental qualities associated with the 'ideal Tamil woman' make Tamil women economically resourceless, politically powerless, culturally voiceless and socially defenseless (Kamala 2006).

### 4.3.1 Marriage and Family Life

According to Tamil belief, marriage is a sacred institution devised by gods for the welfare of human beings. Marriage in Tamil culture therefore is not just a mutual contract between two individuals, or a relationship of convenience, but a social contract and moral expediency in which couples agree to live together and share their lives, carrying out their respective duties and keeping the institution of family intact (Wadley 199, Kamala 2006).

The most important item in a Hindu marriage in Jaffna as well as in South India is a nuptial cord called *thaali*. During the wedding, the bridegroom ties this cord with three knots on the neck of the bride. This is the climax of the wedding ceremony and in the past women never removed the *thaali* from their necks while their husbands were alive and they gave great respect to their *thaali*<sup>21</sup> (David 1991, Kamala 2006).

In Tamil culture, a man is recognized as a primary upholder in the family and the main recipient of all honors, whereas his wife is destined to serve him and keep

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21 The thali proper is a small pendant attached to the cord.

him happy (Kamala 2006). When a woman loses her husband, she loses everything—her wealth, her identity, her comfort and her status. She becomes ‘inauspicious,’ therefore she is isolated from society (David 1991, Wadley 1991, Mukund 1992, Kamala 2006).

### 4.3.2. Dowry

Dowry is another aspect of Tamil custom that makes women dependent in society. Most researchers agree that dowry or *chitanam* is an important custom that fosters gender relations. It is a form of wedding gift prevalent on the Indian subcontinent that is also called the ‘price of the groom.’ According to Mullatti (1992), the custom of dowry has taken the form of a market transition in all classes and castes irrespective of one’s level of education. Though dowry was initiated with the intention of providing security for a girl in case of adversity or unexpected circumstances after marriage, Mullati further says the system has however claimed the lives of scores of women and has made life a virtual misery for many more (Mullati 1992: 2).

The dowry practice has developed immensely on Indian subcontinent to the extent that it has become the biggest problem women face (Mahapatra 2013). Many marriages have been strained because of the dispute over dowry and cases of burning brides were reported where newlywed girls commit suicide or were burned alive over dowry disputes (Ash 2003, Kamat 2004, Mahapatra 2008). Not to mention that ‘dowry deaths’ are still rising despite modernization on the Indian subcontinent (Williams 2013).

Most of the Tamils in Sri Lanka believe that dowry is a system that helps them to live prudently, encourage savings, build houses and generally to accumulate wealth (David 1991, Thambiah 1973, Shanmugalingam 2000, Aftab Ali 2013). However, many writings argue that most of the ‘decaying moral characters’ of the Tamil society can directly or indirectly be traced to the dowry system (Balasingham 1994, Shanmugalingam 2000, Aftab Ali 2013). According to these scholars, the dowry system is the cause of most of the misunderstandings between parents and children, between brothers and sisters, between relatives, and even among the communities. Therefore, the system of dowry is ‘social conservatism’ that makes not only women’s, but also the whole society’s, situation hierarchical (Aftab Ali 2013).

“Dowry is what legitimizes the hierarchies of sex, age and caste” writes Fuglerud (2001: 202). He says that the institution of marriage, which is/was possible through giving and taking dowry, activates three mechanisms that structure interpersonal relationships in hierarchical orders: gender (where male is

superior to female), age (where older is superior to younger) and caste (where higher rank is superior to lower rank) (Fuglerud 2001: 203). Adele Balasingham (1994), on the other hand, describes ‘dowry’—the inherent material aspect of marriage in Sri Lankan Tamil society—as an ‘unbroken chain’, which, she says, is believed as a custom that should be followed unchanged.

Dowry is an ancient custom like caste observation on the Indian subcontinent, but it still prevails due to the existence of patriarchal societies. Moreover, the existence of a social system requires strong social support. However, Thambiah (1973), Sivathamby (1995), Fuglerud (2002) and Derges (2013) state the dowry system that exists in Jaffna is unique. Firstly, the dowry system in Jaffna is strongly linked to ‘*Thesavazhamai* law,’ which establishes the system as it practiced and makes it deeply institutionalized. Sri Lanka has a national law, which applies to everyone, but at the same time there are other local laws and customary laws that also need to be taken in consideration. *Thesavazhamai* is one such law of the Sri Lankan Tamil inhabitants of Jaffna, codified by the Dutch during their colonial rule in 1707. Jaffna region varies from the majority of the subcontinent in specific ways (Thambiah 1973, Sivathamby 1995). The general South Asian pattern is for women to receive jewels and household items as dowry (Thambiah 1973). As per *Thesavazhamai* or customary law of Jaffna, there are two forms of transmission of property in practice, other than the legal one. First, women get land as well as jewels and household items from the parents at the time of their marriage, which is called dowry or *chithanam*. Second, the father’s heritage property which is called *mudisam* is inherited only on his death by his sons. The property that is acquired during the marriage called *thediathetam* is divided among the sons and daughters (David 1991).

Secondly, the practice of dowry has been on the rise in Jaffna due to the lack of male members in the society. Apart from the economic crisis caused by the armed conflict, there has been a lack of males in Jaffna, which has also been the reason for the existence of dowry in the society during the time of the armed conflict (Fuglerud 2002). The price of the male members has enormously increased by dowry due to the foreign migration of males due to armed conflict, besides many who died in the armed conflict or who joined the movement as fighters. Parents in Jaffna found it increasingly difficult to get their young girls married off as the dearth of eligible men resulted in fewer available bachelors demanding handsome dowry (The Times of India 2002). Therefore, marriage in general in Jaffna appears to be a ‘market’ and grooms objects on that market.

Thirdly, Tamil society insists on giving and receiving dowries which makes women’s position weaker than men’s. The involvement of the mothers of grooms

in demanding dowry creates an atmosphere wherein women at times become enemies of women (Balasingham 1994, Shanmugalingam 2000, Fuglerud 2002, Derges 2013). As per the literature, the engagement of women in demanding dowry had not only created a division between married and unmarried women in general, but had also promoted an economical hierarchy between wealthy women (women who give large dowries) and ordinary women (women married with little dowry) among the married women in particular. According to what has been stated in the previous literature, dowry determines the marriage, which in return establishes the quality of life that a woman in Jaffna can have.

### 4.3.3 Virginitly and Chastity

According to Mahalingham and Rodriguez (2003: 166), the essentialization of female identity in Hindu societies is explained by two complementary cultural belief systems. The first is female chastity or virginitly, which is the most valued trait; and the other is linked to the belief in Shakthi or energy, the powerful goddess from whom even the ‘creator of the universe (Shiva)’ gained his energy (according to Hindu belief). These two worldviews, as Mahalingham and Rodriguez (2003) remark, complement gender ideologies that control the sexuality and the gender roles of women.

Virginitly, according to Tamil society is a term used as an expression of purity. In the South Asian context, it is a concept that refers to the state of a person never having engaged in sexual intercourse (Carpenter 2005). In societies like Jaffna, any form of physical intimation before marriage is considered an act designed to bring dishonor and disgrace to the family. Not to mention that married women also face the issue of virginitly, which is called ‘chastity.’ Though both the terms are depicted by one word *karpu* in Tamil, the meaning of *karpu* in relation to an unmarried woman and a married woman differs. The chastity of a married woman is unconditional and is symbolized by the *thaali*—an ornament, which a husband ties on his wife’s neck during their wedding and which should not be taken off until his death (Fuglerud 2002). As Fuglerud (2002) says, “the tying of *thaali* is the symbolic core of the marriage ritual and is what legitimizes sexual union, confers upon the wife the code of obedience, and in the sense entrusts her with the prosperity and well-being of the family” (Fuglerud 2002: 202). ‘Karpu’, therefore is considered the most revered aspect of Tamil culture, and women are taught to value it more than their lives.



Hrdlickova (2008) says that old Dravidians believed that women possessed a very strong power called *ananku*<sup>22</sup> in a state where they are not controlled by men (Hrdlickova 2008: 459). According to Hrdlickova's version, *ananku* could also have a protective quality in an 'auspicious status,' like if a woman is married and controlled by her husband. Thus, in order to control this female power, Hrdlickova further states that every Tamil woman has to apply certain controlling measures which all come under one word *karpu* (2008: 460). *Karpu* is therefore considered an important aspect for women in Tamil custom. Tamils who claim to be Dravidians by origin and are mostly Hindus by religion hence believe in pre-marital virginity and post-marital chastity (Lindholm 1991).

Scholarly analysis of Tamil culture states that a woman of *karpu* is endowed with a large dose of the moral qualities of *achcham*, *madam*, *naanam* and *payirpu* (Hrdlickova 2008, Mahalingham and Rodriguez 2003, Carpenter 2005). It is considered much more than just sexual fidelity to one man. There is no easy yardstick for measuring these four qualities, however sexual fidelity is the de facto litmus test for *karpu*. A woman is always expected remain faithful to one man all her life. As long as she is faithful she has *karpu*, if not, she has lost it forever with no chance of ever gaining it back (Carpenter 2005). The most extreme case is when a girl is raped before getting married. In this case she enters a state of lost *karpu*. But, the lost *karpu* can be restored if, and when, she gets married to the perpetrator of the rape. In case the woman is already married she has no way of restoring her lost *karpu*. She has to live in infamy (Mahalingham and Rodriguez 2003, Carpenter 2005).

In this context, women who lose *karpu* through whatever means, including rape, are considered to have lost not only their social status but also the 'purity' of both their body and soul. This is the reason why the survivors of rape and sexual harassment in these types of societies are described as the worst victims—because the '*karpu*-lost' women are treated as inferior and 'impure.' The whole issue of *karpu* in Tamil society controls the sexuality of a Tamil woman that ultimately restricts her free mobilization in the society. In order to protect her *karpu*, a woman in Tamil society has to depend on males—be it her father, brother, husband or sons (Wadley 1991).

#### 4.3.4 Community Isolation

In the context of Jaffna, women who are widowed and whose husbands have disappeared face community isolation. These women pay the price of long-term

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<sup>22</sup> *Ananku* means fiery goddess in Tamil.

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civil war in Sri Lanka especially by losing the male members of the family, therefore are isolated both socially and culturally.

### War Widows

In the societies of the Indian subcontinent, the plight of a widow is understandably despicable for anyone assessing the history and screening the contemporary social contexts. Ullrich (1988) says “a widow’s role of permanent sacrament for her husband’s death is societal punishment for her failure and implied denial of the cultural value that devoted wife predeceases her husband” (Ullrich 1998: 172). According to Ullrich, the societies in South India claim widows as to be a ‘misfortune’ for losing their husbands and staying ‘empty.’ The system of *sati*, requiring widows to throw themselves on their husbands’ funeral pyres, was in practice during the early days in Indian societies. Such social customs indicate that a woman was never allowed to live without a husband (Girish 2004).

The cultural veto says that widowed women are spontaneously taken from their ordained functions as wives since being a wife to a man is the foundation of a woman’s respect and status in society (Newman: 2003: 24). This eventually constitutes the state of social death for widowed women because it forces them to depart from social life effectively (Chakravarthy 2012). Although the practice of *sati* was said to have been abolished in 1829, Verma says *sati* deaths were recorded in recent years, for example, in 1990 more than 50 widows were burned alive as *satis* (Verma 1997). In addition, widows still undergo ritual humiliation like head-shaving and wrapping their bodies with white sarees in many of the Indian and South Asian societies (Girish 2004: 1).

In Sri Lanka, the violence caused by the civil war generated widows and husbandless women. The statistics taken during the period of the ceasefire agreement shows that widows in north and east provinces totaled 49,612 in March 2002 and female-headed households numbered 19,787 in the five districts of Northern Province and Eastern Province<sup>23</sup> (North East Provincial Council, Sri Lanka 2003). Of the widows, 22,323 were in the Northern Province, whereas 27,291 were in the eastern Province. Of the eight districts of Northern Province and Eastern Province, Jaffna has the highest number of widows followed by Batticaloa, Ampara and Trincomalee districts.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, a recent study

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23 Northern Province and Eastern Province are claimed to be the main homeland and heartland of Tamils in Sri Lanka.

24 Jaffna and Batticaloa are the two districts worst affected by armed conflict where the majority of residents are ethnic Tamils.

conducted by the Federation of NGOs reveals that more than half of the war widows of Jaffna are below fifty years of age.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the latest assessment asserts that the recent military operation in the north has increased the number of widows to 26,300 in Jaffna (Tamil Nation, June 22, 2010).

Tamil war widows in Sri Lanka, who are mostly Hindus by religion or follow the Hindu culture, remain at the “mercy of religio-cultural traditions that yield power over their personal identities and material lives due to conservative discourses on gender,” writes Newman (2003: 24). Even though the socio-cultural ideology that steers the treatment of widows—such as having their heads shaven, having them wear white sarees and throwing them on the funeral pyre—has never played a dominant role in Sri Lankan Tamil society as in India, widows of Jaffna are nevertheless looked upon as ‘unfortunate’ and a ‘bad portent.’ Thus, the marginalization of widows is a real social stigma for women in Tamil society (Fuglerud 2004, Newman 2003). Widows and women in such societies cannot remarry because social mores find it deplorable and explicitly rule it out (Agarwal 2009). These women are often alone and insecure, and are treated as a symbol of bad luck in their own circles. In this context, widows of war are certainly among the most vulnerable groups of society. One of my informants, a Hindu priest of Jaffna said widows’ remarriage depends on an individual’s decision.

Widows’ remarriage is an individual right and freedom (interview 48, August 28, 2005).

Yet, given the family values of Hindu culture that say ‘one man for one woman,’ the priest, at the same time, said that the so-called widow’s remarriage may also cause additional social problems like divorce and family separation. His actual point regarding this issue was that the promotion of a widow’s remarriage would sooner encourage divorce and family breakdown, which is strictly outlawed by Hindu culture. He also indicated that the concept of ‘purity’ taught in Hindu culture, which explains the chastity of a woman having sexual relationship with one man and vice versa, would simply disappear, if widows were to remarry. Thus, he concluded that widows’ remarriage should neither be legalized nor banned.

This is a strict principle and everyone observes it. We can never give support to the issue of widows’ remarriage. That may create a wrong idea against the family system we have followed for centuries (Interview 48, August 28, 2005).

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<sup>25</sup> This figure applies to the time until the latest peace process was broken. With the end of war in 2009, the number of war widows have been increased.

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Personally this priest believes that widows can have ‘another life.’<sup>26</sup> However, being one of the leaders of a religious institution that restricts widows’ remarriage through norms like ‘chastity’ and ‘one man for one woman,’ he could not openly support the cause.

Some of the NGO officials and social activists of Jaffna were of the opinion that the widows, especially the young widows, should be encouraged to remarry, in order to reduce social problems like sex work and illicit liquor production. They pondered the fact that most of the women involved in sex work and liquor production are widows who find these activities to be a survival mechanism while utilizing them to fulfill their physical needs.

However, most of the widows of Jaffna did not remarry. According to my informants, apart from the cultural practices that prevent these women from remarrying, widows themselves were not willing to enter matrimony. The reason, nevertheless, was not because of the social norm of ‘one man for one woman,’ but the concern about the future of their children: their children’s education and their well-being. In fact, my informants revealed that the widows prefer to raise their children independently. Moreover, they do not believe that any man would have a heart big enough to be the father of ‘another man’s’ progeny.

### **Husband’s Disappearance**

Another area that is of particular concern about women in Jaffna is not only ‘husband’s deaths’ but also husband’s disappearances. ‘Husband disappearance’ in the context of this study denotes the husbands who are missing, abducted or believed to be in prison during the time of the conflict.

Enforced disappearance has been labeled as one of the gravest violations of human rights as per Article 1 of the UN Declaration of 1992. Accordingly, the matter has been extensively dealt within the international human rights system, holding states responsible for commissioning acts of violation. Sri Lanka is one such country where the state is responsible for and alleged to be involved in enforced disappearance, especially in the north and the east (Amnesty International 2005 and 2007, Human Rights Watch 1996, 2007 and 2008).

The enforced disappearances in Sri Lanka were at their peak during the ’70s, ’80s and ’90s. This coincided with the two JVP-led insurrections and the armed ethnic conflict. The Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID) of the UN Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights has recorded 5,671 reported cases of wartime-related disappearance in Sri Lanka, not

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26 In Tamil context, the life of a woman entails having a good family primarily consisting of a healthy husband and children. When the husband is lost, the wife eventually loses her ‘life’ in the society.

counting people who went missing in the final stages of fighting from 2008 to 2009 and in the aftermath. Enforced disappearances in Sri Lanka have occurred island-wide, but more so in Northern Province and Eastern Province, and the capital, Colombo, targeting dissenting voices and the Tamil community (Sri Lanka Guardian 2014). There is no legal, social or any other justification to persons who are subjected to the forced abduction and destruction of their lives. According to the UN and Sri Lankan Human Rights actors, six years after the end of the 30 year long Sri Lankan internal civil armed conflict, Tamil rebels (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) and thousands of people still remain missing (UN Panel Report Sept. 2015).

Women, who are labeled ‘half-widows’ in Northern Province, Sri Lanka, are the women whose husbands have been subjected to enforced disappearance (Subramaniam et al. 2014). Yet, their position in society is worse than the widows. These women whose husbands have disappeared said that they are in a predicament regarding whether they can be called widows or not. They are often in a dilemma as to what role to adopt. For instance, a wife of an abducted man may wonder which role she should play: an anticipating spouse or a widow. Subramaniam et al. (2014) state that society expects these women to be widows rather than be wives in waiting, for the reason that these women’s husbands disappeared as much as ten to fifteen years ago. In addition, society itself faces agony at public gatherings, cultural events or festivals regarding whether to treat these women as ‘auspicious’ or as widows. While an organization consisting of the relatives of the disappeared met the former state president Chandrika Kumaratunge and independent inquiry was ordered by the government, an ambiguous attitude was observed among these women in relation to their husbands’ disappearances (Subramaniam et al. 2014). These women alleged that they still do not know where their husbands are, whether they are dead or alive and whether they are in the prison or have gone abroad. All they know is that their husbands are missing. Despite the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka submitting a report in 2003 saying that the disappeared are dead, the relatives refuse to accept the claim.

An NGO official who was an informant of this study stated that these women do not believe that their husbands are dead because of their strong belief in astrology.<sup>27</sup> These women meet with local astrologers who give horoscopes that state that the women’s husbands are still alive. Even though the state, which is the sole party responsible for the missing persons in Jaffna officially declared that the

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<sup>27</sup> There is a long-established and widespread belief in astrology in Jaffna. It is commonly used for daily life, particularly in matters concerning marriage, careers and other family-related events.

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‘disappeared are dead,’ these women continued to believe in their husbands’ horoscopes, which categorically say ‘they are alive.’

Another informant of this study and one of the coordinators of the Human Rights Commission in Jaffna said that these astrologers are exploiting this sensitive issue by running a business that gives these women false hopes about the survival of their dead husbands.

These women are made to waste money on this fake astrology, which gives them nothing but false hopes (Interview 53, December 24, 2005).

The social behavior towards the women whose husbands have disappeared does not look as the same as for widows. Socially, these women are not yet widows since their husbands have only ‘disappeared,’ because the deaths of these disappeared men are neither ritually confirmed nor endorsed by an observer witnessing the death. Still, they are husbandless though they are not widows. As described by Roussou (1986) and Chant (1997), these women are the ‘false widows’ and ‘de facto widows;’ or ‘half widows’ as Subramaniam et al. (2014) describes them.

### 4.3.5 Domestic Violence

War and economic crises due to war promote the criminalization of society and are the source of frustrations and stresses of individual men, which make domestic violence against women more widespread and dangerous (Ristanovic 2001). Although the patriarchal system of society, that is, the imbalance of power in relations between women and men, is still the main cause of domestic violence, war and economic crises lead it to a dramatic point. Cultural norms, such as the male-dominated ideology regarding relationships between the genders, influence the acceptance of domestic violence in such a way that there is an inappropriate reaction, or even absence of reaction, by police and other institutions within the patriarchal social system. In the conditions of war, this is intensified by the high rate of violent behavior in general and widespread tolerance toward violence as a way of conflict resolution (Somasundaram 2007).

A similar situation is seen even after the armed conflict as well, explains Somasundaram (2007). In Jaffna, the people who were displaced and uprooted in refugee camps for years, and the people who lived in the border villages of higher security zones, faced the problem of domestic violence. In Jaffna, numerous displacements have place since the civil war has started. At various times in the armed conflict, people have had no choice but to leave their homes, in many cases they remained uprooted for years. A vast area in Valigamam, for example has been

taken by the military since 1990. This area was declared the higher security zone, while the people who lived there over the years were forced to live in the refugee camps—even during the ceasefire agreement time.

Sabapathipillai Camp is one of the major refugee camps in Jaffna where the evicted families from the higher security zone of Jaffna live in. Women living there mainly complained about domestic violence and other practical problems. My informants revealed that many women were severely beaten by their men on a daily basis at Sabapathipillai Camp. According to these informants, there had not even been a single day that had passed in which men did not beat their wives—and this usually happens in every family on a daily basis.

In this context, domestic violence against women may also be related to frustrations produced by refugee status. Sometimes the conflicts in refugee families result from a changed social status or a lack of financial security. When a husband does not work and his family has serious financial problems, he becomes frustrated since he is not able to support his family as traditionally expected of him. When a woman, who was earlier economically independent from her husband, is not able to find a job, she may be regarded as worthless and abused, usually psychologically, because of that. In these cases, the violence is most dangerous and the victim is most helpless (Ristanovic 2001, Somasundaram 2007).

An NGO official and an informant of this study working on rural developmental projects considered alcoholism to be one of the main reasons for domestic violence and wife beating in Jaffna. Men drink alcohol every day as the result of the family's aggravating financial situation as well as the incapability of husbands to support their families and to satisfy their own elementary needs. However, domestic violence or wife beating in many rural contexts of Jaffna is considered purely a private and internal family affair, wherein anyone's involvement is not welcomed. Due to the reason that no one from the affected side files complaints in the courts or reports it to the police station, domestic violence has become a sub-culture in these parts of Jaffna society, because no one faces the penalty.

## 4.4 Conclusions

This chapter's aim was to present Jaffna's general context in order to understand its geography, history, culture and women's status in it. As this chapter revealed, Jaffna is one of the largest districts of Sri Lanka which consists of a majority of Tamil-speaking people. Since 1983, Jaffna has become the center of the long-term

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civil war in Sri Lanka. The rebel group called the LTTE waged a war against the government of Sri Lanka and established its Women's Wing in 1989. This Women's Wing consisted of military unit, a political unit and a suicide unit. The war brought the destruction of the lives of men and women. Many women became widows overnight, many women's husbands disappeared and many women lost their loved ones in the war.

This chapter further exposed women's status in Jaffna Tamil society. In Jaffna, women are considered to be inferior to men. Jaffna culture believes that the purity of Tamil society is in the hands of women. Thus, in Jaffna women are taught to follow the moral codes given by their culture.

In Tamil culture, women's lives and freedom are restricted by the institutions like marriage and family. Further to that, the system of dowry, a strict observation of virginity and chastity, community isolation for widows and domestic violence are in practice that makes women's situation volatile. Women who are affected by war and have become overnight widows and household heads were forced to bear the brunt of both the culture and war.

What however little known is how do Tamil women of Jaffna understand their experience of war. An empirical exploration in which women narrate their life at war in the local context is needed, and this study attempts to do that in order to contribute empirical knowledge. The empirical data, corresponding to this research problem are presented in forthcoming chapters.



# 5

## Warriors

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“We all long for the freedom of our land,  
the day we achieve it,  
women’s oppression will be buried in its grave.  
It is not *kunkumam* that decorates her forehead, it is red blood!  
What is tied around her neck is not the *thaali*  
but the cyanide capsule!  
She embraces not men, but weapons!  
Her feet go in search of not kinship ties,  
but the freedom of this land!” (Vanathy 93: 17, qtd. in Sornarajah 2004)

In her poem, “Come Forward,” Captain Vanathy, a Tamil warrior woman and an LTTE ‘martyr’ shared her understanding of the struggle for liberation of a Tamil woman; a liberation from cultural oppression, traditional suppression and unequal treatment. Vanathy’s poem describes the new ideal Tamil woman, who abandons the normal peace-time role of a woman and is prepared to die for the freedom of her people. Her forehead is adorned with a bullet hole and red blood, not by *kumkumam*, the red dot symbol worn by all married Tamil women. Her neck is not adorned by a *thaali*, instead there is a cyanide capsule hanging around her neck. Vanathy’s poem also illustrates the belief of LTTE women, which says the liberation of women lies in the hands of national liberation. Thus, to achieve women’s liberation, national liberation must be achieved first.

This chapter’s purpose is to present the study’s empirical data. The empirical data in this chapter are related to Tamil women’s role as warriors. This chapter therefore presents women’s understandings and experience on their role as warrior in the context of conflict and ceasefire agreement in Sri Lanka. The chapter thus offers women’s narrations on their motivation behind becoming warriors, and the challenges they faced to become warriors. This chapter also presents warrior

women's perception on their role contributing to women empowerment and social transformation.

## 5.1 The Motivations

Warrior women of Jaffna expressed different and intersecting motivations for why they chose to join the LTTE. Some of these motivations were common to both female and male combatants, while others were gender-specific to women. Although some arguments (Bose 1994, Balasingham 1993 and 2003) claim that Tamil women in Sri Lanka undertaking the fighter role was motivated by 'nationalist fervor' interlinked with communal perception of suffering, oppression and injustice, the impression of personal distress has also been said to be a motivation for Tamil women taking on this type of role (Alison 2003, Hellman-Rajanayagam 2008). Moreover, Miranda Alison (2003) writes that young Tamil women in fact wanted to join the LTTE, partly to break up the traditional restrictions on women.

My interviews with the LTTE women disclose that women had personal, political, economic and social motivations to adopt the role of warriors. Interruptions in education, segregation in employment opportunities, loss of family members and property, and internal displacement were said to be the personal reasons, while discrimination against minority Tamils by the government of Sri Lanka was disclosed as the political reason to join in the LTTE. Women also said they joined the fight due to economic and social reasons like poverty caused by the war and to achieve equal status to men in society.

### 5.1.1 Personal Motivations

Some of the warrior women said that the restrictions and segregation on the educational and employment opportunities, loss of primary family members in the events of armed conflict carried out by the state security forces, and the status of refugee caused by the constant internal displacement, have been their personal motivations to join the LTTE. They also said that the memories of major events like mass arrests had a great significance for women to join the LTTE as well. As per their interviews, the rounding up and detention of Tamil youth by the security forces as well as holding them without trial was carried out to suppress the LTTE, but had the opposite effect of many women joining the fight.

According to an interview with one of my respondents, who was one of the senior LTTE Women's Wing leaders, her motivation for becoming a fighter was the interruption in her education caused by the armed conflict.

We lived under indiscriminate aerial bombing and artillery shelling, day and night; our movement was restricted by long curfews. We spent many days in our home-built bunker where I studied, listening to gunshots and explosions, still hopeful that my exams would go ahead as scheduled. But exams were not held in Jaffna. I was so frustrated, then quit my studies and joined the movement (Interview 01, April 23, 2005).

Further in the interview, this respondent said her studies were severely disturbed by the armed conflict and at one point, she realized that she could never achieve anything through education and that her education itself would never help put an end to the struggle.

Another respondent, a senior LTTE woman and the leader of a women's battalion who joined the movement in 1987 recited a similar reason.

I was just a student when Vadamarachchi<sup>28</sup> was under the rule of the Sri Lankan Army. In Vadamarachchi the military repression was severe since it was the native place of our leader. My studies were disturbed especially during the time I was about to sit for my ordinary level examination. I thought that it was impossible to study under the oppression of the Sinhala chauvinism. Finally, I decided to fight for the liberation of our people (Interview 02, April 23, 2005).

This respondent further said that she joined the guerrilla group soon after her village, Valvettithurai, had fallen at the hands of the military, in the same year she was supposed to sit for the national ordinary level examination. This LTTE woman also alleged that her education was interrupted by the constant adjournment of the scheduled examination. She therefore was very displeased with the fact that the students from the other parts of Sri Lanka had already been through with the same examination.

According to most of the interviews with the LTTE women, the general disruption to secondary school education caused by the war has been a motivation for some women to join the LTTE. In the Sri Lankan education system, if one is prevented from even completing high school, it is impossible to get access to tertiary education, and these LTTE women said they had lost the hope to further their studies to university level due to the denial of secondary education.

LTTE women continued to say that their personal motivations to join the LTTE also sprang from deep emotions associated with the witnessing of a massacre or other atrocities. In certain cases, they said it was a combination of witnessing military brutality and other factors such as displacement, aerial bombings and

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<sup>28</sup> Vadamarachchi is the north part of Jaffna District (See the map, chapter three) that includes the cities Point Pedro and Valvettithurai. The LTTE leader comes from Valvettithurai.

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cold-blooded killings. Joining the LTTE, these women therefore said, was one way of ensuring protection to oneself.

I was just 18 at that time in 1988. Our house was completely bombed. It was an aerial bombing. We all survived because we were inside the bunker. The very next morning the government radio announced that they had completely destroyed an LTTE base. I was very furious listening to that. They bombed our house and said it was an LTTE camp. I was not an LTTE member then, but they said we all are LTTE members. Therefore, why can't I be an LTTE member for real? (Interview 08, July 12, 2002).

