

The transition of teenage girls and young women from ex-combatants to civilian life: a case study in Sri Lanka

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This paper describes the lives of young, female former Tamil Tiger fighters, in Batticaloa, after the civil war in Sri Lanka. It shows how the kinship and solidarity found in female networks, in a matrilineal society, has helped them survive the conflict. In Batticaloa, female-headed households bear the main burden for caring for the traumatised, and sometimes injured, returning female, former soldiers. This is done in the absence of social welfare services or specific medical or psychosocial care. Disabled female ex-combatants find it especially difficult to build a future within the community. Although Sri Lanka's National Action Plan for the Re-Integration of Ex-Combatants does include disabled fighters, in reality, disabled female ex-combatants receive hardly any support. The author concludes that money is spent on programmes that are not aimed at restoring trust between the Tamil population and the Sri Lankan state, but at reconciling ex-combatants with local communities. This is unnecessary, as communities already accept and help them, especially in the female-headed households. Households that have extra mouths to feed, because they provide care to returning female soldiers, should at least receive economic support.

Keywords: child soldiers, demobilisation and reintegration, disarmament, Sri Lanka, young women and girl soldiers

Introduction

In May 2009, after nearly three decades, the armed conflict in north and east Sri Lanka

ended in a military victory for the Sri Lankan army. During the final hostilities, thousands of civilians were killed by troops on both sides. One of the militant groups, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam or LTTE, recruited girls – both children and young teenagers. They comprised one-third of the active fighting force of the LTTE (Bouta, 2005) and were known as the 'Birds of Freedom'.

There is strong evidence, provided by the UN and other international human rights organisations, that international norms were being violated by both the forces of the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE, when they caused huge numbers of civilians to be trapped within the conflict zone, resulting in large-scale civilian death and destruction of communities (International Crisis Group, 2010). As the armed conflict escalated in the 1980s and 1990s, the Tamil Tigers managed to capture and control many rural areas in the east. As a result, this created a complicated geography of rebel-controlled and government-controlled territories (Goodhand, Klem & Korf, 2009). In the Batticaloa region, in eastern Sri Lanka, over the years people have experienced torture, disappearances, gruesome decapitations and full-scale massacres of both Tamils and Muslims (Goodhand & Lewer, 1999). Furthermore, Batticaloa became the main recruiting ground for both female and male Tamil

Tiger combatants (Trawick, 2007; Lawrence, 2007). Forceful conscription took place, and included many children. If a family resisted, the child was taken away by force (Human Rights Watch, 2004). In the civil war between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan army, over the control of Tamil-speaking areas in the east, women were recruited as active fighting cadres by the Tamil Tigers to make up for the heavy shortfall in male combatants killed in battle. This is emphasised by Sri Lankan feminist scholars, who point out that the Tamil Tigers' guise of having a feminist ideology was more a *'rhetorical rouse to maintain the romantic allure of national ideology than a real commitment to social change for women'* (Coomaraswamy & Perera-Rajasingham, 2009, p. 126).

Images of women Tigers: in fatigues, with AK47s, barking out orders and engaged in battle with men might be a stark contrast to the image of the traditional Tamil village girl and suburban educated woman. However, there is a mutually supportive relationship within the community amongst Tamil women, as Sangarasivam (2000) points out. She explains that those who did not join the Tamil Tigers still have ties with those who chose to join the LTTE and *'emotional commitments and connections with friends and family are not severed by the act of joining the movement'* (Sangarasivam, 2000, p. 272).

The (post)conflict environment is a challenge to any form of intervention. A successful process of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatants forms the key to (post)conflict reconstruction and sustainable development. It is crucial to include both women and men in such programmes.

Unfortunately, DDR processes tend to be viewed by planners as a series of temporary projects put together by outsiders, rather than a continuation of the political dialogue

from the peace process, and a social contract with communities receiving the ex-combatants. Scant attention is devoted to understanding the community reintegration of young women ex-combatants in matrilineal societies like Batticaloa, where women are afforded a certain amount of power in societies derived from their capacity to resist patriarchal hierarchy.

In Sri Lanka, the National Action Plan for the reintegration of ex-combatants into civilian life is stymied by an array of ministries and bureaucratic entities. Most of them do not cooperate with each other. This results in a fragmentation of policy. At the provincial level, DDR policy is implemented by under funded provincial councils, which were formed following constitutional amendments in 1987.

Complicating matters further, Sri Lanka's Ministry of Defence (MOD) has the ability to ride roughshod over DDR plans, and promotes the idea that DDR is a security measure and should be limited to removing all dangerous elements from society. More to the point, the MOD requires that resettlement and reintegration must be interwoven with the elimination of long range offensive capabilities, and the disarmament of the LTTE (Muggah, 2008).

Large sections of the National Action Plan are devoted to screening procedures for ex-combatants before reintegration through a *'strong labour market'* (Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights, 2009). Yet, what is a *'strong labour market'*? The biggest problem women ex-combatants have is that civilian society does not allow them to use the skills they developed in the armed movement. Society would have them learning how to sew or be domestic helpers, rather than being carpenters, masons, bricklayers or computer repairers. Additionally, the National Plan of Action does not provide

any concrete proposals for assisting the empowerment of disabled individuals to return to a productive life.

