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## Beaten but not Broken

*Tamil Women in Sri Lanka*

Tasha Manoranjan

Walking past an Army checkpoint towards her house, a woman snaps at the soldiers harassing her. These soldiers have taken every opportunity to verbally accost her since she filed an official complaint against police officers stealing her property. Neighbors and friends told Murugesapillai Koneswari, a Tamil mother of four, to simply forget about the police's crimes and ignore the daily injustices. However, her actions had already aggravated the military forces in her village. On 17 May 1997, two months after she filed the complaint, police officers barged into her house in the middle of the night and then proceeded to gang rape and kill her.

Koneswari's story exemplifies the precarious position of Tamil women in Sri Lanka, who have been a particularly vulnerable population during the island's half-century-long conflict. Between 2004 and 2007, I spent a year and a half in the territory formerly controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), documenting Sri Lanka's human rights violations and becoming familiar with Tamil stories of suffering. I discovered that Sri Lanka's brutal civil war had caused an erosion of societal norms that disparately impacted Tamil women. Some women had even assumed unconventional societal roles by joining the LTTE's armed struggle

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for independence and fiercely fighting against the government. Women who abstained from taking up arms also remained under extreme pressure, as the government relentlessly attacked the LTTE de facto government and its populace in the northern and eastern regions of Sri Lanka.

Women, traditionally responsible for taking care of their families, watched helplessly as Colombo's final military advance in early 2009 forced their loved ones to become refugees. Tamil women struggled throughout the assault, which consisted of a ground advance, aerial bombardment, heavy artillery shelling, and a government-imposed embargo that restricted food and medical supplies from entering the LTTE-controlled area. This genocidal assault, as well as the conflict as a whole, has had profound ramifications for the cultural and political roles of Tamil women in Sri Lanka, who have reacted in diverse and diametric ways to these dire circumstances.

Tamil women have suffered disproportionately throughout Sri Lanka's decades-long civil war. They have faced both the structural collapse of communities as well as an erosion of societal norms. In response, an increasing number of women have joined the LTTE in recent years and become part of Tamil's armed resistance against the government. I provide an array of intimate testimonials that explain these women's motives, as well as a macroscopic look at Sri Lanka's past, present, and future, focusing particularly on the evolving role of women in conflict. Finally, I examine the ramifications of Sri Lanka's May 2009 victory over the LTTE. Although Sri

Lanka urgently needs to end decades of impunity for its genocidal war against Tamil civilians, this requires greater international pressure and sanctions. Without a meaningful political process that includes women and provides self-determination to Tamils, Sri Lanka is fated for further conflict.

### **Women in Tamil Society: Traditional Norms of Patriarchy.**

Sri Lanka's recent civil war, which claimed the lives of twenty thousand civilians, is only one phase of the country's violent past.<sup>1</sup> Immediately following national independence in 1948, the Sinhalese majority began to marginalize Tamils. The Sri Lankan Parliament passed laws in 1949 to strip citizenship from nearly one million Tamil laborers of Indian descent. Seven years later, the government declared Sinhalese the national language, which privileged native Sinhalese speakers for advancement in education and employment. Sri Lanka further institutionalized discrimination against Tamils when the Parliament passed the "standardization" acts, which established quotas restricting the number of Tamils able to pursue higher education.<sup>2</sup>

This structural inequality led to peaceful protests by the Tamil community, which the government's police forces swiftly crushed. These events arguably served as the catalyst for subsequent decades of conflict, as they prompted Tamils to view armed struggle as the only path to freedom. The LTTE and other armed Tamil militant groups formed in the 1970s, with the first phase of the civil war breaking out in 1983. The LTTE used a variety of tactics during the conflict,

including suicide bombers known as the “Black Tigers,” which prompted the United States to brand the group a terrorist organization. While the LTTE occasionally struck in government-controlled territory, the majority of the fighting occurred in the heavily Tamil-populated northern and eastern regions of the island.

often considered a fate worse than death in the Tamil community. One female LTTE cadre described to me the strict policy of never leaving a fallen cadre’s body behind. She remarked, “It is worth risking my life to save the lifeless body of another female cadre . . . . It would be easier to accept my own death, than the mutilation of their

## **For many Tamils, the high rates of sexual assault** against Tamil women in the civil war represented an attack on the integrity of their community.