Another woman Tiger said:

My family donated two parcels of food to the LTTE, which almost everyone used to do in Jaffna. For that, they arrested my father while my mother was crying, pleading and begging them not to. He was never released. I was just 13 and became an ardent supporter of the LTTE after this incident, but joined the LTTE when I was 23 (Interview 22, April 25, 2005).

LTTE women revealed that they were also motivated by the adverse experiences of their immediate families and the community as a whole. According to an LTTE member, 'a horrible church bombing' she witnessed had motivated her decision to become a fighter.

Supersonic bombers attacked St. James Church in Jaffna. The church was completely destroyed. A nursery school nearby, two shops and ten houses in the neighborhood were also destroyed. Around ten persons were killed and many injured. Of the dead, three belonged to the same family. The bodies of the dead were torn and charred. The blown-up parts of all the bodies were collected and buried together. This was one of the most horrible events that I have witnessed and I thought the same can happen to my family and me. I was scared, but was very furious as well. This incident was an eye-opener for me to become a fighter. At that time, I thought that if I have to protect my family, I should fight the enemy. I was right! (IFT 04, May 6, 2006).

Rape and sexual harassment by the state security forces was said to have been another motivation for women to take up the role of warriors. Though I have not come across a woman who was raped by the forces and then joined the movement, my other LTTE interviewees reported that while this was not part of their own motivations for joining, they have met many female combatants who have suffered rape, were extremely angry about it and joined the LTTE for that reason.

Though there were personal motivations for women wanting to join the LTTE that involved suffering violation at the hands of Sri Lankan government forces, the personal and ideological reasons were not only separate and mutually exclusive, but also intertwined, which was explored in the interviews with these warrior women. Still, there was a difference between women who joined the LTTE

because their family members were killed for no reason at all, and others who had paid for their lives because they were in fact involved with the LTTE.<sup>29</sup>

### 5.1.2 Political Motivations

According to LTTE women's interviews, political motivations—like the feeling of being discriminated against by the state due to one's ethnic status, state oppression towards minorities and the feeling of being a Tamil and a minority created by the governmental policies—also motivated women to take up the role of warrior.

An LTTE woman and a respondent who was said to be the movement's most senior by age (58 years old) stated:

The Sinhala dominating political agenda of the Sri Lankan state motivated Tamils to act against the government.

She said that although the initial struggle against the discriminatory policies of the government led through nonviolent means by the Tamil political parties at that time, many of the youngsters were ready to take up weapons at any time. According to this LTTE woman, the generation born in the '60s, '70s and '80s, especially in the north and east of Sri Lanka, was very much inspired to fight an armed war.

Tamil youths were ready to take weapons in hands. They did not want to be oppressed. A non-violent struggle which was going on was also suppressed by the government and our youths were so frustrated. They became freedom fighters to fight against state oppression and state terrorism (Interview 07, April 26, 2005).

This respondent who said she joined the LTTE when she was in her forties further asserted she became a fighter because the oppression of the state towards Tamil people was still continuing, that too with the international support.

The whole world was with the terrorist government citing we are terrorist. The only option left was for the Tamil people to unite together and fight for their liberation. Does not matter whether you are an aunty or an uncle or even a grandpa. Fight... fight... fight for your people, your people's liberation and against oppression. That is what I did (Interview 07, April 26, 2005).

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<sup>29</sup> Many Tamil civilians were arrested and indiscriminately killed by the government forces. Among them, many were purely innocent and a few were connected with the LTTE—either their family members were LTTE members or they volunteered for the LTTE in its activities.

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Another respondent cited ‘state oppression and injustice’ as her motivation to have become a fighter, because she vowed to fight against the discrimination that her people are subjected to.

I used to read about the non-violence struggle led by our former Tamil leaders against the discriminatory Sinhala state. Also, our family elders used to discuss a lot about how they had to lose their job opportunities due to the ‘Sinhala Only’ Language Policy (Interview 03, April 24, 2005).

Speaking about the government educational scheme of 1971 known as ‘Standardization,’ which according to this respondent has effectively discriminated against Tamils in respect to university entrance, this respondent continued to state that her uncle, who was qualified for the university entrance, was plainly rejected only because he was a Tamil. This LTTE woman, who was later placed in one of the highest positions in the movement, said she was quite settled in life before becoming a warrior. Still, she said, she wanted to become a warrior, because she wanted to ‘crack’ the political culture that tries to ‘victimize’ her own people and the community that she belonged to.

I was a school teacher before. But later, I realized that the job is useless. First of all we have to liberate ourselves. What is the use of learning and earning a living under suppression and oppression? (Interview 03, April 24, 2005).

Few LTTE women whom I conversed with said they joined as fighters because of their anger at the suffering of others in their communities. They said that the responsibility towards their community and people has been another motivation for women to join the armed struggle. For example, the above respondent in her interview again stated:

Our people have been suffering. The common places and the churches and the kovils (temples) were bombed by the government, without any reason. We have to secure the rights and independence of our people (Interview 03, April 24, 2005).

### 5.1.3 Economic and Social Motivations

In the interviews, LTTE women said economic and social motivations such as evading poverty and becoming equal to men (which society denied women) were some of the motivations for them to become warriors.

During the interviews with these women, a few indicated that their families were poor as their parents had lost jobs due to the constant displacements. Even though these LTTE women did not openly say that poverty had partially been the motivation for them to join the movement, it was understood that poverty had

motivated them to become warriors due to their concern over the economic conditions of their families. An LTTE woman with whom I had an informal talk said:

In '90s, the situation was terribly bad. My family was displaced five times constantly. My parents were daily wagers and we used to get our meals on their daily earnings. We never had a penny in hand every time we got displaced. It was a great struggle to survive (IFT May 4 and 6, 2005).

She went on to say:

My sister and I joined the movement together on the same day. My sister is in Batticaloa and I am here in Vanni.<sup>30</sup> We do not have much contact with our parents, but I know they are doing fine. Well, I wish to meet them, but my commitment towards the liberation struggle is more important.

Although achieving Tamil rights has been the primary aim of Tamil women who joined the LTTE, one respondent said she became a guerrilla fighter also to show off her talents that people generally believe only men can have.

When I was growing up at home there were some restrictions on female behavior—such as girls should not climb trees, go out alone or ride bicycles, but I wanted to break every rule (interview 05, April 25, 2005).

She further said that she wanted to achieve something in life, which people think that women cannot.

By becoming a fighter, I have surprised many who initially thought I am a weak and meek woman.

Another LTTE woman said:

Woman Tigers proved they are brave and women are brave. So, I wanted to become one among them (Interview 06, April 25, 2005).

I also interviewed an LTTE woman, an ordinary cadre who joined the movement five years before this interview was done. She stated that she wanted to achieve something in life and had become a fighter.

I joined the movement to achieve something. And being a freedom fighter, I have achieved a lot. If I had been at home, I would have been an ordinary woman, cooking and cleaning up the house without doing anything 'great' in life (interview 06, April 25, 2005).

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<sup>30</sup> Batticaloa is located in the east of Sri Lanka, while Vanni is in the north.

## 5.2 Status and Challenges

The emergence of female combatants in the LTTE has resulted in academic debates. Many academic writings argue that the role of women as warriors was ambivalent (Coomaraswamy 1997, De Mel 2001, Manchanda 2001, Sixta 2007). Few scholars raise the question whether LTTE women would be welcomed back when they return home as they were defying the socio-cultural norms of Tamil society by joining the fight. Moreover, scholars like Coomaraswamy and De Mel state that LTTE women were “the cogs in the wheel” of a male leadership, therefore they were the victims of a male patriarchal leadership (Coomaraswamy 1997, De Mel 2001). Though women had separate units in the LTTE, these scholars continue to say that LTTE women have never been the ‘first’ when it comes to making decisions. According to them, even the decisions of forming separate units for women in the LTTE, were made by the leader or leaders who were mostly men.

In contrast to what had been said in the previous writings, this section of the chapter presents the narrations of LTTE women on their status as warriors and the challenges they experienced as warriors.

### 5.2.1 Status

LTTE women explored two types of status they had in society: one was the status as fighting cadres and the other was the status as social persons or the members of society.

#### **As Fighting Cadres**

LTTE women said that in the initial stage of the armed struggle, they were mainly involved in the task of political propaganda. In an interview, one of my respondents said:

It was mid 80s, we were freedom fighters, but were not actually militarily trained. We engaged in the process of propaganda. I think, propaganda was important at that time (interview 02, April 23, 2005).

According to this respondent, propaganda has been an important factor in the struggle of Tamils for rights, especially at the preliminary stage of the armed conflict. Since the armed conflict had just started, the LTTE’s propaganda, in which women were involved, was used to create an awareness regarding the need



for an armed struggle. Moreover, this respondent said that the LTTE propaganda was aimed at increasing their public support and the membership of cadres.

At that time, the struggle had just started. Our people should understand how important our struggle is, how many sacrifices we may have to make in future, and how people can be cooperative with us in the struggle for liberation. We had to stir up people's hidden emotions (interview 02, April 23, 2005).

Adding up that women have initially been caretakers and propagandists in the LTTE, this respondent further said that a woman guerrilla unit within the LTTE was established with many women joining the LTTE and receiving military training a year later in 1984. She continued to say:

Initially we were organized into female guerrilla units operating with the assistance of men at the beginning. However, we have later started forming an independent structure: the separate women's military structure within the movement (interview 02, April 23, 2005).

Another respondent disclosed that as battlefield warriors, women warriors were as equal to men warriors within the movement.

We plan our actions for ourselves; we have our own female command, and we act independently from the male part of the movement, although we report to the same high-level leadership (interview 04, April 25, 2005).

According to her interview, the Tiger organization had come the closest to affording its women equal power, both in military and in non-military sectors.

Nowhere in the world has gender hierarchy been eradicated, and it certainly has not disappeared from Tamil society. However, our male cadres show a great deal of respect, appreciation and pride in women fighters' achievement (interview 04, April 25, 2005).

My observations in the field in fact corroborate what these LTTE women claimed. I have seen these LTTE women laying mines and clearing mines. I have seen these women carrying heavy weapons all alone, driving heavy trucks and digging up safety bunkers which indeed contrasts with the 'traditional' female gender stereotype of Tamil society.

You can see many women freedom fighters fighting for their causes across the world, like in Palestine and Lebanon. However, we are different. We take part in guerrilla war, conventional battle and if needed, we go for 'self-soul scarification.' We achieved our goals in many circumstances. This is the reason why many scholars and writers pay attention to us more than any other women fighters in the world (Interview 02, April 23, 2005).

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The respondent above had twenty years of experience in war—first as a fighter, then as a sub-commander and later as a commander—and she described suicide bombing as ‘self-soul sacrifice.’ She stated that she joined to fight immediately after she lost her family members in the communal riots of 1983.<sup>31</sup> She also said that she was ready to ‘sacrifice her own soul’ for the cause of liberation. However, she asserted that she was not yet ‘lucky’ enough to hold that privilege. In accordance with the interviews with LTTE women, it was understood that the suicide members of the LTTE, who were also called as ‘Black Tigers,’ were often drawn from the regular ranks from the movement. They would write request letters to their leader asking him to select them for the mission. The leader looked at the applicants’ profiles and selected them and thus, not every applicant could be a Black Tiger.

### **As Members of the Society**

LTTE women said they gained a different experience as members of the Jaffna Tamil society. They said that the members of the society never looked upon LTTE women as ordinary.

May be they think we are ‘extraordinary,’ because I remember a village leader of Kudaththanai<sup>32</sup> told me once, that we are marked off from the rest of the Tamil civilian women, not only by our dress and hairstyles, but by our heroism as well (interview 03, April 26, 2005).

The respondents in the above interview went on to say:

It feels nice when your own people give you respect and take pride in you. But I feel that the respect we receive and the pride they have for us create a gap between us and the people, and sometimes we are not able to interact with them normally (interview 03, April 26, 2005).

Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam (2008) remarks with a similar point of view on her work *Female Warriors, Martyrs and Suicide Attackers: Women in the LTTE*. She states that these LTTE women spread “an aura of determination and self-assurance,” which was not commonly shown by women in Sri Lanka publicly (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2008: 07). Given the point that “many Tamil civilian women feel uncomfortable in the presence of Tiger women” (2008: 7), Hellman-Rajanayagam continues to say that many in the society think that LTTE women act like goddesses. An LTTE woman in her interview has in fact confirmed as well.

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31 In 1983 there was a communal riot against the Tamils living in Colombo in which more than 3,000 Tamils were killed and thousands of them fled to other countries.

32 Kudaththanai is small village located in the north of Jaffna District

Sometimes people treat us as if we are angels who came down from the sky. They do not even want to sit down in front of us. We, many times, explained to them that we are one of them. We do a lot of work with society. When we do that work it is so difficult to mingle with people—they simply separate us from themselves (interview 04, April 25, 2005).

Even my correspondence with the informants also reflected a similar view. The concept of ‘Shakthi-Shiva’ in Hinduism has been used to describe the Tamil warrior women within the locality. “Shakthi,” Wadley says, is “the power or energy of the universe, the goddess provides a motivating force for the passive inactive male” (1980: ix). Though ‘Shakthi’ is described, in accordance with Hinduism, as a powerful goddess with the compassionate qualities of a mother, she can also become aggressive in times of need. Many Hindu legends depict Shakthi as an aggressive power, killing destructive demons and evils.

A few of my study informants used the ‘Shakthi’ ideology to describe the LTTE women, and explain their aggressiveness as an ‘exposure to repression.’ According to these informants, the LTTE women’s braveness on the battlefield, their fearlessness and the power of eliminating the enemies, have probably been inherited from the goddess Shakthi. The informants also stated that in the eyes of a few among the local population of Jaffna, LTTE women were ‘Shakthi-filled’ and ‘innately powerful.’ A woman NGO official who was one of my informants said.

Tiger girls have something powerful that an ordinary man can never have. The braveness and courage our Tiger girls have could have never resulted from education or culture and not even from military training. They have the power of the goddess Shakthi. Like Shakthi, these pleasant-spoken, charming women can at any time turn out to be a destructive storm when they are oppressed and repressed (interview 43, march 31, 2005).

I could also observe a similar situation during my fieldwork. As my informants revealed, LTTE women were admired for their braveness by some of the Tamil people. People in general did not feel comfortable with them, as they thought and told me in their interviews that LTTE women were not ordinary, but special and to be treated ‘special.’ From the perspective of Jaffna Tamil people, Tamil culture portrays women as fearful, obedient and innocent. However, LTTE women, going beyond these characteristics took up the role of warriors and have become ‘extraordinary’ and as ‘energetic as men.’

Nevertheless, in the context of LTTE women, although the Hindu religious ideology of ‘Shakthi,’ along with the Tamil traditional worshiping of brave soldiers tried to qualify the role change of Tamil women as fighters, in practical sense their social life was believed to be ambivalent once the war is over. While

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many informants in their interviews stated that the LTTE women are respected due to their 'sacrificial' and 'altruistic' nature, some expressed concern about their social position once they all are supposed to return home.

The situation cannot be the same after the peace. Once they are weaponless, the respect and adoration they used to get from the people during the conflict will not exist. People will forget all their sacrifices soon after they have returned to society (Interview 47, August 10, 2005).

LTTE women also compared their status in society before becoming a warrior and afterwards as well. One of my respondents and a senior LTTE woman described her status in society before and after her life as a warrior. She attested that the respect and pride she could gain in the society only after becoming a warrior.

I have been through so many hardships in life. I was insulted by the people in society. The community itself spoke badly about me. Today, the same people who hurt me, pay respect to me and salute me. It is all because I am a warrior (Interview 07, April 26, 2005).

Even though this LTTE woman did not reveal the reason she had been insulted by society, she said that she feels highly privileged to be a 'brave soldier' and a warrior. She also narrated that the warrior uniform she wears has given her the power of being respected, especially by the people by whom she had once been offended. This respondent, in reality, was not a battlefield warrior. Due to her age and the Tamil custom of respecting elders, this respondent further said that she was in the movement to look after some of the social and cultural institutions run by the LTTE.

I had an informal talk with a former LTTE woman, who left the movement for various reasons and was living with her family. According to her, she received praise and respect from her relatives when she was in the LTTE, but all that was gone soon after she returned home. Her family, however, was happy about her return, but this former LTTE woman further said that her relatives and others had described her, on many occasions, as a 'runaway woman'.

Gone are those days when I received respect. Now they call me a 'runaway woman,' tease me to my face and speak behind my back (IFT 03, April 28, 2005).

LTTE women who had already returned home (while the armed conflict was going on) said that they were not treated in any special way. The ex-cadre I met in fact told me that she feels she is sometimes treated worse than how she was treated before joining the fight. When I forwarded this thought to a resident of Jaffna who claimed that the LTTE women will always be respected even after their return from the movement, he said "that is because these particular cadres returned home

without completing the ‘mission’<sup>33</sup> (Interview 52, November 1, 2005). Nevertheless, the armed conflict is over now in Sri Lanka and the ‘mission’ of the LTTE women was not completed because they were defeated. Many of the women in the LTTE who were in the detention camps are said to have been sent to their homes and now they live in the society that once gave them lot of praise and respect (Shamila 2012).

### 5.2.2 Challenges

LTTE women said that they faced two major challenges; one was challenging the patriarchal society, and the other was challenging their own emotions.

#### **Challenging the Patriarchy**

The interviews show that the LTTE women, by joining the fight, have challenged the patriarchal system of society. These women joined to fight, as they said in the interviews, without the consent of their parents, which represented a vast deviation from normal behavior among Tamil women. Normally, young women remain under the control of their fathers and brothers, and when they are married their husbands control them. This cycle of male control follows them throughout their lives and these women said they had decided to break up this pattern.

A respondent of my study, an LTTE woman who was a magistrate of the LTTE courts said:

Our society is like a thick iron rod, with plenty of unbreakable rules and regulations. It is always challenging for anyone to make the impossible possible, but we made it so. We broke the traditional iron grip of Tamil society (interview 08, July 12, 2005).

She further said:

If we had not broken up the traditions, no one would have done that. And, our women would have been submissive forever.

Supporting this statement, one of my respondents who was not an LTTE member said:

They, the Tiger women, by taking up arms in their hands, have helped to establish a process for other women to open up and step outside the household (interview 36, January 15, 2006).

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<sup>33</sup> The mission here is meant the state of Tamil Eelam, the separate state.

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This respondent, who was an academic, remarked that the mobilization of Tamil women would not have been initiated if LTTE women had not taken up the role of warriors.

First these Tiger girls went outside the house and other women followed them, not as fighters but with other roles. Therefore, women's mobilization was initiated by Tiger girls.

Moreover, the above-mentioned LTTE magistrate woman also claimed that LTTE women have ruptured the gender division of labor by embarking on the military training program which was designed to be for men.

Firstly, we have stormed into a previously all-male activity. Secondly, the training program for women, and by women, has challenged the entire society's beliefs about women's strength, potential, determination and courage (interview 08, July 12, 2005).

Another respondent, who was the leader of twelve-member fighting group, dismissed the societal perception that the physical strength of a woman cadre is lesser than that of a male cadre. According to her, those assumptions were false that had been imposed by the nature of the patriarchal system and the culture. Referring to herself as an example, this respondent reiterated that she, by being a fighter, had operated heavy weapons in the field alone, driven heavy battlefield vehicles and built heavy bunkers as well.

It is imprudent to say that women are physically weak. You know I am in charge of a 120mm M86 mortar shell. It weighs 100 kg, but I carry it and sometimes operate it alone during battle time. Even during menstruation—the time that many people think makes women very weak physically—we used to be on the war field, used to carry heavy weapons and used to dig bunkers (Interview 04, April 25, 2005).

This respondent further claimed that women of the LTTE had not only challenged the society but also the whole world by showing up their full-fledged participation as conventional warriors and guerrilla fighters.

If we are in supply units, we often go on long treks through the jungle with heavy loads on our backs. If we are in healthcare units, we carry injured cadres, be they be male or female, to safety and provide them with the necessary care. We are capable of engaging in and dealing with a lot of dangerous situations by ourselves (interview 04, April 25, 2005).

She continued to say that the role of warriors have achieved a status in the word.

The whole world may think we are 'terrorists,' but no one can deny our courage, and determination. We have become world-renowned for our courage, determination, strategic thinking, discipline and the ability to make extreme sacrifices (interview 04, April 25, 2005).

Although these LTTE women said they had separate units of their own within the movement and claimed that they had broken the male control mechanism of Tamil society by joining the fight, writers criticize them, saying that the warrior women's functioning was not autonomous (Coomaraswamy 1997, De Mel 2001, Manchanda 2001, Sixta 2007). In fact, the LTTE women in the interviews also said that their ultimate duty was to perform the goals of the leader and they preferred to function according to the will of the leader who was a male. However, LTTE women had different perception and followed a different protocol about this 'leadership and male hegemony' debate. In LTTE women's point of view, LTTE women were performing the goals of their leader and not of a male. A respondent said:

This movement was initiated by our leader who is a male. A soldier's ethic is to follow the order of the leader with which gender has nothing to do. It is baseless to say we are obeying a male; we are in fact obeying the leader. This is how it is everywhere (Interview 02, April 23, 2005).

Another respondent said:

Of course the leader is the sole decision-maker. But before coming to a conclusion he consults his sub-level leaders as well. And among those sub-level leaders, there are plenty of women (interview 04, April 25, 2005).

### **Challenging Emotions**

Challenging their own emotions in committing themselves to fight and die has been another challenge for LTTE women, the interviewees claim. Since these LTTE women did not want to reveal much about it, only a few of my interviewees mentioned a couple of lines about the emotional battle they went through. These women also told stories of their fellow women cadres on their battle between life and death. They said that they had to face emotional battles on two occasions; one was when they had decided to leave their parents and siblings to join the fight, and the other was when they saw their fellow cadres dying on the battlefield. One of my respondents in the interview told me:

I wanted to defend my people, because there was no other option. But as a 23 year old, I could not control my emotions towards my family. Not knowing when I would see my family again, I slowly began to distance myself from them and focused on my own life as a fighter. We have so much to achieve (Interview 03, April 24, 2005).

She also said:

Since the time we joined the movement, the movement became our family and the fellow fighters became our family members. Of course we are trained to be stronger. But whenever I

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see my fellow fighters dying in the battle, I sometimes can't hold myself back. Still, I am a fighter and death is taken into consideration (Interview 03, April 24, 2005).

Another respondent who was married and had children said she cried every time she left for war battle leaving her children behind.

The only time I battle with my emotions is when leaving my children for the war field (interview 01, April 23, 2005).

However, she said she took a vow during her marriage that she will continue to commit herself to the liberation struggle even if she was married or had children.<sup>34</sup>

Our marriages are not conducted in a religious manner even though some of our comrades are religious. Our thaali is pendant with the picture of Tiger symbol, which indicates we are committed towards our goal of achieving liberation even if we are married (interview 01, April 23, 2005).

She went on to say:

A fighter is first a fighter, then a wife or a husband and a mother or a father. We get to have some quality time with the family when there is no war or no military operation. But when there is war, family is literally forgotten (interview 01, April 23, 2005).

### 5.3 Equality, Empowerment and the Reconstruction of Society

Many women who decided to join the LTTE, wanted to regard their participation as a good chance of not only breaking traditional Tamil cultural restrictions but also of obtaining female liberation (Bose 1994). The adoption of the new self-concept and equal gender relations as a result of their involvement in the movement infused them with a sense of pride and made them feel important to their society (Jorden and Denov, 2007). Scholars in fact depict these women as 'radical transformers' of the fundamental gender structure of society, when the normal patterns of life and culture underwent a rapid renovation as a result of large

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34 In my observation, married cadre couples live in separate houses which are located in close proximity to their military camps. Though they were having children and running a separate family life, they however gave significance to the cause they fought for. When there is war, the family becomes secondary for these 'family' cadres. Married women cadres, as mothers, are able to take care of their children because a special time schedule is made for 'mother warriors' to spend time with their children. In case of emergency, however, the children are taken care of by 'volunteers'. These volunteers are not LTTE members, but civilians who are ardent supporters of the LTTE.



number of women taking up fighter roles (Trawick 1990, Balasingham 1993, Segaram 2001, Alison 2003, Hellman-Rajanayagam 2008).

This portion of the chapter aims to explore the understanding of LTTE women on how the role of warriors created a space for gender equality and women's empowerment in Tamil society. Furthermore, this section of this chapter explores the perception of LTTE women with respect to how their role led towards reconstruction of the society that literally transformed the attitudes of men and women and reshaped the position of women in their society.

Before presenting the narrations of LTTE women on their contributions to women's empowerment and to the reconstruction of society, this chapter intends to present the narratives of LTTE women on their understanding and experiences in the areas like masculinity and feminism. The reason to present masculinity and feminism in this chapter is that these women believed that masculinity and feminism are two different ideologies interlinked to women's empowerment and to the reconstruction of society.

### 5.3.1 Masculinity and Feminism

In the process of gathering information on the link between the role of warriors and women's empowerment, one of my questions to an LTTE woman regarding feminism triggered the discussion about the topic of masculinity and masculinization. I was in fact asked a question in return, when I asked an LTTE woman about her idea of feminism.

Are you trying to say I am masculinized? (interview 04, April 25, 2005).

This LTTE woman continued to say that LTTE women were often described as 'masculinized' by a few scholars.

Many feminists write that we, the women fighters are masculinized due to our military training and all. Yes, I do agree with them. We are masculinized on the basis of personality. We also have those strong personality traits as men are said to have.

This LTTE woman in fact admitted that women of the LTTE were indeed 'masculinized.' However, she stated that their masculinity was not in terms of their biology or physique, but rather on the basis of their personality.

We are not physically masculinized, but we are mentally masculinized. Masculinity does not belong only to men (interview 04, April 25, 2005).

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A couple of senior LTTE women who had greater experience in several conventional battles, both with the Sri Lankan military and the Indian military, also disclosed their opinion on them being described as ‘masculinized.’

One can’t simply understand one thing. When we were the ‘women at home’, we were called submissive; now we are fighters and they call us male-like and masculine. Then how should we be? (interviews 03 and 04, 24, April 25, 2005).

One of these respondents further asserted that they, the LTTE women, had the potential for both physical and mental strength. She added:

I believe it is all about training and learning.

According to her, masculinity or femininity had no connection with what Tamil warrior women were—be it their appearance, physique or even their mental strength.

I was trained, I learned and I got what I wanted. It has nothing to do with my gender or with whatever they say masculinity is (interview 04, April 25, 2005).

LTTE women were quite positive about the thoughts of feminism in general. Yet, they have their own ideas about feminism that they believed were appropriate to Tamil culture. One of my respondents in the discussion on feminism said she really admired the ideology of feminism.

I believe feminism is a quality. Through this quality, all women show all their talents regardless of the culture, the society and the religion they belong to (interview 04, April 25, 2005).

Giving herself as an example, this respondent said that she broke all the cultural and religious rules that previously made her submissive. By taking up arms, she said that she became a brave fighter, who fought equally with men, and against men, in the battle. While admiring feminism, this LTTE woman also admitted that the movement she belonged to, believed in and followed ‘culturally oriented’ feminism, which, in her description, helped promote the social condition of women while preserving Tamil culture.

We want women’s liberation in society. At the same time, we want to preserve our culture. I therefore believe in a type of feminism that goes along with our culture (interview 04, April 25, 2005).

Another respondent recited her belief in eliminating cultural traits that oppress women while keeping other cultural aspects intact.

I believe that Western feminism is something that cannot be applied or implemented in a non-Western context. We want women to be treated equally as men in the society. At the same time we do not want a rivalry towards men (interview 02, April 23, 2005).

She further stated:

We will never encourage anything against our culture. We approve of Western feminist ideas of equality, independent individualities and women in public spheres. For us too, it is important to focus on individuality and independence, but we also have to follow the cultural mandate of a woman being a mother or a wife or a nurturer as well. (interview 02, April 23, 2005).

LTTE women said that they did not want to negate some of the traditions that Tamil people have followed for ages. At the same time, they were certain that their role as warriors created a new female character that has both traditional virtues and a liberal consciousness. They largely agreed with the culture expects women to be a good wife, a loving mother and a good family person carrying out all her duties accordingly. But these warriors concurrently believed that women also should change their minds about themselves. In LTTE women's view, women should not see their present situation of oppression as a result of fate, of actions from former births or of the cultural configurations that determined their lives. LTTE women therefore disclosed that they intended to make Tamil women open-minded and free-thinking while keeping the Tamil culture unbroken.

### 5.3.2 Women's Empowerment and the Reconstruction of Society

Interviews with LTTE women reveal their declaration on the contribution to women's empowerment and to the reconstruction of the society. Women's empowerment, according to the interviews with LTTE women, was promoted through women's mobilization as warriors, while the reconstruction of society was supported by women warriors enforcing the laws against the customs that discriminate against women, encouraging widows' remarriage and promoting economic independence for women.

LTTE women believed that they contributed to the empowerment of Tamil women to some extent. By joining the fight, LTTE women said they have ruptured the submissive position of women and have thrown off the societal perception that considered women as weak. In the interviews, LTTE women stated that they also support civilian women to become economically independent by providing them hardware and woodwork training, which were once the domain of men. They also disclosed that the women of the LTTE have worked on reconstructing Tamil

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society through promoting marriage for widows, and campaigning and acting against the customary laws that discriminate against women in the society.