At the community level, in times of conflict and (post)conflict, women often emerge as the main informal providers of social welfare; caring for the casualties of war and supporting sick or injured women in their household tasks (El-Bushra, 2003). Batticaloa has an intriguing pattern of female kinship solidarity that sustains needs based safety nets and ameliorates fear and impoverishment. This paper, based on research carried out by the author in Batticaloa, between April to June 2010, illustrates the resilient female networks, that care for the casualties of war and, until recently, was able to protect self-demobilised, young women and girl former child soldiers from forcible re-recruitment.

Sample and method

A total of 23 Tamil Tiger women and young women ex-combatants were interviewed, between April to June 2010: in five locations in Batticaloa district between April to June 2010¹.

In one of those locations, focus group discussions were also held with five female and two male community journalists. In the capital Colombo, the researcher spoke to key personnel from donor agencies, embassies and international nongovernmental organisations (NGOs).

The criteria used for the inclusion of female ex-combatants in the research study were those who were forcibly recruited by the LTTE and self-demobilised when the eastern Tamil Tiger command split in 2004; those who voluntarily disarmed following the 2002 ceasefire; and those who were released from detention by the Sri Lankan military and police following the end of the war on May 19, 2009.

While carrying out the interviews, the researcher used a semi-structured approach with a combination of direct and open ended questions. Like Alison (2009), the researcher structured the interviews around a few topics and key questions, and then gauged where the discussion was leading in order to allow self-reflection by the participants.

The researcher, who is fluent in Tamil, used Tamil in dialogue with interviewees and was aided by a research assistant. The confidential nature of the interviews was emphasised by both the researcher and the research assistant. The researcher further assured participants that the sensitive nature of the issues under discussion would be respected, that their views would not be judged, and it would not affect the services delivered by NGOs.

Results

Memories of atrocities M10 is an injured ex-Tamil Tiger young woman combatant, now reunited with her sister's family in Batticaloa district after spending 11 months in an army detention centre. She recalls the heart-wrenching scenes of human suffering in Puthikkudiyiruppu, in the north's Wannu region, as she fled the battlefield:

'I saw babies, less than a year old, dying in indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas. The shells were propelled from multi-barrel rocket launchers and shrapnel hit lots of people. I saw a busload of civilians with children blown apart by a shell. . . As we were fleeing the shelling, together with the civilians, there were literally waves of people dying behind us. . . When I see my sister's children, I think of the children in the last days of the war.'

Disabled girls: economic problems and unemployment M10, who lost her left leg in a 1995 battle in the Wannu region, surrendered

herself at the Omantai military checkpoint in the closing days of the war, after fleeing the heavy shelling (described above) on Puthikkudiyiruppu. Thereafter she was taken immediately to the Pampaimadu Camp for interrogation by Sri Lankan army intelligence and the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of the police force. One year later, in late April 2010, M10 was released and recalled how she was sent back to Batticaloa:

'After about one year of intense, repetitive interrogation by army intelligence and the CID, I was told that I would be released. There were about 20 girls like me. We were asked to get in a military truck and after we all got in, the back of the truck was covered with a large tarpaulin. We could not see where we were being driven. After several hours the truck stopped and my name was called out. I knew I was in Batticaloa as the surroundings looked familiar. Then I saw my sister and her children run towards me. I shouted 'perria aka' (big sister) and we all embraced and cried. There was a CID officer who accompanied us. He warned me not to talk to anyone, or else I would be in trouble.

The truck then drove off. I felt that I had just been dumped into uncertainty. My sister is poor; I am disabled, so how is she going to look after me? No NGO came to talk to me in my sister's place, except for the police who drop by every week to check up on me.'

M7, like M10, is an injured ex-Tamil Tiger young woman combatant who surrendered at the Omantai checkpoint, in the closing days of the war. In April 2010, she was released after a year in Cheddikulam camp, where the CID interrogated her. She graphically explains how she was blinded in her left eye during a battle in Killinnochi in 1998; *'I saw my eye-ball on the forest floor after I was*

hit by shrapnel and then passed out'. M7 recalls how she tried to look for a job in Batticaloa after the army left her in her mother's house:

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

The IOM programme in Batticaloa and other parts of the east, funded by the United States government, says it *'provides information and counselling to former fighters, referring them to vocational training, psychosocial support and employment opportunities'* (Embassy of the United States, 2009). Some participants, with appropriate experience and skill sets, also receive small grants to help them start their own businesses in their local communities. Disabled ex-combatants, especially females, have great difficulty reintegrating in the absence of specific medical and psychosocial care in their communities. Due to their disability, they are usually unable to generate any income without intensive training and rehabilitation (Mehreteab, 2007).