As a result of prolonged exposure to this conflict, traditional Tamil gender relations shifted dramatically. Within Tamil society, women were historically valued as the bearers of culture, responsible primarily for maintaining the home. Parents carefully “protected” or controlled women from childhood until marriage, when authority over them would transfer to their husbands. Due to the fact that women’s domains did not typically extend beyond their households, they were generally excluded from the political process. Society rigorously maintained the image of women as sacred bearers of family and community, utilizing females as symbolic markers to measure purity and respect. This cherished image of women rendered the violent experiences they faced during the civil war traumatic not only for them as individuals but for the entire Tamil society as well.

**Rape as a Weapon: The Significance of Sexual Assault in Tamil Conflict.** Sexual assault is

bodies and spirits.”<sup>3</sup> Stories concerning the rape and mutilation of women are well-known among Tamils; Krishanthi Kumaraswami’s death is particularly infamous. Kumaraswami was an eighteen year old Tamil student who was arrested while passing through a Sri Lankan Army checkpoint in 1996. Her mother, younger brother, and a neighbor went to the checkpoint that afternoon to find her, refusing to leave until she returned safely with them. The soldiers killed all three of them. An hour later, they gang raped Krishanthi and buried her body. Reflecting the importance of this event within the Tamil community, a Tamil schoolteacher, Padmini Ganesan, told *The Washington Post*, “Every Tamil remembers the Krishanthi case . . . . For us, the checkpoints are sort of a slow-motion thing, the trauma and the fear that we go through.”<sup>4</sup>

However, these stories do more than reflect on the vulnerable position of women in conflict. For many Tamils, the high rates of sexual assault against

Tamil women in the civil war represented an attack on the integrity of their community. As United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women Radhika Coomaraswamy reported, sexual assault in the context of ethnic conflict has community-wide implications. She states: "To rape or mutilate women in ethnic conflict is to raid the inner sanctum, the spiritual core of ethnic identity and to defile it . . . . The female body is a symbol of a community's honor and its inner sanctum. To rape women with impunity . . . is to assert domination and to symbolically assault ethnic identity in its most protected space."<sup>5</sup>

### **Fighting Back: Tamil Women Take Arms for Empowerment.**

In recent years, Tamil women joined the LTTE in greater numbers than their male peers. Though female cadres had different personal reasons for enlisting, many joined after experiencing some form of injustice at the hands of the Sri Lankan Army. Most women came from the heavily militarized north. The permanent insecurity of this environment inculcated a desire for freedom and statehood, which included the motivation to take up arms. One LTTE fighter, Senthulasi, described coming of age in Jaffna, a heavily-militarized city. Her own cousin was raped and killed on her way home. Senthulasi said she ran away from home to join the LTTE and fight against the helplessness she felt daily.<sup>6</sup>

Although most women initially joined the LTTE to find respite from this suffocating physical insecurity, their involvement in the armed movement had unintended yet profound cultural and social consequences. Local

psychologists noted that, for Tamil women, "joining the militants [was a] liberating act, promising them more freedom and power . . . . Tamil society had always suppressed women into a subservient position . . . it was the war that has had a liberating role."<sup>7</sup> Many of the female Tamil cadres with whom I spoke expressed their desire to fight for the liberation of both their ethnic community and also their subservient position in Tamil society.

When women first began to join the LTTE, they primarily worked in service and support roles as caregivers for the wounded, but they later advanced to positions as frontline soldiers. This initially met with opposition from the conservative Tamil community. Many of the earlier female cadres reported that male Tigers "wanted them to flee with the civilians."<sup>8</sup> Women had to demonstrate their equal competence to earn the respect of the other cadres as they were "challenged to lift bigger bombs."<sup>9</sup> One can also attribute the acceptance of women's participation in the war to the government's indiscriminate bombings of civilian homes and schools: "a clear sexual division of labor in war . . . usually disappears when there is no clear differentiation between the 'battle front' and the 'home front' or 'rear.'"<sup>10</sup> Women were forced to protect not simply their own physical integrity but also that of their children. Female cadres eventually prided themselves on performing all tasks of their male counterparts. The LTTE even established male and female artillery divisions, long considered impossible for women to handle due to their weight. Some female cadres remarked with pride that they surpassed