For the LTTE, it was their Women's Wing that was the supreme symbol of the liberation of women (Schalk 1997, Balasingham 2003). However, some researchers remark that the LTTE's agenda of women's empowerment was mainly to attract women to join the movement, and by that to increase the number of fighting cadres in the movement (Coomaraswamy 1997, De Alwis 2003, Jeyamaha 2004, Ocasio 2007). Adele Ann Balasingham, a British-Australian spokesperson of the LTTE, writes in her book, *The Will to Freedom*, that Pirabaharan, the leader of the LTTE was ready to accept women in the movement as battlefield warriors. Nevertheless, his fellow male cadres were against the idea of women joining the LTTE because of their traditional conception of women in general (Balasingham 2003). According to Adele Balasingham (2003), the LTTE leadership had to convince his fellow male cadres and the Women's Wing of the LTTE was formed out of these negotiations. An LTTE woman in an interview has in fact confirmed this as well.

Some of the senior and important figures of the LTTE objected to the idea of women being fighters, thinking 'nothing can be done by women.' They also said that instead of fighting for the liberation they may have to build extra sentry points for looking after these women. But what happened in the end is already known (interview 03, April 24, 2005).

This respondent said that owing to some practical difficulties, such as women's menstruation cycle, some male LTTE members initially disagreed to accept women as fighters in the movement. She further said,

However, those disagreements were eventually overruled since the 'liberation struggle' was given more importance in the group and not the gender of the fighters.

This respondent continued to say:

The Women Wing of LTTE has many sub-goals apart from the main goal of achieving national liberation. Empowering women is one of our goals by liberating women from the social elements that discriminate them. Therefore, we started focusing on eliminating the dowry system and domestic violence (interview 02, April 23, 2005).

While Tamil women were traditionally seen as nurturers and caregivers, the LTTE women claimed that they have forced a major shift in roles of Tamil women and they are proud of it. This shift, which they further recounted, has been a product of women participating in warfare.

According to Tamil culture a woman is a 'fearful being.' In fact a Tamil woman is always portrayed as innocent and fearful. But we proved everything wrong. How can we, women, be

in the battlefield if we are fearful? We face the enemy eye to eye in battle, and whenever it happens, we get more energy and courage to fight hard (interview 04, April 25, 2005).

Thus, LTTE women declared that they had achieved some level of empowerment by joining the LTTE, which had also boosted other women's confidence to demonstrate their capabilities.

I have lost my fear and gained self-confidence. The LTTE has helped me stand on my own feet. There's nothing we cannot do. We, Tamil women can achieve anything. The LTTE has helped us to grow with courage and confidence (interview 05, April 25, 2005).

According to the above-mentioned LTTE woman, women were no more submissive. They were no more fearless, weaker and dependent.

Now I have the self-confidence, now I don't need anybody. Now I won't allow others to make decisions for my life.

This respondent further added that others should respect women and to get that respect women have to develop their capacities.

Women must develop their capacities. Through that, they can make others respect them (IFT 04, 6 may 2005).

The interviews with LTTE women in general reveal that LTTE women were able to think and act independently, within the broad parameters set by LTTE policy, without the oppressive pressures from their families and husbands. They never had to be concerned about getting permission from their husbands when making decisions in their line of duty. Such changes in the female culture, as some scholars remark, had a corresponding effect on the male culture too, which was clearly seen from LTTE men's adaptation to this evolving female culture (Segaram 2001, Alison 2003, Hellman-Rajanayagam 2008). An obvious aspect of this change was the degree of respect long-standing LTTE men afforded their women, which was expressed in the interviews with the women in the LTTE.

LTTE women professed they have also constructed a better society for women. With regards to the social problems that the Tamil women faced, the interviewed LTTE women emphasized the need to help women to become independent, particularly economically independent. In order to encourage women who were not in the LTTE, the Women's Wing of the LTTE said they organize workshops and arranged lessons for auto mechanics and carpentry.

In the Vanni (an LTTE-controlled area) there are various projects we have for the women, especially women who have been affected by the war. Women are given training in auto

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mechanics, which has been a domain for men. And we have encouraged them to start an auto repair shop of their own and they are doing it well (interview 01, April 23, 2005).

LTTE women disclosed that they also encourage remarriage for widows in the society.

The LTTE promotes widows' remarriage within the movement hoping that the society will eventually follow that too. Many of our martyrs' wives were encouraged to remarry their fellow comrades, and they did so (Interview 02, April 23, 2005).

On the other hand, LTTE women said they were being careful about promoting or encouraging civilian widowed women to remarry. As per their understanding, widows' remarriage is not only a social aspect, but a personal issue too. Dealing with the social issue of widows' remarriage, LTTE women further revealed that they could never go against one's personal will. Therefore, these LTTE women stated that they endeavored to create an awareness towards widows' re-marriage, while not being insistent on it at the same time. Marriage in the LTTE's point of view is the decision of individuals and not of a society or of a group.

At the moment (when the interview was taken) we are working on creating an awareness about widows getting married again. We cannot force anyone to get married—be they widows or any other women. Marriage is their personal choice (Interview 02, April 23, 2005).

Going against the customary law and cultural aspects that discriminate against women has been said to be another step of LTTE women towards the reconstruction of society.

Abolishing the dowry system, eliminating all discrimination against women, ensuring Tamil women control their own lives and securing legal protection for women against violence are parts of the reconstruction process (interview 02, April 23, 2005).

For Sri Lankan Tamils, their culture is their way of life (Sabaratnam 2005). Tamil people consider their culture an immortal treasure that they have been following for thousands of years. Tamil customary laws evolved among the ancestors of indigenous Tamils of Sri Lanka mostly based on cultural aspects (Thambiah 1973). This includes caste, dowry, and land and property rights. LTTE women believed some of the customary laws are discriminatory towards women, and thus they were determined to remove or reform these laws in order to promote equality in the society. An LTTE woman said in an interview:

There is no doubt that we follow a great culture. We value it. But some customs are inhumane and discriminatory. Of course we want to preserve our culture, at the same time we want to prevent conservatism as well (Interview 02, April 23, 2005).

According to the woman stated above, the Women's Wing members of the LTTE initially played an active role in leading campaigns against the system of dowry, caste and gender hierarchy. Therefore, these women had to implement laws in due course in order to prevent unnecessary events taking place in the name of caste and dowry. My respondent, a magistrate of LTTE courts and an LTTE woman asserted:

We implemented strict laws against rape, sexual harassment, domestic violence and dowry harassment and dowry demanding (interview 08, July 12, 2005).

Further in the interview, this respondent continued to explore the details of punishment for the ones who breach the implemented laws.

The punishment for dowry demanding is six months to one year imprisonment with the fine depending on how much dowry was demanded. For domestic violence and Eve-teasing, the culprit gets a few months of imprisonment; for sexual harassment, it is two years and for rape it is life imprisonment, depending on how severe the case is. But if the culprit is a serial rapist, he will get death penalty. My verdict had always been severe towards the culprit engaged in sexual violence against women. It was very important to impose severe punishment against violence against women as the patriarchal system of the society always encourages men to push their 'physical and biological strength' on women (interview 08, July 12, 2005).

She went on to say:

You can hardly see a man or a boy teasing a girl or a woman at streets or in public places, because they fear punishment (Interview 08, July 12, 2005).

However, a few of my informants were of the opinion that LTTE's code of law on dowry, caste, rape and sexual harassment has been quite authoritarian, which helped to lead to severe consequences in society. A government servant told me in the interview:

Too much suppression will destroy the spirit of the society that could also steer immoral sexual behavior in society (Interview 50, October 18, 2005).

This 'sexual immorality' was indeed observable in the society as these people claimed. While I was interviewing women prisoners, I came across a few people who were imprisoned under allegations of illegal sexual behavior such as prostitution. In accordance with their interviews, I learned that these prostitutes came from the LTTE-controlled Vanni region to –military controlled Jaffna for prostituting due to fear of the LTTE. It was also said that quite a number of clients used to come from Vanni, the LTTE area to the military controlled Jaffna, for

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prostitution. This indicates the situation that even after LTTE women tried to control crimes like prostitution through their strict laws and severe punishments, people who engaged in acts against the LTTE's laws moved to non-LTTE areas to continue their deeds. Therefore, LTTE women's functions to eradicate the customary laws has been applicable only to LTTE-controlled areas and not to the entire Tamil society of Jaffna District; even if the LTTE had some level of control over the people of Jaffna who were living under military administration.

One of my anonymous, non-LTTE female-respondents also said that LTTE women failed in challenging the social custom and the culture.

Tiger women's claim on challenging the social customs is inappropriate and null. They did it by using the weapons, but it was still unsuccessful. Weapons carriers can do anything, because they are powerful. Even then, they could not challenge the customs that people have followed for generations (Interview 37, January 2, 2006).

Nevertheless, another respondent of my study (who was also not an LTTE member) expressed that the anti-dowry law of the LTTE is quite useful.

The LTTE's law against dowry is useful for a person like me who is facing the problem of dowry even after six years of marriage (interview 30, September 10, 2004).

This respondent of my study, who was left by her husband due to the dispute over dowry, also said:

I would have approached the LTTE for help if I have been living in Vanni (LTTE-controlled area).

Field sources also assert that the LTTE, who had initially expressed strong reservations about the dowry system had, however, gradually relaxed on the issue. One of my respondents, an LTTE woman, admitted their failure in eradicating the caste and the dowry systems as well. She said that the LTTE had to ease their laws to some extent as they could not go against the whole of Tamil society.

We required people's support and cooperation to act against the culture of caste and dowry. The majority of people were not in favor. They believe that the ancient customs can be reformed but should not be banned. The village councils and community centers refused to cooperate with us, so we had to relax our laws especially regarding dowry (Interview 02, April 23, 2005).

Yet, there were also strong structures against domestic violence set up by the LTTE. Men guilty of domestic violence were first warned, and subsequent violations earned them a fine and finally imprisonment. Taboos keeping women from cycling, swimming, climbing trees, which were usually male preserves, were assigned to be broken. However, the LTTE was insistent on some of the cultural



aspects that technically explored the traditional stereotypes of gender. Though social roles of non-LTTE women and the way society perceives them have changed due to the LTTE, some respondents and informants of my study who were civilians said that there have also been instances where women have been advised on how to dress.

As per LTTE women's claim, the role of woman warriors has reduced the gender gap in the society in general and had reconstructed the society in a way that was 'quite gender-flexible' and 'relatively liberal.' Initially Tamil women were expected to be shy and timid, which changed after LTTE women were inducted into the battlefield that women of the LTTE professed. Since the time that Tamil women have occupied a key role in the conflict, the socio-cultural role of women has undergone a transformation, which was claimed by the LTTE women as reconstruction of society.

Generally saying we have reformed, remodeled and reconstructed Tamil society, which was previously very rigid, male dominated and conservative. This has been the result of women frequently venture out into the battlefields, side-by-side with their male combatant counterparts (interview 01, April 23, 2005).

The LTTE women in addition said that their laws against the system of dowry, sexual harassment and domestic violence had not only helped to empower women from the day to day problems, but also supported to raise awareness among men to stand against the violence against women. In this way, warrior women of the LTTE claimed they had reconstructed society at least to an extent where men and women have started to think about women's welfare and to believe in gender equality.

## 5.4 Conclusions

The objective of this chapter was to present the findings related to how Tamil women of Jaffna district experience and understand their roles as warriors in times of conflict and ceasefire agreement in Sri Lanka. From the indications of the field interviews, it appears that Tamil women of Jaffna assumed the role of warriors due to personal motivations, political motivations and economic and social motivations. It seems also that the personal motivations were interruptions in the educational and economic opportunities, constant internal displacement and loss of family members and properties in war. The data from the district also show that state's discrimination towards ethnic Tamils was the political motivation; while

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economic and social motivations for women to join the fight were poverty caused by the war and unequal gender status of Tamil women in society.

From the above underpinnings, these warrior women went through challenges including challenging the patriarchal society and challenging their own emotions to join the fight. Based on these women's interviews, it can also be argued that by joining the fight, warrior women had not only empowered themselves to some extent, but had also encouraged other women to mobilize outside the households. Finally, this chapter presented the LTTE women's claim on their role having helped for women empowerment and social transformation.

# 6

## Household Heads

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In the context of Sri Lanka, women assume the role of household head after their husbands disappear under unknown circumstances, or are killed in action, imprisoned, murdered or persecuted (Dept. of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka 2012). In some instances, women take on the position of head of the family because they have adapted to the socio-economic conditions of running a household (Mookodi 2004). However, the often-horrific circumstances that lead to their rise to head of the family, forces women to face not just the psychological traumas of desertion and loss, but motivates them to take on responsibility for the economic and social maintenance of the family as well.

In the Sri Lankan context, household heads have always been men (Hemawanne 2009). Even the governmental document referred household head with a masculine term, indicating men's superiority in the households. For example, the governmental family card often refers to a household head as *kudumpathalaivan*, which means 'male household head.' *Kudumpam* means family and *thalaivan* is a masculine word for 'head' or 'leader'. The feminine word for 'household head,' *kudumpathalaivi* (*thalaivi* is a feminine word for 'head' or 'leader') was hardly recorded in any of the governmental documents. Against this backdrop, women taking up household leadership and the responsibility of breadwinning are quite significant in a context where men are superior and dominant (Hemawanne 2009, Thiruchandran 1999).

This chapter's purpose is to present the empirical accounts of the role of women household heads from the district of Jaffna. Similarly to chapter five, the present chapter presents women's understandings and experiences on their role as household heads in the context of conflict and ceasefire agreement in Sri Lanka. This chapter is thus structured as follows: first, this chapter provides women's

narratives on their motivations to take up the role of household head. Secondly, this chapter explores challenges that women household heads faced. It continues with exploring women's involvement in illegal activities. This section also deals with the reasons for women finding illegal ways to provide their families. The final section of the chapter presents women's narratives on their contribution as household heads to women empowerment and, to social transformation.

## 6.1 The Motivations

The narratives of Jaffna women declare that women adopted the role of household head under four different circumstances created by the armed conflict. These circumstances were, as they say, the motivations of women to become household heads. In this context the motivations that women said made them adopt the role of household head are: the death and disappearances of the male family members; husbands' migration abroad;<sup>35</sup> the unemployment of male family members or husbands; and political threat and a militarized situation

### 6.1.1 Deaths and Disappearances of Husbands

Many female household heads in Jaffna were war widows and women whose husbands have disappeared (Dept. of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka: 2012). These women had to take up the household responsibility immediately after the loss or disappearance of their husbands. The interviews and focus group interviews with these women divulge that most of these women have only been homemakers before the death or disappearance of their husbands. These women literally elaborated the process of their lives after the loss of their husbands. Moreover, these women revealed how their role of housewife had suddenly turned into the role of a working mother, principal decision-maker and a household head.

My husband was killed in aerial bombardment and I was just a housewife before that. My life was just within four walls. I stepped out of those four walls after the demise of my husband (Interview 12, February 7, 2005).

The respondent of the above interview was 35 years old with two children, and her husband was killed in 1990.

Never thought I would lose my husband. Because of the cruel war, I had to take on the responsibility for my children all alone.

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<sup>35</sup> Women's husbands are abroad mainly in order to escape from the militarized situation that initially targeted men.

It was perceived from the interviews with my respondents, that a woman receives a ‘double shock’ by losing her husband. One shock is the sudden death of her husband and the other is the shock of taking up the sudden responsibilities. Nevertheless, women in Jaffna said that they took up the household responsibilities, which they were forced to due to the scarcity of options. My respondents in their interviews describe how they were left with no options but to take on family responsibilities single handedly.

Really, I had no clue on what to do next and how to take up the responsibilities of the family. Still, I took up the household charge, because that was what I had to do at that time (Interview 11, February 7, 2005).

There was no other option left. So, I was ready to become a household head, which is not in the culture. I never regret what I have done, because my children are well off now (Interview 12, February 8, 2005).

Society follows the custom that has been followed for many centuries, I do not mind being called a widow. My problem, at that time, was not that I was called a widow, but to find a way to move on, to provide my children with a good life. I took the entire burden on my shoulders, because there was nobody else and there was no other way (Interview 13, April 4, 2005).

As said above, Tamil women had to move on with their lives after the death of their husbands and they said they did. One of my respondents below describes how she had moved on in life and had become a wage-earning mother after her husband was killed.

My husband was never involved in any ‘anti-state’ activities, but was killed by the government forces’ air strike. I never received any compensation or support from the government. The only support I received was a sum of money, which is my husband’s employee provident fund. Using that money, I bought a sewing machine and started stitching clothes for cheaper rate. Because of my cheaper rate, I started getting many customers and I have also started earning a reasonable income (Interview 11, February 7, 2005).

Another respondent, in describing her situation after the death of her husband, said:

When I saw my husband’s dead body fifteen years ago, the first thought running through my mind was about my survival in society as a widow with two fatherless children. Once I thought of committing suicide. But my children, who will take care of them? I took life as a challenge. I wanted to live in the world and was ready to face society. I went out of the household. I turned out to be a working mother. I met military and government officials whenever I had to, I saved my children from the war, and I managed to lead a life even in refugee camps. Above all, I educated my children with my own earnings and savings. It does not mean I never had problems, but I challenged everything. Now I am better off than the other women in society (Interview 12, February 8, 2005).

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The interview with this above respondent says a lot about her life as a household head and a breadwinner. This mother, who was in her late-fifties, said she is in an overall better position than most of other women living in that area. In addition, this respondent says that she is well-off due to the reason that she is still earning a wage and her children are earning a pocket full of money, keeping her (their mother's) financial condition sound. She also held a good social status, she said, as she was a 'proud' mother who raised her children all alone and educated them without any external support.

Another respondent, a 45-year-old war widow from Jaffna, revealed the challenging life she faced in society. This respondent disclosed that she had lost her husband in the IPKF<sup>36</sup> military operation in 1987. With four children aged 8, 6, 4 and 2, this respondent said that she had struggled for survival after the death of her husband. She was not supported by anyone that she further declared, except the government's compensation of LKR 50,000.<sup>37</sup>

However, this respondent of my study continued to say that she had started selling fish with her mother at the beach. She was again helpless when her mother had fallen sick and she started selling porridge at the shore. This woman household head, in the interview, said that she had lost not only her husband, but also her father and son-in-law later in the armed conflict. This respondent also stated that her son, the only male survivor in the family, became handicapped due to the war.

My husband was killed in a shell blast. Five years later, my father was taken by the army, and then tortured and killed. Then, the navy killed my son-in-law when he was fishing. My son was disabled due to an injury as he was caught in gun fire. I was left with no 'able' male in the family to earn money for living. I was all alone, I am not educated, but I did what I could—selling porridge (Interview 13, April 4, 2005).

This respondent further uttered that she has been 'peaceful,' even after losing precious things in her life. She remarked:

I earn very little money, but I earn it honestly. I am satisfied with what I am doing now.

This above-mentioned respondent said she took up the role of a household head due to the unavailability of a male earning member in the family. This in fact indicates the changing situation in the roles of Jaffna women. For example, the above-mentioned respondent's role of being a 'chaste mother' and a 'moral wife,' who has to stay indoors and mourn for her dead husband for the rest of her life, has been completely changed into that of a household head, breadwinner and the

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36 Indian Peace Keeping Force Operation during the time from 1987 to 1989.

37 LKR 50,000 is a very little compensation for losing a breadwinner for one's whole life.

principle decision-maker in the family. Therefore, the interview with this respondent says that this woman is no more a mourning widow, sitting in the corner of the house and crying for her dead husband. Instead, she became the guardian, economic contributor and the sole decision-maker in the family.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the death of one's husband gives a woman widow status, and widows in the context of Jaffna face particular constraints as a consequence of their marital status and gender. Therefore, it was never easy for a woman—that too for a widow who had been a housewife until the death of her husband—to become a household head, seizing economic independence and decision-making power. In spite of constricted job opportunities and the lack of a support system, Tamil women asserted that they were determined to take on the headship of households by choosing gainful employment through possible and actual economic survival strategies.

Women also stated that not only their husbands' deaths, but their disappearance too led women to take on household responsibilities in Jaffna. Women said they were severely affected by the ongoing enforced disappearance, even though men comprised the majority of those who disappeared in Jaffna. These women further said that they experienced not only the devastating social and economic consequences, but faced a psychological impact as well. Regardless of these encounters, that these women claimed that many women in Jaffna emerged and carried out their duties as household heads and even as activists. My interviews and focus group interviews with the respondents, record that in Jaffna, the women of the disappeared husbands or sons were still engaged in an ongoing struggle to receive adequate reparations, for their stories to be recognized and for justice to be done.

One of my respondents in a field interview said that she had been searching for her missing husband for a decade, while looking after the family at the same time:

My husband was arrested at Kalviyankaadu. We reported it to human rights commission. I have been traveling to almost all the prisons in Sri Lanka, Galle—Veligade, Kalutura, Kandy, etc., but no news about him. Just this month, they said that all are no more. But I will not believe that. I strongly believe that my husband is alive. I believe my husband will return home one day. My husband is missing and not dead (Interview 18, August 6, 2005).

This respondent further said that her brother initially supported her. Her brother took care of her family in the absence of her husband, believing that her husband would be released soon.

My brother supported me for few days. We all thought he would be released soon, but months passed, nothing happened. I know my husband will come home one day, until then I have

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decided to take care of my own family without depending on others (Interview 18, August 6, 2005).

According to the interview, the brother of the above respondent took responsibility for his sister's family after the disappearance of her husband, following the tradition that a family should be led by a male from one's kin. However, it became impracticable as the days passed. Resultantly, the wife of the disappeared husband took over the charge of her own family, appropriately becoming the household head and the breadwinner.

I go to forest every day early in the morning to collect wood, because selling wood is my source of income. Fortunately, I have only one daughter. Though the income is little, we can at least get one meal a day (Interview 18, August 6, 2005).

After the demise and disappearances of their husbands, women said they found themselves not only in a fight for survival, but in a constant conflict with their new entry as household heads and working mothers in the community. In fact, these women revealed that they typically work for lower wages and have less access to assets and productive resources than before. Due to the cultural and social stigmas attached to their marital status, these women continued to profess that they were limited to fewer economic opportunities. According to these women, the cultural perception that describes widows' presence as inauspicious prevented these women from obtaining good opportunities in the stream of employment. For this reason, as stated by these women, even if women had good educational qualifications, they were forced to work for lower wages, and therefore were mostly poor.

### 6.1.2 Husbands being abroad or unemployed

Women said that husbands being abroad and husbands being unemployed due to war motivated many women to become household heads. However, there is an observable distinction when analyzing the interviews with various household heads of Jaffna. Women, whose husbands were abroad, were 'de facto' heads of the households and not the breadwinners. But, women whose husbands were unemployed were actually breadwinners of the families, while their husbands 'officially' stayed as household heads. Even though women with husbands' abroad technically headed the households, they were not as independent as the above-mentioned household heads who were war widows and whose husbands had disappeared. First of all, most of these women I came across in the field said that their husbands migrated to foreign countries during the '80s and '90s, when the arbitrary arrests and disappearances that initially targeted men in Jaffna were high.



Subsequently, these women led the household, however, they revealed that they were economically dependent on their abroad-living husbands. Most of the women who had foreign-living husbands said they were housewives, except for a few who leisurely give private tuitions at home. These women, as stated in their interviews, were not the soul decision-makers of the families. Their husbands, in most cases, were the decision-makers, even when abroad. For example, one of my respondents, whose husband is abroad said:

I take care of the family because my husband is abroad. He went abroad in 1988 due to the fear of IPKF arrests. The economic needs of my family are taken care of by my husband. Otherwise everything I do by myself regarding family and home. But if I am to make a decision, I consult my husband as well (FGI 12, January 12, 2006).

One more respondent from this category revealed that her husband had to go abroad due to the political situation of 1990s.

We forced him to go abroad due to the constant arrests and round-ups. We were scared he might get arrested as well. I promised him that I will do everything required for the family. Since that time the family has become my responsibility (FGI 12, January 12, 2006).

Regarding decision-making, this respondent further said:

I make decisions after I make sure that he will be okay with them (FGI 12, January 12, 2006).

The women of foreign-living husbands said that they were quite proud about their husbands being in the decision-making process. These women believed that their husbands' involvement in decision-making is essential for running a healthy family. However, these women said they have committed to becoming household heads because their men were abroad. They were not breadwinners though as they apparently received economic support from abroad. A few informants of this study stated that women whose husbands were abroad enjoyed the social, cultural and ritual privileges found among all other female heads of the household. Since these women's husbands were alive and keep their financial status sound, women household heads whose husbands are abroad led a different form of life unlike the other categories of female household heads who often struggled to provide essentials to their families. As per the views of these informants, the financial strength of the household, the constant communication with the husbands and the affirmation of their men's well-being made women whose husbands were abroad well-off and affluent.

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Moreover, other field sources reveal that many men living in the coastal areas were unemployed due to the ban on the fishing. Their wives who were earning and feeding the families were precisely under the criterion of being the household heads, for the reason that they were the breadwinners. These women also dominated the process of decision-making at home due to the economic power they had gained. This economic power of women was fundamentally caused by their husbands' unemployment. These women generated their income by sewing, by selling homemade food products in the market and by engaging in animal husbandry.

My husband was a mason. Due to the ban on cement in Jaffna, he could not get any job offers. There came a need for me to earn money. I am a good cook, so I started taking catering contracts since then (FGI 06, December 20, 2005).

It was not allowed to sell cement in Jaffna for more than ten years. In fact, the government of Sri Lanka, due to the reason that the LTTE used cement to build underground bunkers, banned cement distribution to Jaffna. As a consequence, many brick craftsmen, masons and building contractors became unemployed which resulted in their women taking up the responsibility of breadwinning. Nevertheless, the wage-earning wives of unemployed men were actually breadwinners, as demonstrated by my observation in the field. Their husbands officially held the position of household heads, because of the traditional norm that always considers a male as a leader.

A (working) woman and a wife of an unemployed husband from Gurunagar said the conflict situation offered her the opportunity to become the breadwinner of the family. This respondent, who was a mother-of-two, was also a social volunteer. Owing to the 'powerless' stature of her husband who lost his job due to the ban on fishing, this respondent of my study said she chose to become a school teacher. According to her interview, this respondent opted to be a working woman due to the reason that her husband's skills for engaging in jobs other than fish marketing was very limited. Therefore, this respondent said that she was put into a situation to be the family breadwinner.

My husband was a *sammatty*<sup>38</sup> and is now unemployed. He can't search for any other jobs as he is only skilled in fish marketing. I thought we cannot depend on my husband for living anymore. We have no idea when this war will come to an end and when will fishing be resumed.

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38 A *sammatty* is a person who heads a group of fishermen, who is also an agent in marketing fish. A *sammatty* does not fishing; instead he employs a group of fisherman who fish for fixed wage per day. The fishermen are only paid for fishing, but the caught fish is owned by the *sammatty*.

So, I decided to search for a job, the job I had been longing for a long time (Interview 15, June 15, 2005).

In the above interview, the ‘lack of ability’ of her husband and the security situation that banned fishing in Jaffna for years were explained to have made the respondent’s husband ‘dependent.’ This situation has subsequently helped the wife to make a choice. She however has chosen to work as a teacher for which, she expressed, she had been longing to do for years. This respondent in fact said she, who had previously been a housewife, later became not only a powerful moneymaking person in the family, but an active member in the community also.

### 6.1.3 Militarized Situation

Women said that the militarized situation has been another motivation for women to become the household heads in Jaffna. The field sources indicated that Jaffna was going through a situation with constant military patrolling, arrests without warrants and continuous cordoning and searches, and indiscriminate killings that initially besieged Tamil men as offensive. Frightened men hid indoors while their women became protectors of the men and families.

A group of women in a focus group interview describe how they took all the responsibilities upon their shoulders when their men were hidden indoors.

We had to take all the responsibilities upon our shoulders because our men were in danger. They were actually powerless. They could not go out of the house; if they did so, they would be caught. While they were hiding inside, we used to go out and do the things that they used to do. Eventually, we took on the whole responsibility for our families and the families became dependent on us (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

The women of above focus group interview state that the ‘powerless’ stature of men, made some women become ‘invisible’ household heads within the ‘vicinity’ of the (male) household heads who were hiding inside. Women under those circumstances had to take up the household responsibilities as the situation was so dangerous, especially to men. Women claimed that their men could surpass the military danger only because of women’s home management and social management skills.

Despite going through with many personal and social crises, we kept an eye on our men. We went out to earn money while they hid inside the house. We took care of all the external work, including meeting up with the military all by ourselves. This was how we made things balanced in the family (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

These women of conflict-ridden Jaffna continued to claim that they were good at managing the dangerous situations single-handedly. These women described

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themselves as active and ‘vigilant household heads.’ They in fact claim that their sense of vigilance helped many men to escape from the arrest, torture and murder.

Many men of the district escaped from death or arrest and torture because of women and their swift actions in safeguarding their men. We were always vigilant about the safety of our men (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

In their interviews, women also revealed that their correspondence with both the military and with the LTTE saved many men from disappearance and many young men from being the fighters respectively. They stated that women were indeed apt at hiding their men during the time of ‘cordon and search’ operations. Women in fact knew that they were risking their lives by doing so, yet these women said that they were determined to protect their men, disregarding their own safety.