The care of female relatives, friends and neighbours
In the absence of care services, female-headed households bear the main burden of caring for disabled female ex-combatants. Ruwanpura & Humphries (2004) found that in the kinship networks in east Sri Lanka, neighbours and friends are an important source of assistance for female-headed

households. In particular, the non-financial help that many women found invaluable, such as: childcare, help in chaperoning children to school, help with cooking, and emotional support. The help of these friends also enabled them feel more emotionally stable and secure.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The mother of injured ex-Tamil Tiger young woman combatant M8 thanks the goddess Aman for looking after her daughter when she was blinded in one eye by shrapnel in a 2007 battle in Puthukkudiyiruppu. M8's mother is now making plans to send her to school, after she arrived home in April 2010, after spending a year in a Sri Lankan military detention camp:

'It's a miracle that my daughter is still alive. It's through Aman's grace. Now I want her to have a good life. But first she has to go back to

school. My eldest son has just finished his Ordinary Levels, so I'll send him to work in Batticaloa town to help support his sister. He's still young and we can depend on him. But once he marries, his responsibility will shift to his wife and her family.'

Ongoing violence Paramilitary gangs still operate underground in Batticaloa. Because of this, women feel particularly vulnerable in the prevailing climate of insecurity. Ex-Tamil Tiger young woman combatant M16, who is now a social worker, explains:

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

Women and men in east Sri Lanka The female leadership in families could be explained by Batticaloa's matrilineal system: when new families are formed, the husband should live in the house of the wife's mother. Interestingly, according to Balasundram (2008), the wife in a matrilineal society is entitled to the entire income of the husband. In this context Balasundram (2008) intends to convey that the wife makes all the financial decisions for the family. In Tamil families in Batticaloa, all earning male members on pay-day have to 'surrender' their pay-packets to either their wives or mothers. These males are then given 'pocket-money' for their daily expenses. Money from all males in the family

is pooled for extended family expenses, and some is set aside for savings. However, this is not an indicator of gender equality. A strong patriarchal system still exists when it comes to Hindu rites and rituals. It is simply that Batticaloa Tamil women, in these households, make financial decisions on behalf of their families. However, that is not the only explanation. Many women have lost men due to the fighting, killings and abductions. There also are many instances of desertion, separation and divorce, resulting in female leadership of families (Ruwanpura, 2003). In addition, pressures exerted by the war resulted in increased migration of men, leaving families headed by women stranded. Additionally, as El-Bushra (2003) notes, the war put all kinds of stress on the community, leading to an increase in male alcoholism and domestic violence. This in turn, affected women's long term expectations of marriage and family life. Some women, including returned former Tamil Tiger combatants, face a choice between remaining single and never establishing a family of their own, or entering into polygamous or informal relationships. M16 talks about the social problems in North Vaharai:

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

Former child soldier M17, self-demobilised and resettled in her family home in Kathiravel in North Vaharai, prefers to remain single, for the time being, and gives her reasons:

'I do not like the civilian Tamil men here. They do not respect their women, drink too much and beat their wives. No, civilian men for me! I want to be married to an ex-cadre. Only such a man will love and understand me.'

Discussion and conclusions

The stories of the women and girls, who are systemically bypassed in the DDR process in the wake of the war in Sri Lanka, resemble the experiences of the same category of women in Sierra Leone (Coulter, 2009). Many of the women interviewed by Coulter found it extremely difficult to return to their families, let alone integrate back into their communities. Without any reinsertion benefits, as a transitional safety net, some were forced into prostitution to eke out a living. The same situation is now being reported by social workers in Batticaloa's North Vaharai division.

In Batticaloa, women-headed households now bear the main burden of caring for traumatised and disabled female ex-combatants. However, social and economic conditions are unfavourable and unsustainable. Some of these households desperately need economic support.

Donors funding DDR initiatives in Sri Lanka, however, often tend to overlook this fact. They seem to still believe that there are strong divisions between ex-female combatants and the communities which is, in fact, not true at all. So money and energy is invested in an obsolete community centred, reintegration approach; instead of strengthening social networks within the community that ex-combatants, especially young female ex-Tamil Tiger fighters, rely on for their survival.

The main problem in Batticaloa is the lack of trust by both the women ex-combatants and the Tamil communities towards the Sri Lankan state and its agencies, which they

feel have treated them with disdain and suspicion for at least three decades. There is little confidence that the Sri Lankan police, army and government ministries will support them. In fact, there is a strong reluctance within the communities in Batticaloa to work with agencies like the Ministry of Child Development and Women's Affairs.

The invisible wounds of the war are in the minds and hearts of the combatants, civilians and communities. Yet, the current situation in Sri Lanka offers a window of opportunity; with a combined effort and international cooperation, much progress can be made towards healing the rift between the Tamils in Batticaloa, and the government. In order to start the healing process at both the individual and community levels, first and foremost, dignity must be given to the young women ex-Tamil Tiger fighters. Additionally, the female networks, that heal, nurture and protect all groups of women ex-combatants must be recognised, valued and supported.

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- ¹ The five locations were in: Iripudichenai – Pan-kudaveli (Chenkalady) Division; Mavadivembu (Chenkalady) Division; Sittandy – Eravur Division; Vaharai North Division; Mylampavelly – Eravur Division.
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