male cadres in certain areas of fighting, such as sharp shooting.<sup>11</sup>

The LTTE also explicitly committed itself to gender equality and women's empowerment. The eleventh of October is celebrated as Tamil Eelam Women's Day, which marks the anniversary of the first female cadre battle casualty in 1987. On International Women's Day in 1992, LTTE chief-commander Vellupilai Pirabakaran stated: "With pride I can say that the origin, the development and the rise of women's military wing of the Liberation Tigers is one of the greatest accomplishments of our movement. This marks a revolutionary turning point in the history of the liberation struggle of the women of Tamil Eelam."<sup>12</sup> The LTTE further expanded the agency of both female cadres and civilian women within its territory by abolishing the dowry system and promoting education.<sup>13</sup>

of police brutality, ethnic discrimination by the government, and repression of Tamil rights; finally, she accepted that war was the only path to freedom.

### **Current Situation: Ongoing Trauma in Internment Camps & High Security Zones.**

In September 2008 the Sri Lankan government ordered all international aid agencies to leave the northern region controlled by the LTTE.<sup>15</sup> This action paved the way for an intense military onslaught against Tamil civilians and combatants alike. UN sources initially estimated that 7,000 civilians were killed between January and March 2009.<sup>16</sup> However, the former UN spokesman in Colombo, Gordon Weiss, stated that up to 40,000 Tamil civilians were killed during the final stages of war.<sup>17</sup> The significance of this death-toll can not be over-looked, especially when

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As they advanced to new roles in society, Tamil women strove to realize their political aspirations. The female cadres with whom I spoke said that Sri Lankan soldiers fought only for a paycheck, whereas the LTTE fought for the freedom of their people and land. One female cadre, Isaimozhi, said she aimed to kill on the battlefield, but regretted that violence was the only way to actualize Eelam.<sup>14</sup> Isaimozhi cited the decades

compared to other conflicts that have garnered much more media attention. For instance, 1,788 people have been killed since January 2009 in Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup>

In the months during Sri Lanka's most intense conflict from January to May 2009, conditions worsened. There was no neatly delineated "battle front," and the fighting trapped 300,000 Tamil civilians in Mulaivaikkal. Starva-

tion and malnourishment were widespread, according to UNHCR assessments.<sup>19</sup> The government's embargo against the region was total and indiscriminate, and women could not search for food without dodging gunfire.

The conflict reached a deadly and dramatic end in May, when the government regained all territory previously controlled by the LTTE. Up to 300,000 Tamils who had fled from their homes due to the military campaign were interned in government-run camps in the northern areas of Jaffna, Mannar, Trincomalee, and Vavuniya.<sup>20</sup> The government intended to detain these refugees for three years but began releasing them into High Security Zones across the north after an international outcry.<sup>21</sup> Currently, over 106,000 Tamil civilians are still trapped in these camps.<sup>22</sup> Tamil parliamentarian Suresh Premachandran expressed concern about the lack of institutional support for resettling refugees, since they return to war-torn villages where most, if not all, structures have been destroyed.<sup>23</sup>

Women remain particularly affected by the conflict. Conditions in the internment camps are poor, as access to aid agencies and journalists is sporadic and insufficient. Local sources report that families are often divided, because male and female refugees are separated upon arrival. Sri Lanka is notorious for its use of extra-judicial disappearances, and families must worry whether this is the fate of their sons and daughters. This constant mental anguish exerts further strain in an already tense environment.

The camps are heavily militarized. Human Rights Watch researcher Anna

Neistat described them as "machine gun nests" due to the massive military and paramilitary presence in and around them.<sup>24</sup> Sexual assault is also reported to be prevalent. Journalists from the United Kingdom's Channel 4 News managed to enter a camp and were shocked by what they found. According to journalist Nick Paton Walsh, there were "[bodies] left for days; children crushed in the rush for food; the sexual abuse of women; disappearances."<sup>25</sup> He also reported that after three dead female bodies were found in the bathing area of the camp, refugees requested that they be guarded by female police guards instead of soldiers.<sup>26</sup> After the report aired, Walsh and his team were arrested and deported, reflecting the government's harsh tactics to suppress media coverage of the suffering of Tamils.