Nevertheless, women also asserted that their ‘dominion’ over their households during the militarized situation had come to an end when the situation went back to normal.

Yes, we took up men’s responsibilities because they were in danger. But men took back their role once the emergency situation was over (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

Schindler and Bruck (2007) state all households in a conflict environment may restructure membership as a strategy to generate income. For instance, how these husbandless women and women with unemployed husbands in Jaffna had to adopt the tactic of breadwinning in order to handle the social and economic pressure. However these women may also lost their power as stated by Schindler and Bruck (2007). For example, in the case of the respondent from Gurunagar (Interview 32), her situation of being empowered may disappear when her husband is re-employed and her access to earn money is again denied. This changing social situation in conflicts indicates the fact that although the impact of the conflict gives women household heads the power of being the principal decision-makers in the family, it is also possible that they lose this power if there are working male household members.

Thereupon, the context of Jaffna discloses that the intensity of the household leadership was not the same for all women household heads in Jaffna. Even though these women were the household heads, their ‘control’ over the households and their ‘independence’ over the leadership they took upon themselves vary. For example, a war widow was the sole household head and the breadwinner who acquired full authority and independence to control the household matters. On the other hand, a woman household head whose husband was abroad did not have the same power over her household. Since the abroad-living husbands were directing

the decision-making process in matters related to families, the wives who led the households were just substituting their husbands' supremacy in their absence. Furthermore, the social and the economic status of these women households differed due to the 'existence' and 'non-existence' of their husbands. Households headed by widows and women whose husbands had disappeared in war, had poor social and economic positions compared to the households headed by women whose husbands were abroad. The narrations of these women household heads will further elaborate this context in the upcoming section of this chapter.

## 6. 2 Challenges

Most of the women disclosed that they had to confront two different challenges in taking up the role as household heads; one was sexual harassment and the other was the community isolation.

Actually we are facing two challenges. One is sexual harassment and the other is social isolation (Interview 12, February 8, 2005).

In the interview, this respondent who lost her husband in an aerial bombardment said that men tried to take advantage of the lonely status of women and tried to harass them sexually.

Society's men know that there is no one to question them, so they take maximum advantage over women's loneliness. If a woman does not have a husband, it means she is alone, and men take advantage of that (Interview 12, February 8, 2005).

Although women experiencing sexual harassment is common in most contexts, women with absent husbands are always its target (Höglund 2002, Handrahan 2004). The Jaffna case confirmed this as well. My respondents delivered their stories of being sexually stalked. They said that men had frankly asked these women not to be partners in their lives, but to 'be company in bed.' A war widow, the household head and a mother-of-two children said:

I was 28 when I lost my husband in war. Since then I get many proposals. But they are not the proposals for marriage. They are just calls for bed. Shameless people (Interview 10, February 5, 2005).

Despite these social and personal problems, this mother-of-two revealed that she was still able to run the family by earnings from a small shop she owned.

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A few other women also revealed their stories on how they had to constantly encounter sexual harassment in the workplace. A working mother who was one of my respondents said:

We have to work with men, and it is not easy (Interview 16, February 7, 2005).

This respondent further expressed that they have no choice but to challenge sexual stalking.

This is a man's world and men exploit women's rights in the workplace. They know our families' survival depends on our income. Our choice in this regard is only to challenge those sexist men (Interview 16, February 7, 2005).

The interviews reveal that many women-breadwinners who worked for lower wages as maids and cleaners in local organizations were most vulnerable to sexual harassment. The interviews with these women expose that these women were targeted firstly because they are husbandless, and secondly because they were poor and would not complain to the relevant authorities as they were badly in need of their jobs. These women accordingly revealed that sexual harassment was in fact a serious issue that they experienced. In many instances, these women had to act swiftly in order to evade the elements of sexual harassment. One woman in the focus group interview said she quit her job and eventually started her own business at home.

Attempts were made several times to molest me, so I quit the job (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

Another woman said she had approached Human Rights Commission to file complaints.

I complained to Human Rights Commission and he received a warning. But he became furious after that and started stalking me in different ways. He is my superior at work, he is using his authority to seek revenge on me (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

Women also disclosed social isolation as another big challenge that women household heads in Jaffna confronted. As I described in the previous chapter, most of these women were demanded to be isolated in social activities because of their stature of husbandless. However these women uttered that their participation in social functions was inevitable as most of them were not only working mothers but social activists as well.

A mother-of-four and a widow from Nallur in an interview remarked that society needed women's service therefore it accepted them as public figures regardless of their marital status.

This society tried to isolate us, but it could not. Our function is everywhere as teachers, community leaders and social workers. So society needs us, and we give our service to society as well (Interview 11, February 7, 2006).

The field sources refer to many women household heads as the members of various women and other organizations who represent their organizations on public occasions. Many among these women were working women who embodied their workplace in business meetings. Therefore, these women's presence is essential in any public, private and social event as they are the representatives of public organizations and as well as of their families. One of my respondents from the village Savaalkadu, for instance, is a war widow presiding over a widows' association. This respondent, being a widow, has actively taken part in organizational meetings and gatherings by representing the organization she has been attached to. Since her attendance signified her organization and not her individual, social or marital status, her presence there has been forced to be accepted. This respondent herself describes how she was forced to be welcomed in the public functions despite being a widow herself.

I should have been cornered out of any of the activities because I am a widow. In contrast, men and others are in a situation to accept my presence in the public functions and meetings. Whether they like it or not, they have to welcome me, because I am the president of an organization (Interview 13, April 4, 2005).

Therefore women household heads stated that Jaffna society was forced to accept women's role as household heads despite being a society that strictly follows its culture, which demands widows and husbandless women to stay indoors. However, these women still had the feeling of being isolated. While physical isolation of widowhood seems impossible in the current political and economic situation, household heads, especially the widows, said that they were put into emotional isolation, sometimes deliberately.

Some people are jealous that we achieve things that they cannot, that too without the support of our husbands or men. We are public civil servants and they cannot force us to stay indoors. If they see us in public meetings, they come towards us to chit-chat and they deliberately talk about our dead husbands, reminding us their loss and our stature. This is really insane (Interview 11, February 7, 2006).

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Due to the reason that a woman without a husband will experience difficulties in functioning alone, these female household heads gathered as groups to perform their duties in society. In an interview, a widow and a mother-of-two who works as a teacher in a government school, explained that women working as groups was more comfortable and convenient than women's individual function in society.

The problem is, even after all this destruction done by war, some people still think that widows should be treated as widows. Many of the widows hold the membership of various communities and women's associations. Therefore, working individually is not easier than working as a group. A widow, in any case, may have to face some discomfort in working alone. And so it is better to work as group, which gives enough power for resistance. (Interview 14, December 5, 2005)

From the interviews with these household heads, it was apprehended that the Tamil customary law of isolating widows and women without husbands triggered these women to mobilize and work in groups.

The new small establishments of women's groups, such as the widows groups in the villages, eventually led to the formation of many other women's groups in Jaffna (Interview 14, December 5, 2005).

As the above respondent quoted:

Slowly widows' groups have started to form here and there. Later on we expanded our collaboration with other groups too (Interview 14, December 5, 2005).

According to the interviews with these women, widows' groups were the first groups actively engaged in social activities that in a way that encouraged other women's groups to be formed in the district. As these women further cited, the individual affiliations of women with each other led them to be a group and thereafter helped to form group affiliation.

Initially women did have an individual association—as mothers, as housewives, widows and just individual friends. Thereafter they joined in hands as a group and started associations with other groups (Interview 11, February 7, 2006).

Women revealed how they have managed to survive in society by challenging the issues like sexual harassment and gossip. However, they said that their financial struggle has been an additional distress to them. Quite a number of women household heads claimed that they do dual jobs each day in order to provide a better life and education for their children. One of my interviewees said that she had to do two jobs a day; one in the morning and the other in the evening in order to raise her fatherless children. Apart from selling porridge at the seashore in the



morning, this household head widowed by war said she had started making *beedees*<sup>39</sup> and distributing them to the *beedee* companies in the evening.

You will not believe that I never wear shoes in my life, because I never have money to buy a pair. I did two jobs, because my family is quite big (Interview 09, February 5, 2005).

Accordingly, women household heads divulged that they were able to cope with the changes in lifestyle—both socially and economically. Yet, they said the grief, intense worry, and unhappiness resulting from the events of war were still there. Nevertheless, their ties with the women’s groups, and the social network received through those groups, helped these women to overcome the challenge of social isolation.

## 6.3 Breadwinning through Illicit Means

While some women had generated income through legal and socially acceptable occupations, a number of women household heads are reported to have engaged in earning money through illegal means. Women are found to have produced illicit liquors and supplied them to the illegal bars, and engaged in prostitution. This nevertheless is not new in a context of conflict. As presented by Somasundaram (2007), the loss of the social support system and the community solidarity, especially towards vulnerable women, makes women lose their social and cultural ties that leave them responsible for ‘stigmatized’ activities, such as illegal liquor production and prostitution.

The field sources reveal that the ceasefire agreement time has given space for women to be complicit in activities like *kasippu*-brewing and prostitution. It was told that *kasippu*-brewing was already there during the armed conflict, but was restricted due to the fear of the LTTE. It was then on increase later in the ceasefire agreement time. Prostitution, on the other hand, was said to have not been seen, or at least was not spoken of as an issue in the time of the armed conflict, especially when Jaffna was under the control of the LTTE. It has ‘emerged’ as a social problem accordingly during the time of ceasefire agreement.

### 6.3.1 *Kasippu* (Moonshine Alcohol) Production

Producing *kasippu* is kind of a household economic strategy for some women whose families are under the condition of poverty (ICAP 2008). *Kasippu* contains a high amount of methylene, which is injurious to health and brings death in some

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<sup>39</sup>*Beedee* is the most widely used kind of cigarette in South Asia.

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cases. Moreover, *kasippu* manufacturing and consumption lead to a tremendous degeneration of society that increases the rise of alcohol-related crimes, such as drunk driving, traffic accidents, violence and homicide. Most *kasippu* manufacturers are from poor economic backgrounds and the drinkers are poor daily wage earners (ICAP: 2008).

According to the field sources, *kasippu* has become popular during the time of armed conflict in Jaffna. My informants of the study told me that *kasippu* consumption in Jaffna was lesser prior to the armed conflict and increased during the armed conflict. As per the assumptions of these informants, *kasippu* consumption in Jaffna was somewhat connected to the armed conflict.

Many from the field area believed the reason for *kasippu*-brewing being on increase was the economic sanctions in the city of Jaffna. Due to the economic sanctions, the beverage supply from the south of Sri Lankan was stopped. The demand for local 'toddy' then became higher and pricy. *Kasippu* took the market under these circumstances and many men have started consuming it. Moreover, *kasippu* has been the cheapest beverage of all and hence even the poor can afford it.

As per the field sources, women were forced to produce and sell *kasippu* in the context where men became unemployed due to the conflict. Not to mention, women who were widowed by armed conflict or women whose husbands disappeared were reported to have used *kasippu*-brewing as a mean of survival as well. It was revealed that *kasippu* production and consumption was against the LTTE's law and those who involved in it were punished during the time of LTTE-controlled Jaffna. *Kasippu* therefore became a home-based noncommercial alcohol, which made women eventually part of its production.

The consumption of *kasippu* by women in the context of Jaffna was said to be unusual. However, women were engaged in the manufacture and the sale of this beverage. The police officer at Jaffna police station who was one of the informants of this study categorically blamed women for the increased crimes caused by *kasippu*. He declared that every now and then the police raid the suspected *kasippu* manufacturers' houses in Jaffna and the cases claimed all *kasippu*-brewers were women.

Just last week, we raided a house near the railway station and caught a woman attempting to escape from the kitchen with a bottle in her hand. The police, on detaining and questioning her, found that she was brewing *kasippu* and the bottle contained brewed *kasippu* (IFT 14, December 6, 2005).

One of my respondents, 55 years old, was imprisoned on the charges of selling illegal liquor. She expressed that she has been a housemaid earning LKR 100 a

day. This respondent said that her husband was killed in a shell blast during the Indian Peace Keeping Force's operation. After her husband's death, she said she was left out with her daughter who was abandoned by her husband.

I had no other choice except for producing *kasippu*. My daughter has also been left out by her husband and she is my responsibility as well. What else I can do? (Interview 27, November 8, 2005).

This respondent added that she had started to produce *kasippu* because she found the 'job' easier and less constraining than the other jobs. Moreover, this respondent believed that she could earn good enough money by selling *kasippu*. She further said she was known to make 'fruit-*kasippu*.' As she described, fruit *kasippu* is a liquor mixed with orange peel and Coca-Cola, giving it a nice smell and color. Police arrested her on the information they received from her neighbor. She was then presented in court and found guilty.

I know what I was doing is not good, so I accepted my crime. The judge ordered me to live in the cell for six months. But I was later granted bail, but there was no one to take custody of me.

Another *kasippu*-brewer who was put in the same prison cell, said that the reasons for her to be involved in *kasippu* manufacture had been the internal displacement and her husband's unemployment caused by the internal displacement.

My husband was a farmer. After the 1990 displacement, we permanently lost our farmland to the military. Our farmland is now in the higher security zone, which we can never imagine we'll get back (Interview 26, November 7, 2005).

The above respondent went on to say that the internal displacements and camp life made life harder for her and her family. As she said in the interview, her husband had to give up the farming he was engaged in due to the internal displacement. The constant multiple displacements necessitated her family run their life in refugee camps and she was forced to turn to *kasippu*-brewing in order to survive in the midst of the armed conflict.

First we were displaced from Mylankaadu (our native village) to Jaffna town, from Jaffna town we displaced to Vadamarachchi, from there we moved to Vanni and again we came back to Jaffna. We were living in schools and common places as refugees while being displacing here and there. I thought *kasippu* selling is a more convenient way to earn money in the situation where we run here and there all the time (Interview 26, November 7, 2005).

According to the above interview, this respondent started her *kasippu* manufacture when she was at the refugee camp and continued it even after she was re-settled in her own village. The police then arrested her during a raid.

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During her interview, this respondent said that she has decided to give up *kasippu*-brewing. She was planning to get some minor employment in a factory or in private houses, which she said she should have done before, instead of making *kasippu*. She expressed this because she was in prison and she wanted to get out.

As I understood from the interviews, men preferred *kasippu* to save money as it was the cheapest alcohol, whereas women produced it to earn money. Moreover, women's gender role facilitated their work in *kasippu* sales. First, it was a home-based production—as domestic cooks, women were into the activity of making it. Second, it was one of the easiest ways of earning money for women. Third, serving guests was a standard female domestic duty in Jaffna that attracted the customers. Fourth, women were constrained not to drink what they sell, therefore they would not consume the stock they produce.

One of my informants said that women used to sell *kasippu* by using their 'dainty' characters to attract customers.

These women have loose moral character. They use their female attraction to increase their business. What matters for them is the money and not the morality (Interview 45, June 1, 2005).

This informant continued to say that although associating with strange men could blacken the character of a female *kasippu* retailer and her female children, *kasippu* retailers focused on moneymaking, without being concerned about the 'moral values.'

On the other hand, the interviews with my respondents who manufacture *kasippu* disclosed that armed conflict in general has a role in women's involvement in *kasippu* manufacturing and selling. The destruction of traditional ways of life, combined with the lack of skills and support systems, were profound obstacles to women household heads' employment. This vulnerability caused by the armed conflict led a few women to choose producing *kasippu* to generate income.

### 6.3.2 Prostitution

Prostitution in Jaffna was reported to have become a way for women to earn money, especially during the ceasefire agreement time. Although it was not highly organized and visible in society, the police officer with whom I had an informal talk, disclosed that prostitution was observed to be in progress in the district. According to this police officer, prostitution was seen in Jaffna over the last few years; however it had been on the rise after the ceasefire agreement.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> This contradicts the other field sources that categorically deny prostitution was in progress in Jaffna during the armed conflict. This informant, the police officer, assumed his duty in Jaffna in 1996 after Jaffna had fallen into the

My interviews with the prostitutes in Jaffna reported that the prostitutes were under immense pressure to earn a livelihood as their men were dead or reported missing. They had to bear the economic burden once carried by their fathers, husbands or brothers, and thus had turned to survival through sex. I met couple of women in Jaffna prison who were accused of prostitution. One of these women said in her interview that she was a mother-of-two, her husband was arrested by the military in 1996 and had since disappeared. She consequently ended up in prostitution in order to feed her dependent mother and her children.

My husband was a carpenter. He was earlier in the movement (LTTE) and left it due to his ill health. And I got married to him only after he'd left the movement. When the army captured Jaffna, they arrested him due to his past connection with the LTTE. He was never released and I had to do prostitution for living (Interview 23, November 7, 2005).

This woman further said that her mother eventually learned about her prostitution and became furious and handed her over to the police.

My mother had no idea that I had become a prostitute. She thought I was working as a maid at someone else's house, because that's what I told her. Once she learned about what I was doing, she handed me over to the police. I did not want to be a prostitute. I come from a respected Hindu family. But, what else I could do? I had to provide for my family.

Another one of my respondents, whom I met in Jaffna prison, was from Vanni—the then LTTE-controlled region. She was in fact an IDP (Internal Displaced Person), displaced from Gurunagar to Vanni and was later settled in Vanni. According to her, she came all the way from Kilinochchi district to Jaffna for prostitution. She expressed that she found prostituting much easier and safer in Jaffna. According to her, the availability of customers and the LTTE's limited operations and function in Jaffna District facilitated relatively smooth-running prostitution.

It is quite smooth in Jaffna that is why I came here from Vanni. We get customers, we get enough money and there is no LTTE here to be afraid of (Interview 24, November 7, 2005).

The field data reveal that Jaffna was under the control of the LTTE prior to the year 1995. During this time, people were supposed to follow the LTTE's rules and regulations. Even after Jaffna came under the control of the Sri Lankan military, the presence of LTTE elements were always there, which people were aware of. People were indeed cautious about their behavior and lifestyle (which should not

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hands of the military. Therefore, this informant's information about prostitution during the armed conflict time reflects the period between 1996 (the year he assumed duty in Jaffna) and 2002 (the year the CFA was signed).

go against the LTTE's regulations) even when they lived under the control of the army. For the LTTE, the death penalty was an effective crime deterrent for the crimes like rape and prostitution. Those who went against the LTTE norms were mostly punished with death. Due to the fear of being punished, prostitution was believed to have been limited in Jaffna during LTTE rule. Many people who are both my respondents and informants nevertheless assumed that prostitution slowly started to re-emerge after the Sri Lanka military took control of Jaffna. The police officer who was one of my informants also believed that the peaceful atmosphere fostered by the ceasefire agreement provided an opportunity for an increase in activities like prostitution. It was also understood from the interviews with the prostitutes that there was no fear of the LTTE or their punishment in the ceasefire agreement time, and prostitution was thereby on the increase with the increasing number of customers including the military personals.

## 6.4 Household Leadership, Empowerment and the Reconstruction of Society

### 6.4.1 Contribution to Women's Empowerment

In their interviews, Tamil women household heads also claimed they have contributed to women's empowerment in society by being household heads. They further declared that they provided their contribution through two factors; one was through their leadership in the households and the other was through their communication with others in society.

Tamil women believe that women in general possess leadership skills and process things differently and on their own terms. They believe that women have grit and are not afraid to fight for what they believe in or for an opportunity to achieve something of significance.

Women believe in what they stand for and do more with less (FGI 10, January 9, 2006).

Tamil women therefore said that they have confidence in themselves and with determination they took up household leadership when they saw their families were fragmented. Hence, these household heads said they were good family leaders as they had to forget their distress caused by the war and provided safety and financial support to their family members.

My respondent who was a war widow and a household head expressed in her interview that her family would have been split if she had not taken up the family duties which were earlier carried out by her departed husband.

I earned my own income, I raised my children without anyone's support, I led the family all alone and I made my family survived in the midst of war. My family would have been broken if I had not done this (Interview 05, February 5, 2005).

When revealing their lives as 'husbandless' during the time of war, few women household heads said that the major feature for their 'success' was their 'triumph' over the ghastly experience of war.

It was very difficult. Although the event of your husband's death only happens once, you will always have the vision with you. It is not easy to forget. But we also have to move on, so we did and we are quite successful (FGI 10, January 9, 2006).

These women household heads disclosed that they never thought of finding a way to escape from the burdens of life, like committing suicide. They never thought of taking their own lives, which women from their part of the world usually attempt to do. The highest priority of these husbandless women's lives was their children; and thus they said they lived their lives for the lives of their children.

When a woman learns her husband is dead, the first thought that runs in her mind is 'Why should I live then?.' In the past, many women attempted suicide. But we never thought of it, because we have children (FGI 10, January 9, 2006).

It was quite evident from the interviews that women's aim of living was therefore to provide a happy life for their children, to help them overcome the dreadful experience of armed conflict and to challenge the social system. For this reason, women household heads had to swiftly reestablish their disoriented life caused by the death and disappearance of their husbands in order to ensure the family ran smoothly. One of my respondents, whose husband was killed in a bomb blast said:

If I had been crying all day and night, things would have not worked out. In fact, the whole family would have gone into depression because of me. I had to begin my life again for the sake of other family members (Interview 10, February 5, 2005).

Consequently, these women stated that the mental strength of these household heads and breadwinners, and the quality of facing any sort of challenges, prepared these women to distract themselves from the gloomy atmosphere.

We concentrated more on the lives of our children. We need to educate them, raise them in a proper way, and moreover, we need to save them from war or war-related matters. We live all

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our lives for our children and they should not meet the fate of their fathers. This was and is our main concern, which, in a way distracted us from the memories of bad experiences (Interview 11, February 7, 2005).

These women described their assistance during the armed conflict as ‘altruistic.’ They also expressed that their capacity to adapt in times of crisis helped them to run a smooth family.

We worked hard to save our children from war. But it has also become normal that people are killed every day and we are in a way immunized to these killings and move on with whatever we get in the present (FGI 10, January 9, 2006).

Women household heads said that they had developed their communicative skills as well in order to secure the institution of family. Going beyond the tradition that restricts women’s outside communication, women household heads of Jaffna further declared that they used the strategy of communication to provide a good life and security to their family members. Apart from their individual communication with each other and others in the society, these women said they had started to form groups in order to work together and with the other organizations functioning in the society. And hence, women as individuals and as groups have started communicating with NGOs, religious leaders, military officials and the LTTE. These women revealed that their communication with others supported women to promote their standard of living, provided safety for their families and therefore secured the institution of family.

One of my respondents remarked:

Before the war, we maintained relationship with other women as housewives and as mothers. At that time women interacted only with other women, because women had restrictions in their activities (FGI 10, January 9, 2006).

However, women believed that the conflict situation has reduced the communication gap that women had with the outside world. Due to the political situation, women had to step into public engagements. Women’s communication thus was extended from women to women, and from women to social groups, associations and institutions. Moreover, these women said they also started forming their own groups and working as groups. In these women’s groups, members provided each other with various types of help, while engaging in women-related social work.

In the war time, most of the restrictions on women were dispersed, which helped women to work in groups. And, our activities were also extended from household to society. We started



working with men. Many women are now members of widows' associations and peace groups (FGI 10, January 9, 2006).

Therefore women household heads said they had to have communication with several individuals and organizations due to the requirements caused by the conflict situation. Women, as groups, carried out their own projects and activities that they believed were beneficial to the members of the groups. Conducting micro-saving programs, vocational training classes and daycare and after-school programs were such activities that engaged women to communicate with each other and others in society. These programs were beneficial to women both individually in terms of achieving economic opportunities, leadership capacity and empowerment; and to their families in terms of providing their children with an education and a better life. One of my respondents, a war widow in a focus group interview said:

We feel happy, contented and secure by being together as groups. There is a misconception in society that women can do nothing without the support of men. But we have proven that all these ideology are false. We are engaged in very many activities which are good for us and our families (FGI 10, January 9, 2006).

This respondent, as I understood from her interview, was accustomed to fear of society—because she is a woman and a widow. She had an unhappy and abnormal life since the time she lost her husband in war. Nevertheless, this 'widowed' woman further said that the situation changed and she no longer feared anyone in society. As long as she had a huge support group behind her, she said that she did not have to agonize about the unwanted social elements that disrupt her normal life. Therefore, she was happily engaged in activities that provided a good living for her and her children.

Another respondent of mine, who was a war widow and the president of Tharaka Centre for Widows activities said, they, the war widows, together engaged in livelihood-promoting activities.

We have many women who are skilled. Some of them are good at making mats, stitching and painting. We sell those arts, save that money and support our women when they are in need (Interview 28, April 4, 2005).

The Tharaka Centre for widows' activities, one of the prominent independent women's organizations, was running with an active function encompassing grassroots women as members. It was initiated by Shantigam, a center for psychosocial work and counseling, and was supported by HUDEC, a Catholic non-governmental organization. The Tharaka Centre for Widows Activities had

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actively emerged under the leadership of a woman who is a war widow and a Nobel Peace Prize nominee in 2005. Consisting of 92 widows, mostly war widows, the organization engaged in activities that worked to improve the standard of living.

Women household heads said that they also had communication with the so-called powerful groups. These women further stated that their communicative skills had protected many lives during the situation of emergency. One of my respondents said:

If we want to get things done, we have to have communication with the individuals or groups who are powerful (Interview 09, February 5, 2005).

Another respondent in a focus group interview remarked:

We got much work done through communication. We spoke to government and business officials in order to get rations and provisions for cheaper prices during the food shortage. We also communicated with the military and the LTTE to protect their husbands, brothers and sons from arrests and detention (FGI 08, January 4, 2006).

This respondent continued to say:

My son was 21 and my daughter was 19. The military should not suspect them as rebels or rebel-associates. Whenever I went to the civil affairs office run by the military, I used to take my children with me, just to prove that my children are always with me and have no connection with anybody out of their environment (FGI 08, January 4, 2006).

The interviews with these household heads explained the fact that ‘lonely’ women, especially those who had young sons and daughters, needed to build trust with the parties involved in the armed conflict. Under such circumstances, communicating with various people and groups has been a strategy for many women household heads to survive amidst armed conflict.

Women said that they had communication with religious leaders as well, due to the reason that they could acquire their assistance in case of an emergency. My respondent, who was a Catholic, said:

Rev. Fr. Jeyaseelan is on good terms with the military and is respected by the military. Apart from my own belief in Jesus Christ, I usually attend the service conducted by him every Thursday in his own residential chapel. He has become familiar with me and my family. If something happens to my children, for example if the military arrests them, I have hopes that the reverend father would help me get them released (Interview 17, April 30, 2005).

These women also disclosed that they also had to communicate with the LTTE as well.

Being in communication with the LTTE is inevitable. It does not happen always, but there were times the LTTE sent back some of the newly joined boys and girls home at the request of their mothers (FGI 08, January 4, 2006).

The existing literature remarks that women reasonably fulfill their personal as well as social needs in societies due to their leadership as well as their communicative skills. Abu Nasr (1996), citing the example of Lebanese women, says that women managed to ‘save the most precious things in life: the family, their integrity and consequently their country during the conflict.’ Nasr further remarks that women were active volunteers in Lebanon in areas such as medical relief and education, as well as women’s protest activities. However, the ‘greatest achievement,’ Nasr says, was the role Lebanese women played in their own homes, providing domestic needs and often saving the lives of their family members from the violent conflict. Chodorow (2005: 116), on the other hand, says that women maintain important personal relationships with other women and men; therefore they accomplish their social needs. Along the same line, Porter (2008) affirms that women carry out a variety of activities under difficult circumstances, such as in armed conflicts, risking their lives to safeguard their families and societies, and also for peace, which is essentially created through their communication with the society.

For Jaffna women household heads, establishing a negotiating space for their young men and women with the military and with the militants, has become a way of life—whether it took up the issue of missing sons and husbands or protecting their young ones from the military and militancy. And it was not just because the armed conflict created a space for women to expose their capacities previously sabotaged by the tradition. Tamil women themselves had also begun to realize that there is a world outside the kitchen.

#### 6.4.2 Contribution to the Reconstruction of Society

Tamil women of Jaffna said they have contributed to secure the institution of family during the time of armed conflict. By securing the institution of family, Tamil women said they also endeavored to reconstruct the society in which not only men but also women were heads of the household.

Although we are personally distressed due to the loss of our husbands, and are overburdened by the sudden responsibilities, we are proud that we became the main supporters of economic and emotional survival of our loved ones. In fact, we produced a well-fostered generation for society in spite of the ongoing violence (FGI 08, January 4, 2006).

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As these women claimed, the survival of the family structure, which mainly holds a 'head,' who is also a breadwinner and the main decision-maker, was determined by Tamil women during the time of violent conflict in Sri Lanka. As women further said, the future generation would have been ruined had women taken up the traditional widow role.

What would have happened if I had just sat in the corner of the house saying I am a widow and I am not traditionally entitled to take on any household responsibilities? Would I have been able to educate my children? (Interview 12, February 8, 2005).

Nonetheless, these women were not aware of the fact that their individual efforts, which were purely based on personal needs, would have taken a greater part in assisting a smoothly running family. These women had never thought that their contribution to their own families would help to preserve the institution of family as whole, and therefore would help the customary family structure to survive in war. Another respondent of mine said that she started to earn money in order to support her family, but she is happy that the commitment towards her family supported society too.

When we were doing this, for example, when I started to earn money to support the household, I never thought about my society or I never had an idea that this would help society in any way. All I had in mind was my family and I did everything for the benefit of my family, because there was a need and I had to do it. But I am happy that a little work of mine done for the sake of my own purpose did something good for society (FGI 08, January 4, 2006).

In describing how women managed to preserve the system of family in times of conflict, the women household heads of Jaffna pronounced that they had to be vigilant about the safety of their family members. In spite of coping with the shock of losing their husbands, the social status of widowhood or 'husband-lost' and the situation of violence and militarization, women said they were very watchful of the safety of their young family members as well.

All the responsibilities were put upon us during the war. We had to be vigilant about everything including the safety of our young boys and girls. We had to find ways to feed them during the displacement and we also had to look after the elders in the families too (FGI 08, January 4, 2006).

As household heads, women said they used the powerful symbolic image of motherhood to protect the institution of family during the armed conflict. By employing the norms that respect mothers; and by encompassing the qualities of sacrifice, passivity, caretaking, duty and honor; women further revealed they used

their roles as mothers, breadwinners and household heads to shield their children and families from serious violent repercussions.

The death of an earning household member means that the household will be left with severely depleted earning capacity, poverty, and negative health and education shocks to children (Bruck and Schindler 2007). This situation can further be aggravated by the severe consequences to mental health and psychology. As a result of the disruption to the normal functioning of households, social problems like child marriage, illegal pregnancies and juvenile delinquency may also arise (Somasundaram 2007). Under these circumstances, women household heads have become not only the guardians of families but also the defenders of society (Bruck and Schindler 2007). Such situation is applicable to the context of Jaffna, as women claim by defending the institution of family by being household heads that they have contributed to the reconstruction of society. Therefore, many in society revealed that Tamil women household heads and their role in reconstructing society has been appreciated. These women described themselves as ‘greater,’ ‘reputed’ and ‘special’ contributors to the reconstruction of society. In their interviews they declared that women household heads were ‘greater’ contributors, because they contributed to preserving the institution of family by taking up household leadership. They were ‘reputed’ contributors to social transformation as well, because without deviating from the ‘moral codes of social values,’ their strategic correspondence with the warring parties saved many men from arrest, death and disappearance.

In this way, women proved they can also be good at compensating ‘for men in society.’ Furthermore, women household heads are ‘special’ contributors in reconstructing society, because they are not ‘just women or household heads’ but rather the ‘agents of social change’ as well (FGI 08, January 4, 2006).

## 6. 5 Conclusions

This chapter aimed at exploring women’s understanding and experiences as household heads in times of conflict and ceasefire agreement in Sri Lanka. The interviews of women household heads indicated that Tamil women had several motivations to take up the role as household heads. Women took up the role as household heads as indicated by the respondents include; death and the disappearance of husbands, husbands’ unemployment caused by the war, husbands’ migration to foreign countries and the militarized situation that primarily targeted men in Jaffna.

On the other hand, the interviews revealed that these women faced challenges as well. This includes the issues of sexual harassment and social isolation. Women

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also highlighted why they had to face challenges like sexual harassment and social isolation. They indicated that they were attempted to be sexually harassed and faced social isolation due to the stigma attached to their status of husbandless.

Based on the interviews, it seems a smaller portion of women household heads have also produced income through illegal means such as prostitution and illegal alcohol production. Their interviews indicated the reasons behind women's involvements in such crimes. This includes the death, disappearance and unemployment of their husbands/breadwinners, and poverty and higher cost of living fostered by war.

The data presented in this chapter further specified women household heads' contributions to women empowerment. This includes women's claim on their economic independency and developed leadership and communicative skills. Women also highlighted that by taking up the household responsibilities and breadwinning for the family members, women household heads had restructured the disrupted institution of family. Briefly saying, women gave protection to their families in situations of armed conflict and violence. They intended to safeguard family values (which were at risk during the conflict) and their livelihood; to care for the elderly, young and sick family members. Through restructuring the institution of family by taking up household leadership, the findings of the study claim that women household heads contributed to the 'reconstruction of society,' in which women were also the household heads.

# 7

## Political Activists

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In Jaffna, the political activism of Tamil women, which was halted due to the armed conflict, had resumed during the latest ceasefire agreement. Nevertheless, Tamil women do not have specific political roles in Sri Lankan political institution thus far. They have never been engaged in formal peace talks or negotiations, they have never been a part of changing or shaping political policies and they have hardly been encouraged to be in the electoral contest. Despite the continued under-representation of women in political institutions, Tamil women of Jaffna claimed they were determined to engage in political activism and provide leadership, labor and passion for young women to engage in the stream of politics.

This chapter presents the narratives on the political activism of Jaffna women. The narratives in this chapter are presented in order to explore women's understandings and experience on their role as political activists in the context of conflict and ceasefire agreement in Sri Lanka. The chapter's layout is thus begun by presenting women's narrations on their motivations to be involved in political activism. It continues by presenting women's disclosure on the challenges they encountered in the process of functioning as political activists. This chapter then explores the activities of these women political activists. This includes organizing Pongu Tamil event and demonstrating against the discrimination against women in society. Thereafter, the chapter presents women's narratives on their contributions to empowerment and to the 'reconstruction' of the society.

### 7.1 The Motivations

Tamil women feel anger both towards the racial segregation and gender discrimination they experience as Tamils and as women. Therefore, women said they chose to be involved in political activism in order to gain respect, dignity and justice, both as Tamils and as women.

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These women revealed in their interviews that the motivating factors for Tamil women to become engaged in political activism were the state's political injustices towards ethnic Tamils, Pongu Tamil (Tamil Uprising program that stimulates Tamil nationalism), racism and sexism, and the socially insecure situation of women in Tamil society.

### 7.1.1 Political Injustice towards Tamils

Tamil women of Jaffna divulged that they joined in political activism because they wanted to fight against injustice, merely through non-violent means.

We aim to raise a voice against the injustice done to Tamils—but in a non-violent way (IFT 01: February 6, 2005).

These women believed that even after the Tamil issue of Sri Lanka has been internationalized, the state has not seem to focus on restoring the rights of Tamils. The fight for their rights has been going on for years, and thus, these women affirmed that it is time for them to step into political activism and create a voice for the Tamil cause.

The cry for a Tamil minority-favored political solution is not a new phenomenon. The non-violent struggle of earlier political parties for demanding Tamil rights was abandoned. Then came the armed struggle initiated by the LTTE, but is pictured as 'terrorism.' Now it is time for women to act against the injustice caused to Tamils and we chose to partake in political activism (IFT 01: February 6, 2005).

These women further claimed the ceasefire agreement time was an opportunity for them to mobilize and display their activism.

Getting involved in politics or in political activism during the time of violence has been scary. Those who tried to emerge as politicians or to involve themselves in any political parties were constantly shot to death. This ceasefire agreement gave us an opportunity to emerge as political activists, we are using this time appropriately and fighting for our cause which is 'equality for everybody' (IFT 01: February 6, 2005).

According to the interviews with these women involved in political activism, the discrimination against Tamils in higher education, gainful employment and economic opportunities, still continued. As women, Tamil women believed they also had a responsibility to act against all types of discrimination conducted against their people.

We 're-produce' the society. We have the responsibility as well—to raise a voice against the injustice. That is why we have grouped up as political activists (IFT 01: February 6, 2005).



These women said they aimed to develop beliefs, actions and policies to oppose any kind of injustice. They genuinely intended to promote an egalitarian society in which people do not face discrimination on the basis of their race, ethnicity, gender, religion and caste. They also stated that they knew that this task of political activism was challenging, especially when carried out in a society like Jaffna where women are considered submissive and weaker. However, they said that they had believed in their own confidence and capacity, and the result was their emergence as political activists.

### 7.1.2 Pongu Tamil

Pongu Tamil or Tamil Uprising, has been stated by woman political activists to be one of the motivations for women, and especially for young women, to become political activists. According to the field data, Pongu Tamil was a public political event, which was initiated by the students of the Jaffna University in 2001. Pongu Tamil was organized in response to disappearances, mass graves and abuse under the government's military rule in Jaffna. But later in the ceasefire agreement time it has become a public political event aiming to stimulate 'Tamil Nationalism.'

One of my respondents, who was a Pongu Tamil organizer revealed:

Pongu Tamil was initially organized by the university students within the university to protest the atrocities against Tamils by the military. Many university students were arrested and went missing forever. Nobody was courageous enough to raise their voice against these well-planned human rights violations. Even the university administration was silent. So, students had to do something and this Pongu Tamil was one such way to protest these abuses in a peaceful manner (IFT 01: February 6, 2005).

She also said:

Gradually Pongu Tamil became an annual but public political event that demands the rights of self-determination and autonomy for Tamils.

This respondent continued to say that she and a few of her friends were attracted to politics due to their active involvement in the Pongu Tamil program. She remarked that Pongu Tamil motivated her and a few other women to enter Tamil politics, become acquainted with Tamil nationalism and therefore drove them to become political activists.

I became a political activist because of Pongu Tamil. It was inspiring and an eye-opener for me to enter in Tamil political activism. I researched a lot about Tamil politics in Sri Lanka and Tamils' aspiration when I was in the Pongu Tamil organizing committee. I became involved in political activism since then (IFT 01: February 6, 2005).

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I am a regular participant of Pongu Tamil. I take part in it every year. I was in the Pongu Tamil organizing committee; I learned a lot about Tamil Politics and Tamil nationalism (IFT 06, November 3, 2005).

As per these woman political activists, many Tamils were attracted to take part in the Pongu Tamil event due to the widespread awareness campaign that was carried out by the students of Jaffna and Batticaloa Universities. According to the explanation of these women, the Pongu Tamil campaign was organized to explain to people the urgency to display the combined strength of the Tamil people and demonstrate the unified demand for the Tamils right to self-determination.

### 7.1.3 Racism and Sexism

Another motivation for Tamil women to join the channel of political activism has been said to be racism and sexism. To counter the oppression caused by racism and sexism, Tamil women of Jaffna revealed that they preferred a rightful and non-violent route, which they found through political activism. One of my respondents in a focus group interview said:

I experience racism every time I go to Colombo. Even the trishaw drivers looking at my pottu<sup>41</sup> increase the charge. When I try to argue or to bargain with them, they sarcastically say ‘typical Tamils’ (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

This respondent added that she understood why the LTTE was so deadly towards the government, because the government was racist and it imposed racism on its citizens too.

It is understandable why the LTTE was formed and why many joined the LTTE. I also wanted to fight for the cause that the LTTE are fighting for; but in a peaceful way. Thus, I chose the political stream (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

Another respondent from the same focus group interview articulated that she wanted to be a political activist as she was infuriated by sexual harassment and molestation against women carried out by the state security forces.

I am angered about being eye-molested and Eve-teased by the Sri Lankan army. They have sentry points every five meters and passing these sentries is annoying (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

She also stated that the military and the local men often harass Tamil women sexually.

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<sup>41</sup> *Pottu* is a dot or a small particle worn on the forehead by Tamil women in Sri Lanka.

This has been going on for a long time and our women are living with insecurity. I wanted to voice and act against any type of abuse against women and so, I joined in political activism (FGD 09, January 9, 2006).

Racial and sexual harassment, as these women described, are the violations of fundamental rights that disrespect the dignity of an individual's identity. Both racism and sexism are injurious to society at large, and thus, women said they together have decided to stand against this manifestation of this power-relation, the manifestation that accommodates the 'less powerful' in a vulnerable position.

#### 7.1.4 Social Insecurity for Women

Another group of motivations mentioned in the informal talks with political activists of Jaffna related to social insecurity towards women in Tamil society. In the interviews, these women declared that the traditional norms of patriarchy created and promoted gender inequality, women's insecurity and a dependency status for Tamil women. This motivated Tamil women to join political activism so that they could work on redefining the social system that treats women as second class citizens. A respondent said:

Our entry to political activism was also as a result of our life experience of social injustice as women. We aim to fight not only for political rights for Tamils, but also for women's rights in the Tamil society (IFT 06, November 3 2005).

She also said:

Participation in political activism is one way to provide and promote social justice and social security for women (IFT 06, November 3 2005).

This respondent further remarked that political activism in the context of Jaffna was one more path to endorse women's social justice and social security, through which women can enrich their livelihood, and can be recognized as economic agents, social workers and community leaders. Against this background, Tamil women political activists had an agenda on endorsing social justice and social security for women that includes challenging unequal status of women, reducing violence against women and empowering women by strengthening their leadership capacity. These women believed that by endorsing social security for women, they could also transform society in such a way which would be advantageous to women as a whole.

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One of our aims is to promote social security for women. This includes promoting gender equality, acting against the violence against women and endowing women to take part in public activities and take on leadership. By doing so, we aim to empower women and as well as to reconstruct a new society, which is beneficial for women (IFT 06, November 3 2005).

Tamil women therefore alleged that their participation in politics has redefined the gender rules of the society that make women insecure. They further believed that women's political mobilization in this context has alarmed the elements of violence and potential oppression towards women. Tamil women's disclosure on how their political activism helped to empower women and to reconstruct the society will be explored later in this chapter.

### 7.2 Challenges

The field results show that the reasons for avoiding politics or political activism reflect several obstacles and challenges to Tamil women's engagement. This challenge, however, was caused by two factors. The first factor, as per the field data, was that women feel fear of activism or fear of being political activists due to both their gender and ethnicity. This indicates that the fear has developed not only based on their experiences and roles as women, but also on their own experiences and the experiences of their community with ethnic or regional discrimination and hatred. The second factor was the LTTE's propaganda on recruiting cadres, which literally challenged the political activists to mobilize young women into political activism. In the context of Jaffna, the role of fighters has been more attractive to many young women; thereby many young women have chosen to take up a fighter role over to the role of political activists.

The political domain in general is perceived as best-suited for men. Therefore women avoid getting involved in it (IFT 06, November 3, 2005).

According to the woman parliamentarian, Tamil women were reluctant to get involved in politics or political activism not only due to the culture but also women themselves believed that involvement in anything related to politics is bad.

Tamil women are underrepresented in politics simply because they do not take part in politics or any activism related to politics. They think political activism is bad. This is one of the reasons why the progress of women in political activism in Jaffna is slow (TPI, February 2, 2006).

The interview with the woman parliamentarian of Jaffna District further revealed that domestic responsibilities, increasing criminalization of politics, the insecure life of politicians or whoever involves in Tamil politics, and the threat of character

assassination, also made it difficult for Tamil women to be part of the political framework. One of my respondents said that women have psychological barriers to take part in public roles as activists:

Tamil women were brought up and taught up to be shy and timid, therefore they have psychological barriers towards participate in political activism or to be a politician.

She continued to say that despite the major changes in gender roles in recent times in Jaffna, women still feel hesitant to claim authority in in the stream of politics.

Women feel discomfort with expressing anger or outrage in the parliament, or in demonstrations or in any political campaigns. These women see acting on anger and raising their voice as violation of the ethics of a traditional Tamil woman. They think it is inappropriate for them to do such things (IFT 01, February 6, 2005).

Tamil women professed that the Tamil politics of Sri Lanka never ever had a woman ‘role-model’ politician or political activist before. The absence of a ‘role-model-effect’ in Tamil politics, according to these women, was one of the causes for women’s unwillingness to join political activism as well.

Tamil women never had a ‘role model’ woman political activist or a politician, who led a political campaign, political party, or who had been a minister, or the prime minister of the state. Even the Tamil political parties of now and then, never tried to offer positive models of female political leadership (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

Role modeling of course, has been proven effective in many settings, including work, community, and political life. Therefore role models or just seeing someone ‘like oneself’ doing similar work, could have helped women see new possibilities for their potential involvement in politics and activism. The women of Jaffna disappointedly said that Tamil women never had a role model, while expressing the hope, that their work can motivate other women, especially younger women, to join political activism in future.

When I look at the activist things I am involved in, as a Tamil political activist I would say the most important attribute is to show people that what I do is for my own Tamil people. And then I don’t care anymore what anybody says. That’s an important example I try to set for young women. It keeps you moving forward, because you are always working towards that goal. Once people see that you are unwavering in your commitment to society, they will be more inclined to follow you (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

Women political activists divulged that many women in Jaffna were not motivated to get involved in politics, because they were attracted by the role of battlefield fighter. As they remarked, the battlefield fighter role had given both men and

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women pride and respect in the society, and thus women preferred to take up a fighter role to a political activist's role.

Youngsters of this era get attention in society by becoming fighters. They believe that by being fighters they get respect and honor. They think politics in Sri Lanka is corrupt and politicians are the disgrace to the society (IFT 06, November 3 2005).

Since the time in which the non-violent struggle of Tamil political parties against the state failed, Tamil people had veritably lost hope in fighting politically against the discrimination they faced. Moreover, with young men and women emerging as fighters, carrying out successful operations against the state army convinced people to believe in fighting an armed struggle. Against such a background, where the armed struggle brought many successes, the politics were completely silenced and politicians and political activists were threatened and killed; mobilizing people, especially women into political activism has been said to be a massive challenge.

### 7.3 Activities

The interviews with women political activists reveal that women had engaged in quite a number of political activities despite the fact it was just the beginning of their political activism.

According to the field data, Tamil women of Jaffna engaged in political activities in four different ways: electoral participation as voters, electoral participation as candidates, organizing and participating in Pongu Tamil or Tamil Uprising, and affiliating with organizations that take political stances.

In the context of the ceasefire agreement time in Jaffna, women were said to have been less political than men. However, women claimed they reported a higher voter turnout than men in the election held in 2004. Jaffna women therefore claimed that women have taken part in the most basic and fundamental form of participation in the political arena, which is voting since 2004. A woman activist who was my respondent, in a focus group interview said:

We haven't voted for 15 years though there have been elections in the country. The first election that almost everyone voted in was in 2004 after the cease fire agreement was signed. Women's presence in the voting was very obvious (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

As per the field sources, Tamil politics were silenced due to the armed conflict. Many Tamil politicians were killed which made not only women but also men stay away from the formal politics or political activism. Prior to 2004, the last election

held in Jaffna was in 1988. Thus, there had never been elections in Jaffna between the years 1988 to 2004 (Sri Kantha 2006).

Women turned out to be high number of voters in the 2004 parliamentary election—the election held after 15 years in Jaffna. In fact, the EU Election Observation Mission for Sri Lanka Parliamentary Election of 2004 observed the larger participation of women as voters in the election (EUEO Final Report: 2004). Nevertheless, the women of Jaffna believed that their votes in high numbers in that year had turned into a powerful political source for women in parliament. These women claimed that Jaffna women's votes resulted in producing a first ever- Tamil woman parliamentarian to enter the Parliament of Sri Lanka.

We devoted our votes to Pathmini. She got the second highest preferential votes and became the first Tamil woman member of parliament in Sri Lankan history (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

Given the aspect that Tamil women were active voters in parliamentary elections, Tamil women political activists have started to represent political parties and to contest in the elections. A respondent of my study who was working with the woman Member of Parliament said:

Pathmini Sithampanathan, the woman parliamentarian, represents both the Tamil National Alliance, the political party, and Tamil women of Sri Lanka. She has a set of women volunteering for her in her projects related to gender and development (IFT 06, November 3, 2005).

The above respondent added that there was also an independent group of women political activists in Jaffna who wanted to enter into formal politics. She asserted that these women had filed their nominations for the local elections in 2006. However, the election was cancelled due to the escalations of violence.

There is another set of woman political activists in Jaffna. They are an independent group. They filed nominations for the local elections which were supposed to be held in February 2006. Unfortunately, the election was cancelled (IFT 06, November 3 2005).

Commenting on their participation in the formal politics, this respondent further stated:

Participation of Tamil women in politics is a crucial aspect, because women are being subjected to victimhood by war and violence. Thereby, they can only highlight the difficulties of life under the clouds of war (IFT 06, November 3, 2005).

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Pathmini Sithamparanathan<sup>42</sup>, the first Tamil woman parliamentarian from Jaffna, said that she was delighted to represent Tamil women in the parliament.

I engage in social work. I conduct a workshop for women to overcome the psychological impacts of war. I work with several women's groups. People are aware of my social work, thus they have selected me for political work as well (TPI, February 2, 2006).

Mrs. Sithamparanathan continued to say that she experienced difficulties as a woman politician, especially during the time of the electoral campaign.

I was not provided equal access in media and other publicity organs. Being a woman candidate I was ignored during the campaign. But I had a large number of women who worked hard for my success in the election.

The parliamentarian conclusively said that parliament gave her a forum to expose grievances of women affected by war. She said she believes that women's involvement in formal politics or in political activism is an important opportunity to advance the status of women in society. She also expressed that she will continue encouraging many women to join in the stream of politics.

Tamil women disclosed that taking part in Pongu Tamil has also motivated their engagement in political activism.

Pongu Tamil allows our people to express their feelings. It is in fact an event to further unify Tamil people (IFT 01, February 6, 2005).

To the question—in what way is Pongu Tamil believed to be a political event?—an active Pongu Tamil organizer said:

Pongu Tamil is a Tamil resurgence.

She further said:

This event is to urge the government of Sri Lanka to put forward a political solution for the Tamil struggle; and to call upon the international community to understand the aspirations of Sri Lankan Tamils (IFT 01, February 6, 2005).

Another respondent believed that Pongu Tamil laid the foundation for a new wave of political changes in north and east of Sri Lanka.

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<sup>42</sup> Pathmini Sithamparanathan later joined in Tamil National People's Front, another Tamil political party of Sri Lanka.



It was always the parties involved in politics. But Pongu Tamil is different because it is an event of public politics which proclaims that an environment must be created to enable Tamil people to decide on their political destiny (IFT 06, November 3, 2005).

Pongu Tamil campaign has always been launched with rallies and meetings in which women political activists said that many women relentlessly take part.

We go house to house and make people aware of Pongu Tamil. At this time of crisis, we need to have support from the whole Tamil community in demanding for a self-autonomy for Tamils. Pongu Tamil is for raising up a voice for our self-rule and determination within the Tamil territory of Sri Lanka (IFT 06, November 3, 2005).

Although Pongu Tamil was claimed to be a public political event, there are other observations that describe Pongu Tamil to be pro-LTTE propaganda (Subramaniam 2002, Orjuela 2009). According to these observations, Pongu Tamil glorified the LTTE leader Pirabakaran. It expressed the Tamil demand of self-determination, while displayed the LTTE symbol and flag. Moreover, Pongu Tamil was an attempt by the LTTE to utilize people's use of non-violent protest against the government of Sri Lanka when the violent struggle was halted by the ceasefire agreement (Orjuela 2009). The field sources of this study also disclose a similar point. Pongu Tamil was indeed initiated by the university students in order to raise voice against the ongoing human rights violations. Nevertheless, it had become a public event and was utilized by the LTTE as one of their propaganda mechanisms.

Other than Pongu Tamil, some women who were affiliated with the organizations that take political stances, participate in the activities directed at solving community problems. The Theatre Action Group and Women Cultural Centre were two such organizations in which women were involved in politically related social activities. Run by the woman parliamentarian of Jaffna, these two organizations aimed at healing the stress and trauma that people have gone through due to the war.

We heal people traumatized by war through performing arts. We travel to many towns and villages, organize workshops consisting music, dance and meditation. People live in fear and without any hopes for the future. Our aim is to alleviate these fears (TPI, February 2, 2006).

This respondent, who was a member of parliament, further revealed that along with conducting cultural events like stage dramas, folk dance and street dramas, they also organize audience participatory workshops. According to a member of these two politically affiliated NGOs, the art therapy supported trauma recovery, which could clearly be observed in the context of Jaffna.

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People were very forthcoming and expressive in bringing out the atrocities and difficulties they have gone through during the time of war and violence. They threw out their anger, frustrations, grief, the thirst for living a peaceful life (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

According to the interview, Women Cultural Centre which was also run by the woman parliamentarian of Jaffna, joined hands with the Theatre Action Group in healing psychological wounds caused by the war.

Through performing music, dance and dramas, we also carry peace messages and engage in reconciliation programs for war-affected and tsunami-affected people (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

As said in the interviews, the members of this cultural center also organized awareness programs and processions on women's liberation that urge women to break down barriers and rise up empowered. To raise awareness on empowerment and independent life, the women political activists of Jaffna claimed they had organized various campaigns and workshops.

We conduct meetings and processions. We distribute pamphlets house to house urging women to oppose suppression and oppression of their basic rights (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

The articulation of Jaffna political activists highlights their battle against sexual and domestic violence as well. These women have been working on creating awareness among the women who are the victims of domestic violence on a day to day basis. These women believed that all women, together, can put an end to any forms of violence against women.

We encourage women to raise their voice against any forms of violence against them. We encourage them to come out into the open and openly battle with the elements of violence against women. We encourage women to go against their husbands if they assault them, and report their authorities at work if they are abused by them. This way we can put an end to all types of violence against women (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

Domestic violence was one of the main social issues in the context of the ceasefire agreement time in Jaffna. I observed this during my fieldwork, especially in the villages Evinai and Mylankaadu. In these two villages, women were beaten severely on a daily basis. According to a group of women who participated in the focus group discussion, there has not been even a single day that has passed in which men did not beat their wives. One of the women political activists who was a university student, but originally from Mylankaadu, said that children are socialized into this domestic violence and they follow the footsteps of their parents after they grew up.

Only a few weeks before, a wife had been burned alive by a drunkard husband in Mylankaadu. Her husband poured kerosene upon his wife and set her on fire. She died an hour after having been taken to the hospital. Sadly, no one dared stop this incident because everyone thought it was a private/family matter (IFT 06, November 3, 2005).

She continued to say:

Many women have taken poison after having quarreled with their drunkard husbands, many were cut by sharp tools and many women's heads were banged against the wall. All these things were done by their husbands. Women should be emancipated from such a cruel culture. Men think that the culture gives them rights to beat their women, while women think that they have to bear the brunt as they were born as women.

According to the above activist, women political activists identified villages, like Mylankadu in which domestic violence was increasing, spoke to the women there and motivated them to rise against this kind of systematic violence. Since this cannot be done by a small group of political activists all alone, this activist further said that they, the political activists, had to get some support from the NGOs like FORUT.

Male dominance is powerful in Jaffna. We, a small group of women can of course not control it all alone. We get help from NGOs like FORUT. They support us by providing resources to campaign against violence against women. After launching campaign against violence, a few cases were reported in the police (IFT 06, November 3 2005).

Political activists of Jaffna were of the opinion that women's participation in the workshops, protests and demonstrations, helped many of them gain greater self-esteem and confidence to revamp their future. At the same time, the field sources of this study explore that Tamil women's political activism was one more way to mobilize women to become active participants in social change. Tamil women who engaged in political activism somehow challenged not only the hostile political situation but also the traditional norms and restrictions of society. However, the notable significance in Tamil women's political activism has been that it has substantial strands of Tamil nationalism that prioritize the agenda regarding the aspirations of Tamils and their rights to self-determination. In this context, Tamil women were actually preceding of Tamil nationalist mobilization under the banner of political activism.

## 7.4 Social Security, Women's Empowerment and the Reconstruction of Society

The interviews with political activists claim that their role has contributed to women's empowerment and to the reconstruction of the society, through endorsing social security for women in the society. However political activists disclosed that they only made 'small contributions.' Due to the reasons that their political activism had just begun and they were few in numbers, these women said that they could not focus much on women-related socio-political issues. These women were at the initial stage of activism, therefore they first of all had to concentrate on mobilizing women into political activism, and second of all to stabilize themselves as a powerful political group.

A respondent told me in the interview:

We are few in numbers. We have quite many in the group, however only fourty to fifty women are active. Therefore we cannot do much. Still we try to do our best (IFT 06, November 3, 2005).

Another respondent said:

It has not so long since we started our activism. So, we did little work. We also need some time to establish our own political group (IFT 01, February 6, 2005).

Yet, the observation in the field asserts that the work of political activists was fairly good in terms of increasing security for women in society. These women, as they described, took two different initiatives to endorse social security for women; first was challenging the unequal status of women in society, and second was empowering women through leadership and policymaking programs.

A group of women political activists in a focus group interview described how they mobilized women to act against the oppression they undergo.

Even the most marginalized and submissive women from the grassroots level have started to challenge their unequal status with men and to bring the issues of concern to the public. This kind of events rarely occur, still it is one of the outcomes of Tamil women's political mobilization and one of the results of social security for women being increased (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

These women continued to say that their resistance towards the cultural barriers challenged the gender inequality in the society and gave space for women to act

independently and gave them confidence that oppression of women can never be a permanent condition.

Cultural barriers are among the most difficult to resist, as they are often subtly enforced by both men and women. They are seen as immutable. However, women were able to challenge these barriers eventually and also realized that oppression of women was not a permanent condition (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

Empowering women by strengthening their leadership to take policymaking in their hands has been declared to be another step of these political activists in the project of endorsing social security for women. Through boosting up the confidence and self-esteem of women, woman political activists said they empowered Tamil women towards the process of policymaking. As these activists declared that this empowerment was indeed needed, because Tamil women continued to be under-represented in all areas of decision-making, such as religion, the media, culture and the law.

Women had to be empowered, at least to some extent in order to overcome the obstacles which prevent them from participating on an equal footing with men. We could do that through a combination of education, training, networking and lobbying. We encourage women to become active voters in the elections and to become candidates or leaders of political groups or NGOs associated with political parties (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

These women's interviews claim that their programs on training, networking and lobbying, reconstructed the social environment where women could advocate on matters of policy, run for political office, be elected, govern effectively, and participate meaningfully in every facet of civic and political life.