On 26 January 2010 Sri Lanka held its presidential election. The candidates were sitting President Mahinda Rajapakse and former Army Commander Sarath Fonseka. The Tamil National Alliance pledged its support for Fonseka, having reached an agreement for greater regional autonomy if he won.<sup>27</sup> However, there was great ambivalence for Tamils voting in this election: vote for the president, the chief architect of the military onslaught that destroyed their homeland, or vote for the army general, the chief executor of the military offensive? Despite Tamils' hesitant support for Fonseka, Rajapakse won with 57 percent of the vote; Fonseka received 40 percent of the vote.

Following the election, Fonseka said he was prepared to give evidence in international courts on soldiers committing war crimes. "I am definitely

going to reveal what I know, what I was told and what I heard. Anyone who has committed war crimes should definitely be brought into the courts.”<sup>28</sup> Later that day, Sri Lankan military police arrested him. He remains in custody.

### **Moving Forward: Recommendations for a Sustainable Peace.**

Accountability for Sri Lanka’s egregious human rights violations against Tamils is a necessary first step towards re-building Tamil society and recovering from the devastating conflict. The Army General has conceded that war crimes were committed when Sri Lanka prosecuted its final offensive; however, there has been no attempt to hold any soldiers or officials accountable for the thousands of deaths that occurred in a matter of weeks. Until this occurs, every Tamil will continue to feel insecure on the island, fearing another wave of violence. Fonseka’s arrest reveals the limited political space that exists even for dissidents of the ethnic majority. When even Sinhalese critics of the government face repression, Tamils feel threatened to openly express their political aspirations. This suffocating political environment will only breed further violence and instability.

As Sri Lankan courts are loathe to hold officials and soldiers responsible for their crimes, justice must be sought through a number of extra-territorial means. First, the UN Security Council should refer Sri Lanka to the International Criminal Court. Second, given that Fonseka holds a U.S. Green Card, and Sri Lanka Secretary of Defense Gotabaya Rajapakse is a U.S. citizen, the U.S. government should use

domestic legal mechanisms to prosecute them under the law of command responsibility. Third, American companies, such as Victoria’s Secret and The Gap, should move factories off the island to pressure the Sri Lankan government to respect international norms of human rights. With exports constituting nearly one-fourth of Sri Lanka’s economy, these companies have significant leverage over the policies of the government.<sup>29</sup>

Tamil women must play a greater role in the economic and political development of the northern and eastern regions of the country; a just political solution must address their historically disadvantaged situation. The LTTE made strides in this direction when it conscientiously embraced a policy of gender equality, both in its armed movement and in its state-building apparatus. In LTTE-controlled territory, I witnessed billboards denouncing the dowry system, encouraging families to value children of both genders equally. Female civilians and cadres confidently drove motorcycles in saris and helmets—unheard of a decade ago. The lives of women in LTTE-controlled areas appear to have gradually—but markedly—improved over time.

These advances disappeared with the government’s military assault in early 2009. If Sri Lanka wishes to truly empower Tamil women within a post-conflict context, the government must institutionalize Tamil rights and women’s rights by means of a just political solution. It must normalize the north and east through the maintenance of a minimal military presence and with strong socio-economic development. It must also transfer “High Security

Zones” to civilian control, so that rightful owners can finally return to their homes. All new programs must encourage the participation of women. Finally, since the government has regained control of LTTE territory, it is now obligated to promote the welfare of Tamils. If the regime continues to deny freedom of movement and the right of self-determination to Tamils, the region could quickly descend back into war. As Isaimozhi told me, “Tamils have been living as slaves for the Sinhalese for decades. We can’t live like that anymore.

We have to all achieve freedom or we have to all die trying.”<sup>30</sup>

As the government claims victory over its most recent conflict with the LTTE, it is urgent that the equal rights for which Tamil women fought are not lost. Sri Lanka now stands at a crossroads, between a continuing conflict exacerbated by the bitterness of life in internment camps and a just peace that respects the political and human rights of all its communities. Women have and will continue to play a role in determining which path is pursued.

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