It is necessary to strengthen their capacity for leadership. It is also necessary that voters support them. To believe in women's experience to bring about wider social change and an end to inequality in particular, we train women to run for office, at the same time ensure that women are willing and able to reconstruct a society of solidarity and equality while governing (Interview, February 2, 2006).

These women explained that the role of political activists had decreased the violence and discrimination against women. The united women's demonstrations and protests against women, not only resisted fear and violence, but created a safe space for all women as well.

Our protests and demonstrations drew attention to the persistence of rape, sexual harassment and other forms of violence and sexual discrimination against Tamil women (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

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In the context of Jaffna, the issues like violence against women act as barrier to women's participation in decision-making, whether it is in the home or in the community. Domestic violence affects the mental health of women and causes low self-esteem, anxiety and fear, which hamper women's ability to travel outside the home and to get involved in public life. Therefore, Tamil political activists in Jaffna believed, that their attention to eradicate all odds against women had helped the reconstruction of the society in which women were safer to some extent.

Women's isolation from public life contributes to increased violence. They are being oppressed more and more when they are within the four walls of their house. Joining community groups and social networks decreases women's vulnerability to violence as they will get the support of the whole community. We therefore promote civil and political participation of women as a tool to reduce violence against women and to maximize the impact and longer-term benefits for women. Most of the women are now aware of how to act against the violence against them. Our women are not completely safe yet, however our efforts made people to think not twice, but thrice before doing something against women (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

However, Tamil political activists believe that the participation of women both in formal politics and in the negotiating settlement is absolutely important for conflict settlement. These political activists expressed that because of the precise ways in which the conflict affects women, women do bring unique proficiency and perception in social change. During the collection of data, Jaffna women kept emphasizing the importance of the participation of women in the parliament and in the peace process which, they said, is limited in Sri Lanka. Therefore, Jaffna women conclusively perceived that one of the reasons for the peace process failing in Sri Lanka was due to the absence of Tamil women in political activism or in the formal politics.

## 7.5 Conclusions

The chapter had the objective of presenting the narratives of women on their role as political activists in the district of Jaffna. The findings presented above indicate that Tamil women took up the role of political activists in the time of the latest ceasefire agreement. Considering the respondents' narratives given in the chapter, it seems that the cessation of guns and the peaceful atmosphere given by the ceasefire agreement motivated Tamil women to take on this role.

One of the motivations of adopting the role of political activists that was indicated in the narratives was the political injustice towards Tamils in Sri Lanka. Tamil women were determined to fight for the rights of their people through the stream of formal politics. As indicated in the narratives presented in the chapter,

Tamil women joined the politics inspired by the political event called Pongu Tamil aiming to promote Tamil nationalism. Tamil women also wanted to eradicate racism, sexism and sexual violence against women and thereby took up the role of political activists.

However, narratives state that these women faced challenges as well. The biggest challenge that these women asserted to have encountered was mobilizing women into political activism. Due to the cultural taboo for women to take part in the public activities along with the perilous political situation, women were reluctant to become engaged in political activities. Moreover, women political activists, as said in the narratives had to challenge the atmosphere that attracted young women to join the fight. Many more young women chose to be fighters than politicians or political activists, and thus their narratives indicate that it was challenging for political activists to bring in more members into the stream of politics.

Electoral participation as voters and candidates, organizing political rallies and campaigning against racial and gender discrimination were the activities the women state carried out by women political activists. By carrying out such activities, political activists aimed to endorse social security for women in society. Finally, this chapter highlighted political activists' claim, which says that their role of political activists promoted empowerment for women and has supported to 'reconstruct' the Tamil society, through endorsing social security.





# 8

## Peacebuilders

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According to the data collected in the field, peacebuilding had a fresh start in contemporary Jaffna with the initiation of the ceasefire agreement in 2002. The peacebuilding process had revived its function after the ceasefire agreement was signed, that too at the grassroots level. Nevertheless, women taking part in the formal peace negotiations or in the formal peace process has been limited within the women of LTTE. However, civilian women have also engaged in peacebuilding on the local level about which, this chapter will further elaborate.

This chapter, in this context, shares the stories of women who evolved as local peacebuilders in response to the horrendous societal conditions and indiscriminate violence that the armed conflict produced. The dynamism of these women in this context was their transition from widows, affected and isolated women to local peacebuilders.<sup>43</sup>

This chapter on woman peacebuilders of Jaffna explores the narrations of women on the understanding of their role as local peacebuilders. This includes women's motivations to become peacebuilders, their peace initiatives, the gains women achieved on a personal level as peacebuilders, the challenges they faced in the process of their mission towards peacebuilding, and the contributions of their role as peacebuilders to women's empowerment and to the 'reconstruction' of the society.

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<sup>43</sup> Women peacebuilders and woman political activists in the context of the ceasefire agreement time in Jaffna were two different and separate groups. Women peacebuilders worked for peace both on local and national levels, whereas woman political activists engaged in political and social activities, mostly within the District.

## 8.1 The Motivations

Women of Jaffna said war and violence had been the only motivation for them to take on the role as peacebuilders. They articulated that the common experience of Tamil women across ethnic, regional and community boundaries often helped them to understand the need for peace. Peacebuilding, in the understanding of Tamil women, prevents, reduces, transforms, and helps people to recover from violence in all forms. Peacebuilding also creates the capacity within communities to meet all forms of human needs and rights. And thus, the women said the ongoing war was the only factor motivating Tamil women of Sri Lanka's north to become engaged in peacebuilding.

Enough of this war! We dream of a peaceful future, particularly for our children (FGI 11, January 12, 2006).

Often victimized by war, violence and militarized violence, Tamil women said that they understood that in order to minimize the atrocities committed by war mongers, they needed to take action to curb the violence.

We are tired of war, we are tired of running, tired of begging for rice, and we are tired of our children being raped, killed and taken away. We are now taking this stand to secure the future of our children because we believe we are custodians of our society and tomorrow our children will ask us: 'Amma, what was your role during the crisis?' (FGI 11, January 12, 2006).

The peace women of Jaffna also revealed that they had wanted to raise their voice against war and for peace for long time. However, the powerful pro-war propaganda, which said that the war is the only way to achieve liberation, did not permit them to rise up.

We wanted to act against this war for a long time. But we were scared of weapons holders who were canvassing for war. The ceasefire time, we found, was the ideal time for us to unite and rise up for peace (FGI 11, January 12, 2006).

It was perceived from the interviews that most of the peacebuilders of Jaffna were widowed by war, or women whose husbands and sons were taken away by the state security forces and paramilitary groups. Peace women of Jaffna said that they had decided to work for peace, because they very well understood the price of war and violence. And thus, Tamil women, who were traumatized by war, violence, and sexual abuse and other human rights abuses, said they tried to forget their past and had renewed their focus on the future, which was peace.

We were upset with the events happening in our lives. We used to think about our past. Now we have started to focus on the future, which is possible only through peace (Interview 10, February 5, 2005).

However, peace has not yet prevailed in the country. Fearing that the ceasefire agreement may break off anytime and war may return, Tamil women said that they were trying to prevent the return of war through their peace initiatives.

This is just a ceasefire, just an eye-wash peace accord. Both parties agreed upon it to strengthen their military capacity. We are afraid that war may return anytime. We do not want war again, therefore we are trying to prevent it through our peace initiatives (Interview 13, April 4, 2005).

Adding the point that both men and women suffer from war, these women also stated that the experiences of women during war show that women were more vulnerable and tormented. According to this group of women, women in general have a special capacity to build peace as they were one such group among those who were worst-affected by violence and war.

We, Tamil women, are the mothers of the land. We feel the joys and sorrows of this land in a special way because we are women. Not only do we represent our community, but we also feel a special sense of responsibility for our children, our husbands and our brothers. War has taught us that the future lies in saying NO to violence and YES to peace (FGI 11, January 12, 2006).

For Tamil women, motherhood served as a source of empowerment and leadership, and hence they believed its effective use would ultimately lead to the achievement of peace. From their interviews, it was understood that the roles played by women in the preservation of lives, the sustenance of lives throughout the war, were unprecedented in society. It was women who were going out finding the food, keeping the children safe, and in many instances hiding the men from danger under the circumstances of war and violence. These women's work towards peace in fact revealed women's experiences of deeply humane and sacrifice, which as women claimed, in most cases were motivated by the ethics of care, compassion and justice.

## 8.2 Gains and Challenges

Women declared that the networking strategy and group work of Tamil women had facilitated to initiate peace within society and with the other societies. They also said that the peace work of women indeed benefited women themselves for their individual development, such as getting exposure to other cultures and languages, receiving employment and leadership opportunities due to their networking and collaboration. On the other hand, these women declared they faced

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challenges as well. Lack of financial support, dependency status caused by financial inefficiency, managing time and space between peace work and domestic responsibilities, were said to have been the main challenges the woman peacebuilders of Jaffna battled with.

Peace women of Jaffna articulated that they often travelled outside the district in order to meet women from the south of Sri Lanka with the aim of exchanging their experiences of brutal war. This kind of exchange through travelling, they said, had been a good way for women to get exposure to the outside world, especially to women from the grassroots level. These women described that this exposure of travelling around and meeting people from other ethnic groups that genuinely made women's belief in peace stronger, given them a sense of confidence to achieve their goal and helped them to eradicate the submissive feelings that their culture enforced.

I am so lucky that I got a chance to travel around Sri Lanka, which would have never happened if I'd stayed at home. I understood the power of communication. If we had communicated before, this war would have never occurred. On a personal level, it was a good experience for me (Interview 29, April 10, 2005).

Women therefore said that the peace groups that women were engaged in gave women better opportunities to take leadership positions. In a woman's group, as the interviews with these women show, it is easier for young women to be encouraged to take up responsibilities and leadership. These groups also gave women the opportunity to learn about and discuss topics that were unique to them, which was also stated in the interviews with women. The topics that were normally discussed were the topics on peace work, reconciliation and social management. As divulged by women, women's organizations gave women a special opportunity to bond, network and build powerful relationships with other women. The president of the Tharaka Centre for Widows Activities divulged:

I was 19 when I lost my husband and was a traumatized widow for five years. Now I am leading an organization. Sometimes I get surprised about myself (Interview 28, April 4, 2005).

Another peace woman who was the president for sixty women's groups of Jaffna region in the interview said:

I thought peace means no-war; I had no idea what was meant by reconciliation and what that so-called exchange program was. I learned about them gradually through training. Working for peace completes my life (Interview 29, April 10, 2005).

According to the field data of this study, most of the peace women of Jaffna have never worked before, thus they had never been exposed to the world outside the

household. The local and national level peace-related programs however gave these women a different experience that also helped them to improve their language and communication skills. This development of communication skills helped women increase their level of self-confidence and self-esteem, and supported them in increasing their knowledge and skill in building peace both at national and local levels.

I did not know English before. Now I understand a little. I am learning English (Interview 28, April 4, 2005).

We attend training workshops in various districts: Colombo, Trincomalee and Batticaloa. There, we present our own experience to the audience (FGI 04, December 6, 2005).

The development of social networks in this connection appeared most beneficial for woman peacebuilders in Jaffna. Besides, a group provides a woman a comfortable social environment within which to explore new social relationship and to create a new life. Women, in this context used their mission of building peace as a platform of acquisition of skills that prospered not only for women's personal lives, but also for the sustainable development in the society through peacebuilding.

Despite the successful work for peace women had done so far, women stated that their peace activism had also been challenged and limited. First of all, these women said they faced financial problems. In fact, they were in need of attracting financial assistance from various sources in order to establish and strengthen their organizations. Many women in the interviews and in the focus group interviews described how often they had to walk several miles and to wait for hours to meet the ministers and businessmen in order to receive financial help.

We spent many hours, days and months to raise funds for our work, but only few people have a helping attitude (FGI 04, December 6, 2005).

Though some of these organizations had somehow managed to get financial support from some of the international non-governmental organizations and missionaries abroad, these women said that they still had to look for a location to hold their meetings. These women in several occasions were refused a place to meet and plan out their activities. The president of Tharaka Centre for Widows' activities pronounced her long struggle to get a permanent location for planning out and organizing their projects and activities.

When we were struggling for a place to conduct our meetings, I found a house which was half built. I went to the owner and asked him to rent us this place. But he asked me to buy it for 100,000 to 150,000 rupees. I went to the minister (the late) Maheshwaran and asked for help.

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He immediately gave me 100,000 rupees and a Methodist foreign missionary who served in Jaffna gave me 50 thousand with which I was able to buy this property. But to transact the deed and for further renovation of the house we needed more money and the same missionary, after being abroad, sent us enough money. To preserve the labor wage, we, the members of this association, did everything that laborers were supposed to do—like stone breaking and fetching water, etc. We had somehow managed to complete this building. Now, this building is our office (Interview 28, April 4, 2005).

Secondly, the dependency stature of these women's groups restricted their independent function for peace as well. As these women has revealed in the interviews, most of the women groups were affiliated with the NGOs mainly for financial support. On the one hand, this affiliation provided women new chances to engage in peace-related projects. On the other hand, there were instances where women wanted to function independently, but could not as their self-sufficiency was circumscribed by their financiers.

We have plenty of ideas in hand, but cannot initiate everything as we do not have enough funds. We always have to wait, believing someone would come forward to help us (Interview 28, April 4, 2005).

Thirdly, most of the women who were associated with women groups working for peace were widows and were from the grassroots level. Women disclosed that their marital status as widows and husbandless had been a barrier to influence the community and to convey the peace message to people. People on many occasions refused to welcome them or even to listen to them.

They asked me to improve my own life instead of wasting time on such activities. They refused to listen to me first of all. Things would have been different had I been a woman with a well-off life, having a husband and wealth around. (Interview 28, April 4, 2005).

However, these women said they worked hard. Despite having domestic responsibilities, women professed that they dared to spend extra time mingling and acquainting themselves with the community in order to work for peace.

I cannot ignore my domestic duties as well. I have to manage time between my children, my job and my work for peace. Most of my evenings are spent on working for peace. Whenever I travel outside for reconciliation programs, my mother takes care of my children (FGI 04, December 6, 2005).

Finally, these women also said their engagement in other women-related activities, like widows support programs, reduced their time to work for peace. Apart from the time they were to spend on performing their 'traditional' duties at home, these women also said they had to share their schedule with working on solving women-

related problems in society as well. Peace work came amidst everything that sometimes reduced women's schedule for peace work.

Peace is a national issue, but women in Jaffna go through many social issues which are also to be taken care of (FGI 04, December 6, 2005).

### 8.3 Peacebuilding Initiatives

Peace women of Jaffna said they believe in building peace through reconciliation and they carry it out as regular peacebuilding as groups.

Most of us in the groups are affected by war. Many are widows, some women's husbands were arrested by the army, and many lost their loved ones in war. We lost our property, our dignity as we have been wandering here and there as refugees and we almost lost our worth as being human beings. We cannot get back everything we lost in war, but what we can do at least is build peace to save our future generation. As a first step, we have started to interact with the Sinhalese who think Tamils are enemies and vice versa (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

Therefore, these women asserted they aimed to make peace not on the political level but on the community level, in order to make peace within and between communities divided by war.

We do not want to take part in political negotiations or be part of the peace process. Whether these negotiations are successful or not, it is the people of different communities who should be united together. We therefore believe that the peace work should be started from the bottom, which is the general public, so that everyone in one voice can compel the warring parties to give up (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

These women believed that local peacebuilders can break the cycle of violence. They believed since the local peacebuilders were rooted in their communities, they could understand the dynamics of war and peace better than whoever was involved in war, or any outsider who worked for peace.

We bring people together from all sides, act as neutral facilitators, and build understanding instead of mistrust. This is why we, the local peacebuilders, are the key to building peaceful communities (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

More than the individual efforts, these woman peacebuilders of Jaffna considered that efficient group work was constructive and could promote a culture of peace both in society and in the nation. One of my respondents said in a focus group interview:

We started our peace work by meeting the women from the other ethnic communities who are also affected by war. We travel around the nation; we meet Sinhalese women who are mothers

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of soldiers, whose sons are missing in war and who lost their relatives in bombings. We also meet Muslim women, whose families were forcefully chased away from Jaffna by the LTTE. We hear them out and vice versa. We share each other's grievance and this is how we make each other understand how important peace is (FGI 09, January 9, 2006).

Another respondent, who is the President of Tharaka Centre for widows' activities and works for peace revealed:

We have been silent for a long time, but we are now willing to talk about our trauma, to open up on what has happened to us after the death of our loved ones. The best way is to express our grievance and listen to others' grievances. After all, all are victims of war. This way, we believe that we can make others realize that peace is necessary to put an end to all those miseries brought by the war (Interview 28, April 4, 2005)

This respondent continued to say:

Through our initiative, we are not only promoting peace, but are also helping the people who believe in war to realize that we also have a value as individuals and life has a purpose for us too. Therefore, let people live in peace.

She further said that the peace women of Jaffna strongly believe that the change has to come from individuals. Given the fact that this change can come through peace initiatives, these women started to engage in reconciliation programs as the first step to initiate peace.

All people from different backgrounds should unite. This is possible by promoting discussions and interacting with other community members. This will help all communities to understand each other and become peaceful. We are doing that right now.

One more woman organization that works for peace in Jaffna was the Centre for Women and Development. Consisting of all type of women—women from the academia to the grassroots level—this organization also worked with other international organizations like the United Nations. While grassroots women's groups were mostly engaged in reconciliation programs, the Centre for Women and Development organized workshops and seminars aiming to bring people from different backgrounds together.

Our aim is to build tolerance and respect within communities. So, we organize workshops, dialogues and gatherings in order to bring people from three backgrounds—Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims—together (FGI 04, December 6, 2005).

The Women of Centre for women and Development stated that they were building community bonds by bringing together young people in workshops and seminars, so that the current generations of different ethnicities can learn about each other's cultures. Not just that, by working with young people these women declared they



were investing in a peaceful future. Women from this organization said they allowed these people to express themselves, listen to and understand each other, so that the people could build more understanding, respectful and peaceful communities.

Peace women of Jaffna also highlighted the importance of building peace as mothers. Woman peace groups of Jaffna did not consist of mothers alone, however, mothers of Jaffna took an active and important role in building peace. Mothers of Jaffna who worked for peace divulged that they mobilize motherhood for the sake of peace and a symbol that expresses concern for all children.

Women cannot cry anymore. We, as mothers, should overcome our sufferings and negative thoughts and regain courage to prepare a better future for our children through fighting for peace (Interview 28, April 4, 2005).

This is actually a fight of a mother, or mothers. A loyal fight for peace that expresses concern for our children (Interview 29, April 10, 2005).

These mothers said they were the mothers for peace who did not take part in violence, but acted against war and violence.

Look at the Virgin Mary, she is a sorrowful Mother who saw her son being killed in front of her eyes, but she is known for peace and calm. Our Mothers went through a life with violence. Still, they work for peace and not for war (Interview 13, April 4, 2005).

Many of our mothers lost their children; sisters lost their siblings in war and violence. But they never had an attitude to seek revenge from the killers of their loved ones. There may be a few women who wanted payback, but we are not revengeful (FGI 04, December 6, 2005).

I am one of the 'worst affected' by war. My grandfather was shot to death, my father was killed in a shell blast and my husband was arrested, tortured and then murdered. Still, and that is why I work for peace without being revenge-hungry (Interview 28, April 4, 2005).

The interviews with these women of Jaffna in fact indicate that these women were mothers of sorrow because they had lost their husband when their children were so young. However, these mothers, in their interviews, highlighted their 'from pain to peace' actions and that they were determined to end violence and to make peace. They channeled the pain they felt after the loss caused by the war. Yet, these women's capacity to draw on profound pain and focus on positive was a quality that every peace thirsty mother I met has.

## 8.4 Peacebuilding, Women's Empowerment and the Reconstruction of Society

Woman peacebuilders of Jaffna revealed that they contributed to women's empowerment through acquiring leadership and power, and reconstructed a new society that would not promote the armed struggle, but would urge for peace instead.

Saila is a widow. She is not educated and is from a humble background. Her identity now has shifted from a widow to a peace woman. Yes, it took some time, but Saila's confidence and her passion for peace empowered her and gives her recognition as a woman of peace. She has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, which is a big thing, especially for a woman like Saila (FGI 04, December 6, 2005).

These women continued to say their peace projects demonstrated women's leadership capacity and boosted their self-confidence.

No matter if you are from the grassroots or the top tree. Or you are a male or female. What matters is the capacity; developing it and using it. We, women, have the capacity. We utilize it through peacebuilding and have proven that we are empowered. There was a society in which women were submissive. But we reconstructed a society in which women were not submissive anymore, but empowered (FGI 04, December 6, 2005).

The cases of Lalitha and Saila describe how grassroots women of Jaffna were empowered through their mission of peacebuilding. Lalitha was the leader of sixty fraternity groups of women, while Saila was a war widow presiding over a widows' association. The women's groups under these two women's leadership carry out the mission of building peace both on national and local levels.

### 8.4.1 Lalitha and Her Fraternity Groups

According to the interview with Lalitha, Lalitha was just an ordinary volunteer when she joined Hudec,<sup>44</sup> an NGO working on gender-related projects. Eventually, Lalitha was promoted as one of the program animators for gender-related

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44 Hudec, which is the social arm of Catholic Church of Jaffna, works with the disadvantaged for the alleviation of poverty, ignorance and social oppression. Under the World Bank-funded project 'Empowerment of Women', sixty-one fraternity-sharing groups—comprised of women and widows consisting of more than two thousand members—are working in order to benefit their families and livelihoods. These women's groups, which run throughout the whole district of Jaffna, have their regional and individual meetings periodically. These women's groups in general aim to increase the participation of women—mainly the participation of women from the grassroots level—in community level activities, and to provide assistance and training to refugee women, widows and other women affected by armed conflict (Hudec, Situation Report: Oct. 2005).

programs. Lalitha was not educationally qualified to become an animator, however, she said her determination, leadership capacity, her interests in social work and a deep involvement in gender issues helped her to achieve this level.

I am deeply involved in women-related issues. The director of Hudec, Rev. Fr. Jeyakumar, encouraged my emotional involvement in gender-related activities. I had no educational qualification, but I had experience. I worked as an assistant to coordinate gender-related projects of Hudec. Based on that experience I was given a promotion as the district collaborator for the project called Prabodhini (Interview 29, April 10, 2005).

‘Prabodhini,’ the gender unit of the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, had launched an EU-funded project entitled: *Increasing the Constructive Participation of the Civil Society in the Peace Processes*. As a result, the Prabodhini unit had established a network with the women groups of Jaffna that in fact has given a wider space for Jaffna women to mobilize, work and lobby for peace within and outside the district. Using this possibility, Lalitha said that Jaffna women worked on various initiatives, like prevention of conflict and promotion of harmonious ethnic interaction between ethnically different communities and building inter-ethnic and inter-cultural understanding. According to what she says, women have been travelling district-to-district, meeting people, canvassing against armed conflict and lobbying for peace.

Prabodhini’s goal is to unite everyone together against war. All these years we have seen one against another, especially based on ethnicity. But, at the end of the day we, the common people, are the worst-affected. This truth was realized during the exchange of our experience (Interview 29, April 10, 2005).

Lalitha continued to say that her teams promoted and supported the causes favorable to women in society, including the process of peacebuilding. The collective work of women as groups, she further declared, helped form resistance to certain social sanctions enforced on women, helped initiate proper channels to carry out the activities and helped produce good results.

I believe that women’s initiative for collective work is a step towards the development of women’s positions in the society. I feel really proud seeing most of our women being together and campaigning for peace. It is a positive development in the status of women in our society (Interview 29, April 10, 2005).

As the chairperson of sixty-one fraternity groups that consist of women from various social and economic levels, Lalitha also revealed that the formation of women’s groups has been a capability-initiative for women that has encouraged women to become powerful.

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Our group work developed networking. Due to that we got extra support for the goals we are working on to achieve. That is how we were able to contribute for the nationwide peace (Interview 29, April 10, 2005).

Lalitha was also engaged in the South Asia regional campaign called, “Take a Stand: Support a Violent-free Life for Women”, which campaigns to build a positive attitude and behavior towards women and against violence against women in South Asia.

### 8.4.2 Saila and the Tharaka Centre for Widows’ Activities

Saila’s interview reveals that Saila was a war widow with no male support from her entire family. She lost her grandfather to the Sri Lankan Army, her father to the Indian Army and her husband to the Sri Lankan Navy. Saila said she is the eldest in the family with two siblings. Her family became poor after the death of her father. Her grandfather, who was supporting her family after the death of her father, was also killed in a few months. The constant deaths of the breadwinners left Saila’s family in poverty. Saila was married at the age of seventeen with an expectation that her (future) husband would take care of her poor family. However, she lost her husband in the war, which she never expected to happen. Saila said she was told by the eyewitnesses that her husband was arrested by the navy while he was fishing. She believed that he was alive until she saw his mutilated body off the shore. According to Saila, her husband was first arrested by the navy and was killed later.

But how do I know my husband would also be killed so soon? The man went for fishing and never returned home. Eyewitnesses said that he was arrested by the navy on the sea. Believing that, I walked and talked to each and every military camp in the peninsula for nearly six months. They even told me he would be released soon. I believed them until I found his mutilated body off the shore (Interview 28, April 4, 2005).

Saila’s interview reveals that Saila was 19 when she heard the news of her husband’s demise. She went into a state of trauma for five years. Her mother, whose husband was also killed in the war, raised Saila’s daughter, who was one year old at that time. After having been approached by Shanthigam,<sup>45</sup> Saila came to lead a normal life and was determined to take on the leadership position of the Tharaka Centre for Widows’ Activities in 2002. She was, at that time, 26 years old.

The members of the Tharaka Centre for Widows’ Activities stated that they are impressed by Saila’s work and Saila was carrying out impressive efforts

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<sup>45</sup> Shanthigam is a counseling center in Jaffna.

towards the peacebuilding by being the president of this association. The main peacebuilding program that Saila was engaged in was said to have been the ‘reconciliation exchange’ with the women from the other ethnic communities. In order to convey peace messages to all ethnic groups in the country, Saila revealed that she traveled to almost all the places in Sri Lanka, met various women organizations and civil society members, and canvassed to build up a sustainable peace in the country. Moreover, Saila had an affiliation with other war widows who were from other ethnic groups as well. According to the interview with her, Saila had a good correspondence with Sinhala and Muslim women, because Saila’s motive was to build an understanding between different ethnic communities in the nation.

Earlier we hated the Sinhalese, thinking that their sons and husbands in the Sri Lankan Navy shot our husbands. As we began the reconciliation exchanges, we realized that the pain and the familial loss were felt on both sides. We understand how terrible war is and we want peace (Interview 28, April 4, 2005).

Initiating nationwide peace had become one of life ambitions of Saila and the other women working with her for peace.

As mothers, we are fearful for the security and future of our children. We are worried that the conflict may affect the development of our children. We believe in producing a generation that espouses cherishing love, peace, and justice. We, therefore, joined hands with other mothers. We know this work will be a challenge but we like to face challenges (Interview 28, April 4, 2005).

Saila further added:

If peace is within us, it will eventually radiate to others. In this regard, mothers from south and east of Sri Lanka are being very supportive and cooperative, which gives us hopes that peace will soon prevail (Interview 28, April 4, 2005).

In my observation as a researcher, both Saila and Lalitha displayed a well-developed consciousness for making peace. These two cases in fact appeared to be a rich source of skills, insight and energy for the process of peacebuilding. As some of my respondents in a focus group interviewed claimed:

Earlier, women’s roles in making peace were confined within the family. Reaching peace between villages, and between nations has been the responsibility of men. But through our peace work, the consciousness that women can also make peace is very well established. Therefore, we re-established a society in which women take up the responsibility of reaching peace between the people and between the communities (FGI 04, December 6, 2005).

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The women of Jaffna claimed that the peacebuilding process empowered women to some extent. Moreover, the initiatives of women towards building peace had contributed to reconstructing the society that could attain rights through peace and not through violence. However, the women also pointed out that women seeking peace of course pay a high price to attain it. To make peace, one must be an uncompromising individual; one must embody compromise and one must make ultimate personal sacrifice.

For women peacemakers, the obstacles are greater, the demands are greater, the barriers are greater, and the double standards are more pronounced as well. Despite of all these things, we continue our peace work, and the nation benefits a lot from us and through our peace work as well. In general, work for peace is an immense contribution to reconstructing a healthy and peaceful society (FGI 04, December 6, 2005).

### 8.5 Conclusions

The objective of this chapter was to present the empirical material related to how Tamil women of Jaffna district experience and understand their roles as peacebuilders in times of conflict and ceasefire agreement of Sri Lanka. According to the narrative accounted by women peacebuilders in this chapter, like political activists, the role of peacebuilders was also adopted by women in time of the ceasefire agreement. It appears that these women peacebuilders have engaged in peace work due to the atrocity caused by the war. Most of the peace women of Jaffna that they stated in their interviews are women from the grassroots level, and affected by war. Therefore, the only motive for women to take up the role of peacebuilders that they stated was to put an end to war and bring back the peace.

These women's narratives as given in the chapter have also disclosed the challenges they faced on the mission to build peace. Considering their explanations given in the narratives, it seems that these women had to depend on the funding agency to carry out their activities. Therefore these women, the peacebuilders were not so independent to work for peace. Moreover, the narratives indicate that most of the peace women were single parents that they had to spare their time between peace work and domestic responsibilities. Managing with time and space between these two responsibilities has been a big challenge for a peace woman to carry out peace activities.

As per the empirical evidence provided in this chapter, women peacebuilders have engaged in many peace-related activities. They engaged in initiating peace between the communities divided by the war; they have not only organized peace rallies and workshops, but have engaged in the program of reconciliation exchange as well. Nevertheless, the respondents' narrations indicate that women benefitted

some individual developments through peacebuilding. Due to their networking and collaboration with NGOs, women had opportunities to travel around, they received leadership training and some employment opportunities.

As explored in the chapter, women peacebuilders' efforts to build peace not only initiated peace within and between communities, but empowered women as well. Women were given exposure to various cultures and languages, they have developed their leadership skills, and have become better negotiators and communicators. Therefore, women peacebuilders in Jaffna claim that they have contributed to the 'reconstruction' of the society in which women are not submissive anymore, but are empowered.





# 9

## Conclusions

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I specified in chapter one that the present study contains the narratives of Tamil women in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, and was guided by its research question more than its theoretical framework. The motive for using the research question was to enable me to connect the collected data with the study's conceptual framework. The need to explore this problem was motivated by the need for exploring the unheard voices of Tamil women of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. This study adopted various methods to collect the field data on the phenomenon, and thus the results arising from interview, focus group interviews and observations make up this study. What I do in this chapter is fourfold: first, I bring together the summary and findings of the study. Secondly, I discuss the empirical and theoretical implications of the study. Thirdly the remaining problems of the study are elaborated and finally, the prospects for future research are discussed.

### 9.1 Summary and the Findings of the Study

Most of the Tamil women interviewed for this study were housewives who, prior to the armed conflict, had limited access to life outside the household. The armed conflict then drastically changed their lives and social positions. The sudden changes caused by the war led Tamil women to assume different roles, which, according to the women's own statements, were previously held by men. Women reported in particular that they had assumed four different roles during the war and the ceasefire agreement. Each of these roles was motivated by several factors and presented its own challenges. Moreover, the functions of each role contributed to furthering women's empowerment and social transformation. Thus, this study presents the following findings in the context of Tamil women moving from passive indoor roles to mobilizing in active roles outside the household.

### 9.1.1 Tamil Women Took up Four Different Roles

This study's empirical basis indicates that Tamil women took up four different roles during the conflict in Sri Lanka: women as warriors, women as household heads, women as political activists and women as peacebuilders. Departing from previous studies on women's roles in conflicts, this study investigates the various roles assumed by women in the context of the Sri Lankan conflict, exploring the four roles they assumed. Importantly, in Jaffna, two of the roles (women as warriors and women as household heads) were assumed during the armed conflict while the other two (women as political activists and women as peacebuilders) were assumed during the ceasefire agreement. In post-war Sri Lanka, the role of household head continued after the armed conflict ceased, which corresponds with the field data, while the warrior role was eliminated in the final war. The two other roles of political activists and peacebuilder, began during the ceasefire agreement as the 'ruling' establishment of Jaffna allowed neither political nor peacebuilding activism during the armed conflict. Women political activists and peacebuilders still continue their activism in post-war Jaffna, which is confirmed by the field sources.

As mentioned, there are previous studies that highlight women's various, newly adopted roles in times of armed conflict (Bouta and Frerks 2002, Handrahan 2002, Moser and Clark 2004). Notably, these studies mostly describe women's roles as victims of war, survivors of conflict, perpetrators of war, agents of peacebuilding, coping and surviving actors, household heads and so on. In contrast, the present study provides a slightly different perspective on women's roles in the Sri Lankan conflict. That is to say, based on empirical data collected—including interviews and observations gathered in the war-ridden district of Jaffna—this study claims that victimization resulting from sexual or other forms of violence is a process of war and it cannot be considered a role that women assume. Therefore, unlike some of the previous studies, the results of this study do not subscribe to the view that victimization is a role.

Since this study does not comply with the view that women's role is that of the victim, this study does not consider women to have the role of 'coping and surviving actors' mentioned by Bouta and Frerks (2002). In my understanding, all women are coping and surviving actors and their roles as household heads and political or peace activists are as a result of their coping and surviving strategies. Thus, I believe there is no need to categorize women into a role of coping and surviving actors, which this study concludes is more a general term than a women-specific term. Furthermore, "women in (in)formal employment opportunities" as suggested by Bouta and Frerks (2002), is not actually a role but an economic or

labor activity adopted by household heads, breadwinners and, of course, by other women too.

### 9.1.2 Tamil Women had Several Motivations for Adopting the Roles

In the study, Tamil women of Jaffna narrated their motivations to assume different roles. These motivations were interlinked with the armed conflict and the social gender hierarchy that presupposed that women were inferior to men.

This study reveals that these women had personal, political, economic and social motivations to become warriors. Women highlighted motivations to join the fight such as: disruptions to their education, the effects of internal displacement, and the consequences of refugee status resulting from displacement and the loss of family members in war. Women also said that their political motivation to become fighters arose in response to discriminatory, oppressive government policies and actions towards the Tamil minority. Women's economic and social motivations to assume the warrior role were based on poverty and unequal gender status. Women chose to become fighters in order to evade the poverty caused mainly by the war, and also to demonstrate women's strength and capacity in a society that believed women were weak and dependent.

Traditionally a woman's place in Jaffna was in the home and a man's was in the work force. This gendered division of labor meant women stayed at home with their children and were supported by male kin. Despite cultural norms and traditional values forbidding women from being household heads, the armed conflict led women to become precisely that. The field interviews with the women household heads reveal that there were three factors that motivated them to take on the role of household head: the death and disappearance of their husbands, their husbands being abroad or unemployed, and militarization to the extent that it disempowered men.

This study also reveals women's motivations for assuming the role of political activist. As discussed above, women took up the role of political activist to fight against both political and social conditions that segregated Sri Lankan Tamils and discriminated against women. By adopting the role of political activist, women could non-violently mobilize against the state's injustice towards Tamil minorities. Furthermore, the public political event called 'Pongu Tamil' inspired women activists to promote Tamil nationalism. Moreover, women adopted the role of political activists in order to increase their level of societal security. In sum, the motivations for Tamil women to take up the role of political activists were the

state's discriminatory policies towards minorities, the Pongu Tamil event promoting Tamil nationalism and the discrimination against women in society.

The study finds only one motivation for Tamil women to become peacebuilders: the desire to put an end to war and violence, and to secure peace between the communities divided by war.

### 9.1.3 Tamil Women Faced Challenges during the Process of Adopting these Roles

The women interviewed professed that they faced many challenges in the process of taking up their roles. For instance, women state that they had to bolster their own self-esteem in order to assume unfamiliar roles. Furthermore, they had to challenge the very axioms of their culture and society, which restrict women's mobilization outside the household. In addition, women had to fundamentally challenge the armed conflict itself, which had brought much destruction to their lives.

Warrior women also report that assuming the fighter role was itself a challenge—especially since Jaffna's society believed the role was only appropriate for men. Accordingly, warrior women faced two challenges: challenging their patriarchal society and challenging their own emotions. That is, the interviewees claim that the very act of adopting the warrior role challenged the society they lived in. Thus by joining the fight, women broke the norms and values that their male-dominated society had placed on them in the name of culture and tradition. As a result of their actions, women overthrew the perception that women are fearful, dependent and weaker. Notably, warrior women report that there was a greater challenge than taking on the patriarchal system: fighting their own emotions when adopting the warrior role. As it were, to become a warrior, women first had to prepare themselves to leave the predetermined lives they had with their parents and loved ones while also accustoming themselves to fight and die in battle. However, these women state that by challenging these social and emotional hurdles, they have shown society that women are capable of adopting roles traditionally designated exclusively for men.

The challenges that women household heads faced are quite different from those faced by warrior women. In fact, warrior women chose to face the role's inherent challenges, whereas the household heads adopted this role as a result of unexpected, sudden situations and thus had no choice but to face the role's inherent challenges. Consequently, most of these women report that they had to confront sexual violence and community isolation due to adopting the role of household head. As widows and husbandless women, they were often the victims of a culture

that isolated them due to their civil status. As lonely mothers, these women had to deal with sexual violence, especially in the workplace, which they say they handled quite well. Even though these women were not isolated by the community on a daily basis, they were indeed cornered in certain social situations, as is made apparent in the interview material.

Women in the role of political activist faced two main challenges. The first one was mobilizing women into the stream of politics. The second one was challenging the fighter role's domination of the political role. Notably, political involvement is a life-threatening activity in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, these women claim that mobilizing women—especially in a society that restricts women's participation in the public sphere—was next to impossible. Moreover, many of them respected the fighter role for the same reasons that motivated many young women to choose the fighter role over the political role. Despite all obstacles, the role of political activist emerged. In this role women carried out projects and activities by confronting the challenges they faced in that role.

The main challenges that women peacebuilders of Jaffna faced were the lack of financial support, the dependency status caused by financial inefficiency, and the issues of managing the schedule of peace work with domestic responsibilities. Women peacebuilders worked as a group while relying on certain NGOs for financial assistance. This sometimes compelled these women to carry out projects suggested by the NGOs, and women were therefore not able to work independently in this role. This was the biggest challenge confronting women peacebuilders—alongside the difficulties of managing time between the two main responsibilities of building peace and domestic life.

#### 9.1.4. Tamil Women's Roles Contributed to Empowerment and Social Transformation

The existing literature states that men and women's gender roles are ascribed gender-specific labor responsibilities and decision-making processes. However, armed conflict can lead to situations in which women take over many 'male' roles and responsibilities (Höglund 2001, Goldstein 2001, Moser and Clark 2001, Bouta and Frerk 2002, Lindsey 2001). In such times, individual women are also not bound to a single role, but can assume multiple roles. For example, a mother can be a breadwinner, a household head and a peace activist all at once. In other words, the Sri Lankan armed conflict triggered women to take up new roles, which in turn transformed the social position of Tamil women. Moreover, this transformation led to women developing new skills and building self-confidence. Through this process, women came to be involved in rebuilding their own families and their

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communities. As reported in interviews, up until the armed conflict, Tamil women were largely neglected and relegated to the home. Once the armed conflict broke out, women stepped out of the home to demonstrate their capabilities. Paradoxically, it was in the period of the armed conflict when women were at greatest risk that brought with it the opportunity for women to empower themselves and transform their society making it better for women. Hence, the women of Jaffna, who assumed multiple roles during the conflict and its aftermath, claim that their new roles contributed both to women's empowerment and to social transformation.

Many scholars and journalists have perceived female participation in violent conflict as a perpetration of war. In contrast, the warrior women interviewed said that their role as warriors served as an opportunity for them to defy socio-cultural norms in order to empower themselves and other women. Feminist critics have focused on the militant and militaristic nature of the LTTE as being inherently anti-feminist. Accordingly, their critique argues that such a protracted armed conflict as that which occurred in Sri Lanka cannot be seen as a project of empowerment (De Silva 1994, Coomaraswamy 1997, Coomaraswamy 2002, Jeyamaha 2004). Nevertheless, the present study's field sources say that women fighters were able to attain a sense of liberation in the public sphere that would have otherwise been impossible to attain in the domestic sphere. For many women, this liberation came in the form of emancipation and empowerment, and thrust freedom and mobility in their everyday lives.

As said earlier, this study aims to examine women's experiences with and understandings of their role as warriors. In this context, warrior women see their role not just as a politically motivated role, but also as the role that fundamentally mobilized women outside the household and transformed the traditional structure of Tamil society. As a result, this study came to explore warrior women's narratives that claim that the role of warrior women (re-)structured society by transforming social attitudes towards women and reshaping women's status in that society. In brief, the warrior role of Tamil women is claimed to be a fundamental role that supported the emergence of other women's roles, that empowered women and that facilitated women to become active members of society. It is also important to note that warrior women's initial entry into the public sphere as fighters was not only a precursor to women's further involvement in more political and community level activities, but also 'challenged the myth of the society,' which tried to keep women weak and fearful. Hence, the LTTE women's construction of new gender roles for women provided the opportunity for them to surpass predetermined domestic duties and to promote active contributions in the

fight for a homeland. By pursuing the life of a fighter, these women broke through society's deep-rooted, hierarchical, gendered structure. And thus, the role of women warriors not only empowered women but also transformed society in a way that was quite advantageous to women.

Women were forced to adopt the role of household head. However, they in part assumed the role as an opportunity to show off their capacities for leadership, economic management, negotiation and therefore empowerment. Women household heads, who are mostly widows and women whose husbands have disappeared, were traditionally isolated in society. However, they have challenged this socially enforced isolation and have recently become household leaders, decision-makers and breadwinners. By assuming responsibility for the household, women further report that they have protected the institution of family, which the war nearly destroyed. Moreover, women say that by taking up household leadership and the duty of breadwinning, they have also transformed society by transforming women into leaders, decision-makers, economic contributors and household heads.

However, the roles of warriors and household heads are quite complex to understand in terms of their contribution to empowerment and to the social transformation. Women's private lives were shaped by the public sphere in that women took up the private role as household head due to the public conflict. Along the same line, the public spheres of education, economics and development were safeguarded and progressed by the private role of women household heads, especially during the time of conflict. However, women household heads also acted as prostitutes and illegal liquor producers, which in fact damaged the 'repute' of the institution of the family, which is valued high in Tamil society. Still, the role of household heads conveys a perspective that the public and private spheres are interdependent. Women in fact took a private role of household head that benefited the public institution of family in general. Therefore, the assumption that the private is personal, thus irrelevant in relation to the public, has been challenged by the female household heads of Jaffna.

The warrior role also reflects the same complex effects as that of household heads. The warrior women broke social norms and paved the way for mobilization of the other women of Jaffna, which empowered women to an extent and also contributed to social transformation. Nevertheless, their participation in extreme violence, such as suicide bombings, is thought of as mere destruction that conflicts with their claim that they promoted 'reconstruction of society.'

The efforts behind the roles of political activists and peacebuilders were also valued as contributions to women's empowerment and to social transformation.

Having started their missions with the ceasefire agreement of 2002, women in these two roles began to work efficiently within a very short time. Women in Jaffna understood that in conservative societies women are hesitant to assume public roles, particularly the activists and peacebuilder roles. Nevertheless, women came forward and encountered other cultures and languages by adopting these two roles. Furthermore, these roles gave women leadership, decision-making and communicative skills. Also, by standing up against war and violence, women recreated peace within and between societies. These activists and peacebuilding women also supported women who were oppressed by society and male dominance. They acted against any kind of violence and discrimination, and thus transformed Tamil society by endorsing social security for women.

## 9.2 Implications of the Findings

This study's findings have both empirical and theoretical implications. The empirical evidence of this study implies that *the roles of women are changing*. This highlights how the armed conflict shattered the structural obstacles facing women and thereby paved the way for women to assume different roles.

The empirical evidence also informs the study's theoretical framework. That is to say, the changing roles of Tamil women include dimensions that support a perspective that has good reason to assume that women's roles offer the potential of women's empowerment in times of conflict. Therefore, this study implies a theory that says *the roles of women increase women's empowerment and transform society*.

### **The Changing Roles of Tamil women**

This study indicates that *the roles of women are changing in the Tamil Society of Jaffna*. The findings of this study claim that the armed conflict in Sri Lanka provided a space for women to permanently assume new and different roles. The new, multiple roles assumed by Jaffna's women were in both the private and public spheres. This study also implies that society was forced to accept women's changed, different roles.

Some of the previous studies claim that women's social positions are 'static,' even in times of armed conflict or in times of other transformative social conditions (Kohn et al. 2003, Luke and Munshi 2010). However, in Jaffna, the armed conflict fostered changes, especially to women's roles and social positions. According to this study's findings, the armed conflict gave women a space where they could assume different roles, which consequently supported change,



especially change to the roles of women. Moreover, the armed conflict encouraged women to take up roles not traditionally sanctioned for them. They became warriors because of war. They became household heads because their husbands were living abroad, unemployed, missing or dead. They became political activists because of the extensive injustice towards minorities and they became peacebuilders to put an end to the war.

However, there are studies that remark that roles assumed by women during war are impermanent (Coomaraswamy 1997, Bouta et al. 2002, El-Bashura 2003, Manchanda 2001, Senanayake 2001, De Alwis 2002, Anderlini 2007). That is to say, these studies debate the stability of women's roles in times of conflicts and beyond (Coomaraswamy 1997, Senanayake 2001, Manchanda 2001, Alwis 2002). These studies cite examples from various conflict areas throughout the world and assert that women lose the right to their adopted roles once the local conflict ends. However, this study's field data says otherwise, claiming that women can take up new roles even after the conflict has ended and can continue with the adopted roles even after the conflict is over. The case of Jaffna women provides evidence that the roles of political activists and peacebuilders were adopted by women during the ceasefire agreement, that is, after normal societal life had resumed. Moreover, Tamil women continued to function as household heads and as warriors even after the armed conflict ceased in 2002. This case study of Jaffna women thus indicates that women can adopt roles not only during armed conflict (as reported by the previous studies), but in its aftermath as well. This also happened in Rwanda and Mozambique where women had assumed certain roles, for example those of formal politicians, in large numbers after the genocide and the civil war (Gibbs 1994, Newbury and Baldwin 2001). In addition, the present situation of Jaffna shows that women have continued with the roles they adopted during the armed conflict. Except for the role of warriors, who were defeated in war, the roles which Tamil women adopted during the conflict still exist and are active even five years after the end of the armed conflict in Sri Lanka (Handunetti 2010, Perera 2010, Gunasekera and Navaratna 2013).

This study's findings also assert that Tamil women adopted different roles both in private and public spheres. In the private sphere, women experienced the armed conflict as victims, for instance through battle-related deaths, injury, rape, sexual harassment, loss of loved ones or property, educational interruptions and internal displacement. On a personal level, the impact of armed conflict turned women into widows, working mothers, survivors of sexual assault and criminals. Also in the private sphere, women experienced the conflict as household heads. They faced societal structures that limited their participation in decision-making processes and

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peacebuilding mechanisms. Consequently, women entered the public sphere from the private sphere through their roles, which literally index the process of changing roles among Tamil women. Women, as the findings show, assumed multiple roles in multiple spheres. For instance, a woman who was a mother, a breadwinner and a household head was also a peace activist at the same time. She took up both household and societal responsibilities through her engagement in both private and public spheres.

One more point emphasized by this study's findings relates to the social, economic and political situations under which women took up or changed their roles. That is, there are observations saying that Tamil women took up roles under forced circumstances as women advanced to different social roles during the conflict (Coomaraswamy 1997, Rajasingham-Senanayake 2003, De Alwis 2004). The claim goes that women were forced to adopt roles due to the armed conflict and had there been no armed conflict, then they would not have adopted such roles. According to certain written reports, women were forced to assume household leadership due to the death of male household heads. That is to say, they were obligated to participate in the labor market due to the death of their male breadwinners; women were correspondingly forced to become combatants due to the destruction of war, the death of loved ones, poverty and internal displacement (USAID 2007, Calderon 2010, Moser and Clark: 2002, Bouta and Frerks: 2002). Moreover, the threat of violence, fear and insecurity as well as the destruction of their livelihood compelled women to assume the roles of peacebuilders and negotiators between the warring parties (Rehn and Sirleaf 2009). Therefore, the literature claims that women take up new roles in times of conflict because of the forced situation created by the conflict (Coomaraswamy 1997, De Alwis: 2003, Rajasingham-Senanayake 2003). However, the narratives of women in Jaffna contradict the notion of forceful role-taking as it is presented by previous studies. The concept of a forceful situation gives the impression that women are incapable of adopting different roles and that they do so only because the pressures of armed conflict. Notwithstanding, women claim that they were never able to adopt different roles before, as the patriarchy never allowed them to assume any roles other than the role of housewife. Yet by using the space that arose during the conflict, women claim they exposed their capacities by assuming multiple roles. In this context, women say that they were not forced to take on the roles that were seen as men's only.

Consequently, the women of Jaffna declare that Tamil society was forced to accept women's new roles. Therefore, the 'forced situation' was not forced upon women but forced upon society. As these women further describe, women's

warrior role emerged because there was a need for more cadres in the LTTE and the LTTE was thus forced to accept women as combatants. Correspondingly, society was also in need of women household heads, peacebuilders and political activists during the ongoing conflict. Hence, the Tamil society was compelled to accept and recognize women as warriors, household heads, political activists and peacebuilders—the roles that were necessary at that a time of emergency and great need.

### **The Roles of Women Increase Women’s Empowerment and Transform Society**

Based on the narrative data concerning women’s narratives about their experiences with and understanding of their different roles, this study assumes the theory that the changing roles of women in conflict times increase women’s empowerment in society. The growing empowerment of women, as it is implied by this study, also supports the process of social transformation.

Few previous studies connect the changing roles of Tamil women in Sri Lanka with women’s empowerment (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2000 and 2003, Alwis 2004, Coomaraswamy 2004). These studies actually claim that by exploring different roles, Tamil women increasingly performed everyday activities in Sri Lanka’s conflict-ridden areas and transformed social structures (Rajasingham-Senannayake 2001 and 2003). “This changing shape of women’s agency is an empowerment in war,” writes Rajasingham-Senanayake (2001: 3). However, women’s empowerment, she remarks, is “rarely unambivalent” in war or peace (Senanayake 2000: 3). Raajasingham-Senanayake further points out that the changes war has brought to women’s lives might give clues about how to develop a strategy of women’s empowerment. Nevertheless, she argues that this ‘unintended empowerment’ of women is impermanent since the ‘oppressive culture’ may push women back into the kitchen once the peace is secured. Rajasingham-Senanayake (2001) thus concludes that ending the war means a return to the ‘traditional’ gender status quo in which women revert to their previous positions.

On the one hand, this study on Tamil women’s roles in the Sri Lankan conflict agrees with Rajasingham-Senanayake (2000) on the points of changing gender relations and women’s changing agency in armed conflict. On the other hand, this study differs with the notion of ambivalent agency or ambivalent empowerment. That is to say, this study is in line with Rajasingham-Senanayake’s former claim that Tamil women in conflict-ridden Sri Lanka are not yet empowered or, at the very least, not yet empowered so as to be equal with men. However, this study

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uses women's own narratives to reveal that women's empowerment in war is orchestrated through a process beginning with women changing their roles and leading to women's empowerment. For instance, in the warrior role women exercise their 'power to' engage in war; as household heads women gain 'power over' economic resources and decision-making; and as political activists and peacebuilders women again 'power with' political and civil society through political activism and peacebuilding efforts. As a result, women gain the 'power within' themselves, which, to an extent, is empowerment founded on developing self-confidence, self-awareness and assertiveness. Therefore, this study's findings show that Tamil women are at a crossroad between a continuous progress towards different roles and a process of empowerment. These women, as they describe themselves, are in a 'transitional phase.' However, they are determined to reach the destination: the empowerment of women. And thus, this study concludes that Tamil women's development towards empowerment is sooner 'determined' and 'unambivalent.'

Virtuous cycles of changes can be initiated as women become warriors, household heads, political activists and peacebuilders in a society at war. As Chitkara (2001) says, pathways to social transformation are possible through empowering women, which is quite visible in the context of Jaffna, where women's roles in war contributed to transforming society—a society that could be described as 'better' than the previous one. For instance, a woman can now become a household head in Tamil society.

Given the fact that the role of women warriors emerged during the armed conflict, it is difficult to assess whether women in combat have transformed society in a positive way. When comparing the Nicaraguan Revolution with the Sri Lankan armed conflict, we see two different contexts. However, women fighters appear similar in nature in both cases. While women in revolutionary Nicaragua essentially fought to secure national freedom and equality, Tamil women in Sri Lanka claimed that they were fighting for national liberation and gender equality. Nevertheless, one of the important aspects observed in both Nicaragua and Sri Lanka is that these warrior women played significantly new roles, subsequently challenging gendered stereotypes in their societies (Steven 1990, Trawick 1993, Hellman-Rajanayagam 2007). Thus, as Torres describes, the social revolution in Nicaragua "gave Nicaraguan women the chance to speak" (Torres 1991: 3), while the civil war in Sri Lanka opened up a space where Tamil women could mobilize and break down patriarchal barriers.

The role of warriors in the context of Jaffna had, of course, embittering effects on society. These women were in fact fighters with the passion to continue the

armed conflict. Unlike the other roles of household head, political activist and peacebuilder, warrior women's contribution towards local peacebuilding was described as being null. However, women joined the fight due to political oppression and for protection. In this way, the role of warriors provided some freedom for women, as the role was the stepping stone to other more constructive roles. Although the destructive side of the warrior role is highly difficult to assess, the contribution of this role to women's liberation can, at least to some extent, be considered a contribution to the transformation of society.

In Jaffna, peacebuilding and political activism are important elements in transforming society. While political activism focuses upon facilitating awareness of key political issues, increasing political participation, strengthening voting rights and fortifying rights to campaign and protest; peacebuilding aims at restoring the social fabric of society, that is, restoring communities, helping people recover in chaotic environments and re-introducing people to normal ways of living, establishing routines for them and guaranteeing they have support systems. Thereby, the political activists and peacebuilding women of Jaffna claim that they have helped to re-create a society with positivity and peace-mindedness, even in the midst of powerful, negative elements like war and violence.

### 9.3 Remaining Problems

Although the study offers a comprehensive understanding of Tamil women's role-taking in the armed conflict of Jaffna, there is also a need to address any remaining concerns in order to assist future researchers and research.

The first concern is the field area: Jaffna District, located in Northern Province, Sri Lanka. Although Jaffna District has several administrative and territorial divisions of its own, my research mainly focuses upon the specific historical region of Valigamam. It is important to note that at the time research was conducted there were many practical hindrances due to the political situation. For example, the neighboring district of Vanni was the stronghold of the LTTE, whereas Jaffna was under the control of the military. However, I was primarily not able to cover Vanni because of the time constraints: I had to spend quite a lot of time in Jaffna mingling with people and building trust with them. Furthermore, the war had resumed during the field study, which prevented me from expanding my fieldwork to Vanni. Although, I did have the opportunity to interview LTTE women from Vanni (as I was requested to do), I believe the research would have been more comprehensive if a large sample of women from Vanni had been included. In fact, the inclusion of women from Vanni would have given another angle from which

to understand the roles of Tamil women. Moreover, women from both Jaffna and Vanni are ethnically Tamils and have been equally affected by the civil war, but due to living in two different administrations they were compelled to follow different regulations. Researching women from both these districts would have led to a different understanding of how the political conditions women were living under had impacted their roles, lives and social relations. Thus for practical reasons, this study had to be completed based on the interviews and data collected in the selected sample villages of Jaffna. Yet, the concern remains that the study would have been more pertinent if the field area had been expanded to at least one more district or if the study had been deeper and wider in scope; for instance, if field interviews and data collection had taken place in a few more sample villages.

Secondly, the study does not consider men's experiences of war, the changes to their social positions or the other challenges they faced due to the armed conflict. For example, how men had to depend on women for their own safety because of the militarized situation. However, the study includes the opinions and observations of men regarding the changing roles and status of women in society, as men served as informants to the study. A comparative narrative analysis of both men and women pertaining to their experiences of war and peace would have given a comprehensive picture to readers—not only to facilitate understanding men's and women's social, political and economic conditions at time of the armed conflict, but also to facilitate comprehension of how, and in what ways, women's experiences differ from men's in the context of armed conflict. Nevertheless, due to the fact that the main focus of this study lies only on women, and due to the relatively short time period allocated for the fieldwork, this study could not proceed with investigating the men's narratives. Thus men's voices are rarely heard in this thesis.

Thirdly, this study might have brought out more interesting twists on women's roles and lives under war, if the researcher had been a foreigner, and not a local inhabitant. Notably, the research touches upon many sensitive issues related to women's lives—such as widowhood, marriage and sexuality. These issues are normally, and supposedly, kept secret. People from that part of the world are less concerned about individualistically living their own lives, and more concerned about living collectively in society. Due to the fact that their life stories are not supposed to be open to the public, and due to the fear that their personal stories might spread into society, people there do not welcome inhabitant researchers. In this respect, people trust foreign researchers and are more open to them. Being an inhabitant researcher, I spent quite a lot of time building trust with my respondents, which I could have spent on data collection.

## 9.4 Prospects for Future Research

This study raises new research questions. It raises questions about the actual stability of the adopted roles of Tamil women in Jaffna's post-war context. It also raises questions about the progress of the changes and the impact caused by the roles of women in the context of post-war Jaffna.

According to the latest information from the field and the latest research and journal articles, women continued pursuing their roles as household heads, political activists and peacebuilders, even after the end of the war. However, the role of warriors was eliminated during the final war in May, 2009 (Handunetti 2010, Perera 2010, Gunasekera and Navaratnma 2013). Even though the role is no more, it is said that the impact of the role of warrior women is still felt in society. According to the latest field indications, the freedom and mobility for women that was generated by this role still help women make their own choices and voice their rights.

When compared to the warrior role, the role of household head must receive special mention regarding the context of social isolation. The latest correspondence with the research field reveals that warrior women, who were the first to raise women's status and were once respected for their 'bravery' and 'dedication,' are now being subjected to social isolation. The situation is said to be compounded by the community identifying these female ex-combatants as potential threats; not necessarily due to their perceived or actual involvement with the LTTE, but because they are constantly monitored and their movements restricted by security forces. In contrast, women household heads seem to have gone through the process of social isolation but then challenged and overcame it. Likewise, recent field data indicates that most of the women household heads who were isolated before are now well-respected and appreciated. Previously, women, especially widows, were rarely admired in a society that considered husbandless women as 'inauspicious.' However, according to the recent field indications, this positive change has happened due to women's active involvement in public and economic activities. Nevertheless, more research is required on this topic in order to chart the broader impact of this change.

It seems that women are determined to continue their mission of political activism and peacebuilding despite the overshadowing political threats in post-war Jaffna. Initially, it was the return of war and violence after the breakdown of the ceasefire agreement that nearly suppressed women's political and peace activities. Still, the trend to suppress political and peace activism continues even after the

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end of the civil war. According to the latest telephone conversations with the respondents, women's political and peace activism is still under threat in post-war Sri Lanka as arrests and intimidation of activists constantly take place. Moreover, public functions—such as organizing rallies, demonstrations and workshops—are restricted by the military and paramilitary groups, which leave the roles of political activists and peacebuilders to once again confront serious challenges. Incidentally, this study could not verify these situations in post-war Jaffna, as this study focuses upon the period of the armed conflict and the ceasefire agreement. However, based on the idea that future research arises from current research, allow me to leave this issue for the forthcoming studies regarding Tamil women in present day 'post-war Sri Lanka.'

Moreover, the continuity of the roles of older women and the future generation is something to be observed and analyzed more closely. As mentioned above, the role of warriors no longer exist as warrior women were defeated in war. However, women's activism towards formal politics and peacebuilding may influence the future generation of women. As I noticed during my field visits, many young women were interested in both political and peace activities. On the other hand, the sustainability of the role of women household heads is debatable. In my observation, a woman becomes a household head in the absence of a male household head. She remains the household head even after a male earning member (e.g. her son) rises up or returns to the family. Thus, a woman's household leadership continues despite the availability of a capable breadwinning man in the family. However, things change when the son of a woman household head forms his own family. The son becomes the household head when setting up his own family, even if he has a wage-earning wife, which indicates that a man is still traditionally entitled to become a household head. In my observation, women in contemporary Jaffna can take up many different roles within and outside their households. Within the household, they can be breadwinners and financial providers, meaning that they can become part of the decision-making process. Nevertheless, women can become the household heads only in the absence of their menfolk.

Although women's roles are changing, conventional values and norms of Tamil society continue to influence people's lives in Jaffna. While people may be willing to accept active women beyond the household, they may not be willing to excuse women from their conventional household duties. Thus, a Tamil woman, whether she is a politician, a warrior or a peace activist outside the household, is simultaneously expected to be a 'traditional' mother or daughter who cares and cooks for her family, children and elders. Nevertheless, the acceptance of women's



changing roles demonstrates the fact that 'the old order changed;' even if it does persevere in some respects, creating a paradoxical social and political atmosphere. At the same time, it is true that the country's armed conflict has fostered this change in attitudes. However, women have actively carved out spaces for themselves in order to take on new and different social roles that contrast with the traditional ones.



# Swedish Summary

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## **Kvinnors roller under väpnade konflikter: berättelser av kvinnor från Jaffna på Sri Lanka**

Sri Lanka härjades av ett långvarigt inbördeskrig mellan främst Sri Lankas regering och de tamilska tigrarnas organisation LTTE. Konflikten har kostat tusentals liv med många interna flyktingar samt stor materiell förstörelse och skador på egendom. Resultaten av kriget har sålunda varit destruktivt på en rad olika sätt. Flyktingar, föräldralösa, krigsänkor, funktionshindrade ungdomar och ödelagda ekonomier har varit några av konsekvenser av denna långvariga konflikt. Under kriget med pågående dödande, försvinnanden av människor och den påföljande ekonomiska krisen blev Jaffnas kvinnor fast beslutna att ta upp olika nya sociala roller och kom därmed att bryta med de befintliga kulturella barriärerna. Kvinnor hävdar att de tog på sig nya olika roller för att skydda både sina familjer och samhället undan kriget och våldet.

Det finns flera olika studier som behandlar konflikten på Sri Lanka. Men bara några av dem har fokuserat på kvinnors roller under konflikten. Denna studie om kvinnors roller under den väpnade konflikten i Sri Lanka är en fallstudie analys. Fallstudien av Jaffna kvinnorna utforskar i denna studie tamilska kvinnors erfarenheter och uppfattningar om de olika roller de tog på sig under konflikten i Sri Lanka. Denna fallstudie är baserad på fältarbete som genomfördes i Jaffna mellan åren 2004-2006. Det sammanföll med den tid då den av Norge medlade vapenvilan hölls i landet. Studien använder intervjumetoder som genomfördes med kvinnor som tagit på sig nya roller i samband med att konflikten på Sri Lanka pågick. Observationsmetoder användes också i denna studie för att observera och analysera kvinnors livssituationer i (de utvalda) byarna runt Jaffna.

Teoretiskt bygger studien på genusteorier om roller för kvinnor och kvinnors egenmakt i konflikttider. Empiriskt visar denna studie kvinnors erfarenheter och förståelse för hur de tog upp de olika nya rollerna (t.ex. soldater, hushållsöverhuvuden, politiska aktivister och fredsbyggare) under konflikten. Studien visar vilka motiven var för kvinnorna att ta på sig dessa roller och vilka utmaningar de ställdes inför när de tog på sig rollerna.

Denna studie visar i vilket sammanhang Jaffna befinner sig i med dess geografi, historia, kultur vari kvinnors specifika ställning har utvecklats. Jaffna har

en tamilsk majoritet och är det största distriktet med tamilsk majoritet i hela Sri Lanka. Sedan 1983 har Jaffna varit centrum för det långa inbördeskriget i Sri Lanka. Rebellgruppen kallas LTTE och utkämpade ett krig mot regeringen i Sri Lanka och etablerade sitt kvinnoförbund år 1989. Detta kvinnoförbund bestod av en militär enhet, en politisk enhet och en självmordsenhet. Kriget förstörde livet för många män och kvinnor. Många kvinnor blev änkor över en natt och många kvinnor och män försvann spårlöst samt många kvinnor förlorade sina nära och kära i kriget.

Denna studie har exponerat kvinnors ställning i Jaffnas tamilska samhälle. I Jaffna finns en uppfattning om att kvinnor anses vara sämre än män. Samtidigt finns i Jaffna en kultur som tror tamilska samhällets renhet är i händerna på kvinnor. Således, i Jaffna får kvinnor lära sig att följa de moraliska koderna som sägs vara en del av deras kultur. I tamilsk kultur är kvinnors liv och frihet begränsade av institutioner som äktenskap och familj. Därutöver skapar hemgiftssystemet, en strikt observation av oskuld och kyskhets, samt isolering av änkor, samt ofta förekommande våld i hemmet en instabil situation för kvinnors. Kvinnor som drabbats av krig och som har blivit änkor och hushållsöverhuvuden tvingades bära bördan av både kulturella hinder och krig.

Denna studie presenterar resultaten som rör de roller som tamilska kvinnor tog på sig under konflikten. Denna studie utforskar hur tamilska kvinnor i Jaffna distriktet beskriver sina erfarenheter och hur de förstår sina roller som soldater i en tid av vapenvila i Sri Lanka. Fältintervjuerna indikerar att tamilska kvinnor i Jaffna tagit på sig rollen som krigare på grund av personliga skäl men även p.g.a. politiska, ekonomiska och sociala motiv. Det verkar också som de personliga motiven rörde sig om avbrott i utbildningen och störningar i de ekonomiska möjligheterna liksom konstant påtvingad flykt och förlust av familjemedlemmar under kriget. Data från distriktet visar också att statens diskriminering mot etniska tamiler var politiskt motiverade. För kvinnorna var det ekonomiska och sociala drivkrafter inte minst fattigdomen orsakad av kriget samt den ojämlika statusen mellan könen i tamilska samhället som låg bakom när man gick in i kampen.

Dessa soldatkvinnor gick igenom utmaningar. Enligt deras intervjuer var de tvungna att utmana patriarkala samhället men även sina egna känslor när de anslöt sig till kampen. Baserat på dessa kvinnors intervjuer får man också fram att genom att de deltog i kampen fick soldatkvinnor inte bara till viss del större självständighet men kunde också uppmuntra andra kvinnor att mobiliseras sig utanför hushållen. Slutligen så visar denna studie även att p.g.a. LTTE kvinnor tog sina roller så har det även hjälpt kvinnor att stärka sin egenmakt och därmed bidragit till en social förändring.

Denna studie undersökte även kvinnors förståelse, upplevelser och erfarenheter av rollen som familjeöverhuvud under konflikten när avtalet om vapenvila gällde på Sri Lanka. Intervjuerna med de kvinnor som blev hushållsöverhuvuden indikerar att tamilska kvinnor hade flera motiv till att ta upp rollen som hushållsöverhuvuden. Kvinnor som tog på sig denna roll indikerar flera saker; död och försvinnandet av deras män, mäns arbetslöshet på grund av kriget, mäns migration till främmande länder och den allmänt militariserade situation som främst riktade sig mot männen i Jaffna.

Å andra sidan visade intervjuerna att dessa kvinnor också möte utmaningar när de tog dessa roller. Detta inkluderade sexuella trakasserier och social isolering. Kvinnor betonade också varför de var tvungna att möta dessa utmaningar. De angav att omgivningen utsatte dem för sexuella trakasserier och försökte socialt isolera dem på grund av socialt stigma som följer när en kvinna har förlorat sin make.

Baserat på intervjuerna verkar det vara en mindre del av kvinnliga hushållsöverhuvuden som har skaffat sig inkomster på illegal väg såsom prostitution och illegal alkoholproduktion. Under intervjuerna angav de orsaker till varför dessa kvinnor blev inblandade i sådana brott. Orsaker som angavs var dödsfall, försvinnande och arbetslöshet av sina makar och familjeförsörjare samt fattigdom och högre levnadskostnader som följde i spåret av kriget.

De data som presenteras i denna studie specificerar ytterligare att kvinnor som är hushållsöverhuvuden bidrog till kvinnors ökande egenmakt. Detta inkluderar kvinnors krav på att skaffa sig ekonomisk självständighet och utveckla ledarskap och kommunikativa färdigheter. Kvinnor betonade också att genom att ta upp hushållsarbete och försörjningsansvar för familjemedlemmar hade kvinnliga hushållsöverhuvuden utmanat den traditionella bilden av familjeinstitutionen. I korthet säger kvinnor att de gav skydd åt sina familjer under pågående väpnad konflikt och våld. Kvinnorna syftar till att värna om familjevärderingar (som var i fara under konflikten) och deras försörjning, att ta hand om de äldre, unga och sjuka familjemedlemmar. Genom att ta över rollen som familjeöverhuvud bidrog det till en omstrukturering av familjeinstitution. Resultaten av studien visar att kvinnliga hushålls familjeöverhuvud bidragit till "återuppbyggnaden av samhället".

Studien analyserade också kvinnors berättelser om deras roller som politiska aktivister i distriktet Jaffna. Resultaten som presenteras i denna studie indikerar att tamilska kvinnor tog upp rollen som politiska aktivister i samband med det senaste eldupphör avtalet. Från respondenternas berättelser verkar det som om

eldupphöret och den lugna atmosfären som följde därav motiverade tamilska kvinnor att ta på sig denna roll.

En av drivkrafterna som anges i berättelserna till att ta på sig rollen som politiska aktivister var de politiska orättvisorna tamilerna var utsatta för i Sri Lanka. Tamilska kvinnor var fast beslutna att kämpa för sitt folks rättigheter inom den formella politiken. Berättelserna visar hur tamilska kvinnor anslöt sig till politiken där de inspirerats av de politiska händelserna som kallas Pongu Tamil och som syftade till att främja tamilsk nationalism. Tamilska kvinnor ville också utrota rasism, sexism och sexuellt våld mot kvinnor och därmed tog upp rollen som politiska aktivister.

Berättelserna visar också hur dessa kvinnor ställdes inför olika utmaningar. Den största utmaningen som dessa kvinnor lyfte i sina berättelser var försöken att mobilisera kvinnor till politisk aktivism. På grund av de kulturella tabun som fanns mot kvinnors deltagande i den offentliga sfären i kombination med den farliga politiska situationen gjorde kvinnor generellt ovilliga att engagera sig i politisk aktivism. Dessutom berättade de kvinnliga politiska aktivisterna att de även fick utmana den atmosfär som snarare lockade unga kvinnor att gå med i den militära kampen än den politiska. Många fler unga kvinnor valde att bli soldater än att bli politiker eller politiska aktivister. Det tyder på att det var svårt för politiska aktivister att mobilisera fler för politiken.

Att organisera och mobilisera valdeltagandet samt politiska kandidater, arrangera politiska möten och kämpa mot ras- och könsdiskriminering var verksamheter som kvinnorna angav att de genomförde som politiska aktivister. Genom att utföra sådana verksamheter bidrog det till att skapa social trygghet för kvinnor i samhället. Dessutom visar politiska aktivisternas berättelser att deras roller främjar kvinnors egenmakt och att de fick stöd för att bidra till att "återuppbygga" det tamilska samhället.

Studien presenterar slutligen det empiriska materialet som rör de tamilska kvinnorna Jaffna distriktet och deras erfarenhet som fredsbyggare. Enligt berättelserna som redovisas tog kvinnor på sig rollen som kvinnliga fredsbyggare under tiden för eldupphöravtalet. Det verkar som om dessa fredsbyggare valde att delta i fredsarbetet på grund av de illdåd som kriget orsakat. De flesta av de kvinnor som nämnde att de tog på sig rollen som fredsbyggare i Jaffna är kvinnor från gräsrotsnivån och som hade påverkats av kriget. Huvudmotivet för kvinnor att ta på sig rollen som fredsbyggare var för att söka ett slut på kriget och få tillbaka en fred.

De kvinnliga fredsbyggarna pekar på de utmaningar de stod inför uppdraget att försöka bidra till att skapa fred. Det verkar som dessa kvinnor var beroende av

finansiering för att kunna bedriva sin verksamhet. Därför blev dessa kvinnor mer beroende och mindre självständiga i arbetet för att söka fred. Dessutom tyder deras berättelser på att de flesta av de kvinnliga fredsbyggarna var ensamstående föräldrar som därmed fick dela sin knappa tid mellan fredsarbete och hushållsansvar. Dilemmat med bristande tid och att därmed hinna med båda uppgifter var en stor utmaning för de kvinnliga fredsarbetarna.

Enligt berättelserna i denna studie har kvinnliga fredsbyggare engagerat sig i många fredsrelaterade verksamheter. De engagerade sig i att överkomma det som splittrat samhället under kriget och de har inte bara organiserat fredsmöten och workshops men har också deltagit i arbetet för försoning. Respondenternas berättelser tyder på att vissa kvinnor gynnats av fredsbyggande. På grund av deras nätverk och samarbete med icke-statliga organisationer har dessa kvinnor fått möjligheter att resa runt i landet. Ibland fick de ledarskapsutbildning och en del erbjöds arbetstillfällen.

Studien visar att kvinnliga fredsbyggares ansträngningar inte bara initierat fred inom och mellan samhällen men gav också kvinnor mer inflytande. Kvinnor exponerades för olika kulturer och språk i landet och kunde därmed utveckla sina ledaregenskaper. De blev därmed bättre förhandlare och kommunikatörer. Därför hävdar dessa kvinnliga fredsbyggare i Jaffna att de har bidragit till "återuppbyggnad" av samhället där kvinnors inflytande har ökat.

Genom att analysera det insamlade empiriska materialet drar denna studie en övergripande konklusion som pekar på att de tamilska kvinnornas roller har bidragit till en övergripande förändring i samhället. Dessa förändrade roller för tamilska kvinnor ökar kvinnors egenmakt i samhället och kan därmed bidra till att omvandla samhället.





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# Field Sources

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## Interviews

### Respondents

1. A senior LTTE woman cadre, April 23, 2005.
2. A senior LTTE woman cadre and the leader for Jaffna District Women's Wing, April 23, 2005.
3. A Senior LTTE woman cadre, and the head of an orphanage run by the LTTE, April 24, 2005.
4. A Senior LTTE woman cadre, responsible for a cultural Centre run by LTTE, April 25, 2005.
5. A woman cadre of ordinary level, April 25, 2005.
6. A woman cadre of ordinary level, April 25, 2005.
7. An oldest (by age) and a senior woman cadre of LTTE, April 26, 2005.
8. Magistrate of LLTE's Court in Kilinochchi (female), July 12, 2005.
9. A War Widow, February 5, 2005.
10. A War widow, February 5, 2005.
11. A War widow, February 7, 2005.
12. A War widow, February 8, 2005.
13. A War Widow, April 4, 2005.
14. A War Widow, December 5, 2005,
15. A Breadwinner, June 15, 2005.
16. A woman whose husband disappeared, February 7, 2005.
17. A woman whose husband disappeared, April 30, 2005.
18. A woman whose husband disappeared, August 6, 2005.
19. A woman whose husband disappeared, October 30, 2005.
20. A housewife, January 5, 2006.
21. A housewife, April 15, 2005.
22. A housewife, July 23, 2005.
23. Prostitute 1 (in prison), November 7, 2005.
24. Prostitute 2 (in prison), November 7, 2005.
25. Prostitute 3, November 23, 2005.

## Field Sources

26. A woman Jailed for producing moonshine alcohol, November 7, 2005.
27. A woman jailed for producing moonshine alcohol, November 8, 2005.
28. Saila, a war widow and the president of a woman's organization, April 4, 2005.
29. Lalitha, a woman leader from the grassroots level, April 10, 2005.
- 30.
31. An abandoned woman (abandoned by her husband), September 10, 2004.
32. A minor employee (female), April 6, 2005.
33. A school teacher (female), July 10, 2005.
34. A government servant (female), October 15, 2005.
35. A teenage girl from an orphanage, December 10, 2005.
36. Anonymous, January 12, 2006.
37. An academic (female), January 15, 2006.

## Informants

1. A lawyer and an activist (female), January 2, 2006.
2. A journalist (male), January 8, 2006.
3. Child probation officer (male), January 30, 2005.
4. An academic (male), February 17, 2005.
5. An academic (male), February 18, 2005.
6. Professor Emeritus (male), March 13, 2005.
7. NGO official (female), March 31, 2005.
8. A minor employee (male), April 1, 2005.
9. Jaffna resident (male), June 1, 2005.
10. Jaffna resident (male), August 8, 2005.
11. Parish priest of a protestant Christian church, August 10, 2005.
12. Chief priest of a Hindu temple, August 28, 2005.
13. District magistrate, (female), September 4, 2005.
14. Government servant (male), October 18, 2005.
15. NGO official (male), October 22, 2005.
16. A resident (male), November 1, 2005.
17. Human rights activist (male), December 24, 2005.

## Focus Group Interviews (Respondents)

1. A group of women who are not married, Gurunagar, February 22, 2005.

2. A group of displaced women who are forced to stay in a refugee camp for 15 years<sup>46</sup> (When the FGD was held), April 18, 2005.
3. Women of border villages, July 6, 2005.
4. Women of TCFWA, December 6, 2005.
5. Women disabled by war, December 6, 2005.
6. Women of all categories, Pandatharippu area, December 20, 2005.
7. Women of all categories, Ariyalai (Poompuhaar) area, January 3, 2006.
8. Women of all categories, Savalkaadu area, January 4, 2006.
9. Women of all categories, Nallur area, January 9, 2006.
10. A Woman group consists of widows and women whose husbands have disappeared, Saavalkaadu, January 9, 2006.
11. A group of grassroots women who are peace activists (This groups consists of husbandless women as well), January 12, 2006<sup>47</sup>.
12. Women of all categories, Gurunagar, January 12, 2006.

### **Telephone Interview**

1. Woman Parliamentarian, Jaffna, February 2, 2006

### **Informal Talks**

#### **Respondents**

1. Politically active woman (female), University of Jaffna, February 6, 2005.
2. A young woman political activist, April 3, 2005.
3. A female ex-combatant of LTTE, April 28, 2005.
4. A female LTTE cadre, May 6, 2005.
5. A resident (woman), November 3, 2004.
6. A politically active student (female), November 3, 2005.
7. A female political volunteer, November 11, 2005.
8. A woman whose husband disappeared, December 12, 2005.
9. Woman whose husband disappeared, December 12, 2005.

#### **Informants**

1. An assistant Hindu priest, December 21, 2004.

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46 These women are originally from the villages Evinai and mylankaadu(border villages)

47 These women are from the villages Gurunagar, Savalkaadu and Ariyalai Poompuhaar

## Field Sources

2. A seminarian, St. Joseph's Seminary, June 30, 2005.
3. One of the village council leaders, Jaffna, August 6, 2005.
4. A senior woman government official, August 17, 2005.
5. A police officer (male)—Jaffna Police Station, December 6, 2005.
6. Rev. Fr. Jeyakumar (Hudec- Haritas), December 19, 2005.
7. A staff member (female)- ICRC, December 19, 2005.
8. Saroja Sivachandran, Director CFWAD, December 22, 2005.
9. A retired social worker (male), December 31, 2005.

# Appendix: Respondents' Interview Guide

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Date:

## Background Information

1. Name:
2. Job:
3. Education
4. Civil status (Married/unmarried/widow/ Husband Disappeared:
5. Family Details (No of Children, what does the husband do?):
6. Age (optional):
7. Place of living:

## General Questions related to Politics and the conflict

1. How do you define the conflict?
2. What do you think about the conflict in Sri Lanka?
3. What is your opinion about LTTE and the GoSL?
4. What do you think about LTTE women?
5. Do you think it was necessary to have an armed struggle to achieve freedom for Tamils?
6. What is your opinion on the CFA? Will it a step forward to initiate peace?
7. What is your idea about Tamil political parties?
8. What do you think about the roles that Tamil political parties had/have in the conflict and conflict resolution?
9. Do you know anything about Tamil Nationalism? If so what is your view on it?
10. What is your idea about Sinhalese (not the government but the people)
11. Do you want to have a peaceful solution to the conflict? Or are you opt for the ongoing armed struggle?
12. Do you have any specific and personal idea in solving this ethnic crisis?

## Questions related to the experience of conflict

1. What is your role in the conflict as a woman?
2. How have you been living under the war?
3. Have you ever been affected by the war directly? If so, In what way? Describe the event  
What was your reaction at that time?

## Appendix: Respondents' Interview Guide

What have you decided to do afterwards?

How did you move on in life?

4. Have you ever been displaced and living in the refugee camps? If so  
When did you displace?  
Where did you displace?
5. Did you get any support? If yes from where? If no, how did you manage with the life?
6. How did you get along with the life as a refugee?
7. Was your extended family network supportive to you in times of crisis? If yes, how?
8. Do you think the war and living under the war made you stronger?

### Questions related to society

1. How do you feel a woman in the Tamil society?
2. Do you like to be a traditional woman or want to become an independent woman? Explain
3. What are the obstacles for a Tamil women to be independent?
4. What is your opinion on Dowry system?  
What is the value of the dowry nowadays?  
Who is in the frontline in demanding dowry, and why?  
What is your opinion about LTTE women eliminating the system of dowry?  
What do you think you can do against this dowry system?
5. What is the situation of a woman without husband in the society?  
Do you agree with the culture of isolating widows and women without husbands? Why?  
How do you think this can be eradicated?
6. Do you think the virginity/chastity issue is an obstacle for women's freedom in the society?
7. How much domestic violence is there in the society?  
In what way women are affected by the domestic violence?  
What are the measurement taken to prevent domestic violence?
8. What is your opinion on LTTE's law against violence against women?
9. What is/was women's situation prior to war, during war and in the CFA time?
10. Is there any difference in the status of women right now? If so, how?  
Do you believe that women will continue to be like this (continuing with their new roles) after peace is prevailed?
11. What are the contribution of women's roles to the Tamil society?  
What is your idea about women empowerment?

- Do you think Tamil women are empowered?
12. Did women contribute to the social transformation (reconstruction of the society)?
  13. Do you think LTTE women created a space for women's mobilization?
  14. What are your visions for future in life?
  15. Do you think you are forced to act according to the situation that you are not capable of doing things, but doing so because you are forced?

Questions asked to:

Woman Warriors

1. Why did you want to become a fighter? When and how did you join the movement?
2. What is your position in the movement now?
3. What are the challenges you had to face to take up this role? How did you challenge those challenges?
4. Can you tell me your experience from an ordinary woman to a fighter?
5. Can you tell me about your experience in the battlefield?
6. Were you ever scared of death or seeing your fellow cadres dying in the battlefield?
7. What kind of weapons you operate?
8. What else do you do as a fighter which society believes that women can never do?
9. How do you feel about yourself as a fighter?
10. Do you think your status in the society has changed after being a fighter? In what way?
11. Do you think the status of women in the society has changed after many women becoming fighters? In what way?
12. Do you think LTTE women are equal as LTTE men in the movement? How?
13. How about in decision-making? There are assumptions that when it comes to decision-making, women are excluded?
14. How do you feel as a woman being under a male leadership? Don't you think it is similar to the society's rule of women living under male-dominancy?
15. What is your opinion about feminism?
16. Can you elaborate on the feminism of the LTTE (Tiger feminism)?
17. What are the goals of LTTE women wing regarding the society?
18. What did they achieve so far?
19. Does your law against dowry and domestic violence work? How much it had reduced the problem?

## Appendix: Respondents' Interview Guide

20. What are the punishment imposed for the culprits?
21. When do you think you can return back home?
22. Do you think you will be welcomed by the society? If yes, why?
23. What if you are not welcomed as the tradition still rules the society?
24. What are the contributions of the role of warriors to the society (on social level)?
25. Do you think Tamil women are now liberated from the culture and tradition? Are they empowered?
26. In what way you claim your role has transformed the society?
27. Do you often meet your family?
28. Is there any support extended to your family from the movement?
29. How does marriage system work in the LTTE?
30. Do you have any say over to the allegations on the human rights violation of the LTTE?
31. Aren't there any women in the movement who became fighters through enforced recruitment?
32. Why did you choose a violent path to achieve freedom, why not a non-violent way?
33. What will be the future of Tamil women in the society?
34. What are your visions for future?

### Household heads

1. How did you become a household head?
2. Did you find difficult to take on that role all of a sudden?
3. What are the challenges you had to face to take up this role?
4. How did you challenge those challenges?
5. What have you achieved as a household head?
6. Do you enjoy your status as household head? If yes how? If No Why?
7. Do you think you and other household heads contributed to society in anyway? How?
8. In what way you claim your role as household head has transformed the society?
9. How does the society look at you?
10. What are your visions for future?

### Prisoner women

1. On what accusation you are here in the prison?
2. What motivated you to engage in illegal activities?



3. Don't you think beforehand that it is wrong to do that and you may be punished legally?
4. Why did not you try other ways to earn money
5. Will you continue with the same activity once you are out of Jail? If yes, what are you planning to do?
6. How does the society look at you?
7. Are you feeling bad for what you have done?
8. What are your visions for future?

#### Political Activists

1. What are the motivations for you to become a political activist?
2. Why didn't you take this role during the armed conflict?
3. How did you join the group of political activists?
4. What made you all to form as a group?
5. How do you function as a group?
6. Who are the members of your group?
7. Do you belong to a political party?
8. What is your idea about Tamil/ Sri Lanka politics?
9. Was there any political activism in Jaffna during the conflict? If yes, what? If no, why?
10. What are the challenges you faced? And how did you overcome those challenges?
11. What kind of activities you are usually involved in?  
Can you elaborate about your socially/politically related activities?
12. Why do you think promoting Tamil Nationalism is so important?
13. Does your role contribute to the social betterment? In what way?
14. In what way you claim your role as political activist has transformed the society?
15. How does the society look at political activists?
16. Would you like to become a parliamentarian / politician? When, how and why?
17. What will be the status of women in Tamil society of Jaffna in future?
18. Do your groups have collaboration with the group of local peace women?
19. Do you have collaboration with any groups or political parties across the country?
20. What are your visions for future?

#### Peacebuilders

## Appendix: Respondents' Interview Guide

1. What made you to become a peacebuilders?
2. Why didn't you take this role during the armed conflict?
3. How did you join the group of peacebuilders?
4. What made you all to form as a group?
5. How do you function as a group? What are your activities?
6. Do you have join projects with the other groups of peace women across the county? If so, with whom and what kind of activities?
7. Who are the members of your group?
8. How do you build peace, in what way and how?
9. What is your idea about formal peace initiatives?
10. Why do you believe in local peacebuilding?
11. In what way local peacebuilding will initiate peace?
12. How far you have achieved to build peace?
13. Was there any peacebuilding initiatives in Jaffna during the conflict? If yes, what? If no, why?
14. What are the challenges you faced? And how did you overcome those challenges?
15. Other than peacebuilding, do your groups engage in any social activities?
16. Do you have collaboration with political activists of Jaffna?
17. How is your relationship with the peace women of other ethnic communities?
18. Does your role contribute to the social betterment? In what way?
19. In what way you claim your role a peacebuilder has transformed the society?
20. How does the society look at peace women?
21. What will be the status of women in Tamil society of Jaffna in future?
22. Did you personally gain anything by engaging into peacebuilding?
23. What are your visions for future?