

Reports

War and its Impact on Women in Sri Lanka

Oppressive power relations, sexual assault, attack and disappearance of family members, and the general insecurity on the streets, lead to an overall loss of freedom for women. Women in refugee camps can be particularly exposed to violence, due to the lack of space and security, and their freedom is often confined: "In Refugee Camps due to restricted area of movement it is difficult to find a place to change clothes, or to have a space to sleep. So their freedom is very restricted in the camps." Women from all three communities, Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim have been affected and have their different stories to tell.

In Muslim displaced communities, for instance, the loss of freedom of women has come hand in hand with the adoption of more conservative cultural practices as a way of reasserting a religious and ethnic identity. Many women have found that since they have been displaced and living in the camps, there are more cultural restrictions on their clothing and their freedom of movement compared to when they lived in the North of the country.

One of the main obstacles for women to work for peace is this lack of freedom: said one, "So now she has walked out of the house, on to the road for peace, but what are the obstacles? First of all lack of self confidence in her talents. Even the media portrays her as a weak human being - so as a result she comes to the conclusion that she lacks talents. We tend to think that politics is beyond them. As a result of the war they have no security outside the homes - and the war situation has also contributed to her inability to work for peace. Lack of education means there is no awareness for achieving peace. The language problem is an obstacle preventing her to go to higher planes. Only a few women are in decision making bodies. Who decides whether we continue with the war or have peace talks? They are mostly men - responding to a framework and structure done by men for men. In religious institutions the women do not have proper representatives. So in the public plane they have fears and misgivings and other problems that lead to diffidence. Also sexual harassment makes it difficult to raise their voices. When you look at all these factors - we are able to see our own ideas. We can see the direct link between these problems and the prospect of peace in this country. One of the sentences written about peace was that peace

means equal rights for women - this is because they have always experienced within the house that there is no peace because there is no equality." These and other findings were made when thirty nine women from from all regions of Sri Lanka, representative of the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim communities came to discuss their experiences and different points of view on the 17 year-war in the country. The meeting was organised and facilitated by the National Peace Council, as part of the World Bank sponsored Needs Assessment Study on Relief, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation.

Peace means different things to different people. What did it mean for these women? "Peace means a democratic environment in which feelings and rights will be respected", was the definition of peace, made by the thirty nine women. Most of the women had some direct experience with war, either currently in the North East or in the South during the JVP uprising. Many expressed that it was the first time they had the chance to discuss their experiences and points of view related to the war with women from other communities.

All women at the meeting agreed that women could build peace and even that women were reconciliatory by nature: "We are the only possible peace emissaries because we have the spiritual power - even the women can push the men forward and give them strength... as women are responsible for the maintenance of the family if we share our experience with other people we hope it will bring peace..." Some said that they were prepared to be rejected by their families in the name of peace, because if the war continued then their families could be killed and the loss would be definite. In this sense advocating for peace was seen as an extension of their role to protect and nurture the family.

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This very personal motivation to struggle for peace was manifested in the definition of peace created which included the 'respect of feelings'. In this sense peace is not only to protect the family, but also to be respected as women and as individuals. One of the facilitators tore up a piece of paper. Some women cried out as they thought it was the paper with their sentence on peace, which had been destroyed. Coincidentally it was the male facilitator who tore up the paper. Once it was clear that their sentence had not been destroyed the women explained their reaction: "I thought there was an individual here totally against peace.... if somebody

wants to destroy the fruit of your efforts you must struggle against them - resist.... You can also imagine how painful it is for you if somebody murders a child...".

This incident clearly illustrates the importance and very personal aspect of peace for the participants. The women repeatedly expressed that their rights, role and identity were primarily defined by men - ranging from the family (directly through fathers and husbands), to the State (through legislation, the justice system and political representation) and even culture, tradition and religion. They explained that women are considered mentally, physically and emotionally 'soft', they have little power, are oppressed and thus easily abused. Their role (as defined by men in their family and the culture) is to have children, look after the family, and to stay in the house. Their identity is defined in relation to the men in their family: "you are the wife of someone or the daughter of someone - we do not have an identity, we are not taken as a full person."

Any power relation at work, in the home, or anywhere else, can be a potential situation of abuse for women, as they have little power to protest or seek justice, particularly due to the social stigma attached at being abused or raped. Many of the ways the war affects women are not new. For example, sexual harassment or physical abuse are not new to women: "sexual harassment is always present in society", but these dangers are intensified during the war and may be used as a weapon against women. Women are more likely to find themselves in a situation where abuse can take place because the war imposes a level of social control which can expose women rather than protect them (such as the many checkpoints women have to go through or the conditions in the refugee camps).

In war women are also more likely to encounter situations where someone wants to exercise power over them due to the tension and level of violence in the environment. They particularly made mention of soldiers who respond to a 'herd instinct' and take chance of 'any opportunity' to abuse women. In war it is also easier to justify such abuse, simply as one of those "inevitable" consequences of war, as the soldiers 'are in natural need of sexual activity.' If physical and mental abuse of women exists even in a society without war, the disappearance and killing of family members is a direct consequence of war. As a woman's role has been primarily defined to take care and 'nurture' the family and home, then the attack and disappearance of family members directly cripple her role and her identity as wife and mother: "women lose their children, women become widows... we have never gained anything by the war as mothers

and wives".

Most of the war related experiences were related to the loss of a family member. In comparison to men, women are mostly the survivors - men the direct victims or the disappeared. As survivors they have to find ways of coping with the pain and of restructuring their family unit and lives. One woman described how she was in a new town when her husband was taken away. Even though she was alone she went to the streets and started investigating what had happened to her husband in order to find him again. After nine months her husband was finally set free, even though he was so damaged by the torture that he was unable to work. However, the primary concern of the woman was to find her husband, even though it meant that she had to do things she had never done before, (like deal with the army, police forces, write to MPs and even the president, etc.) which though were carried out for very personal reasons also has some implications concerning a woman's participation in the public sphere.

The impact of war on women is on the one hand a very personal and painful experience, (the death/disappearance of a loved one, sexual assault, daily harassment at checkpoints, etc.) and on the other hand has a long term social impact whereby the conditions and prolonged suffering force women to take steps and responsibilities that traditionally did not form part of her 'role'. One of these steps is the public role of women (women spending more time outside the home, women organising themselves, women protesting, etc.) Other changes which were mentioned include the increased participation of women in the armed forces as well as the LTTE cadres.

This places great pressure on women as many of these new steps are socially unacceptable, and women run the risk of being stigmatised and marginalised by the family and community: "People are totally against women being involved in activities like the search for peace... I don't think so many people will like us coming forward... it is difficult to go on the roads because of the way society looks at us... we are unable to go out of the house...there is a social stigma against widows." Women's role and responsibilities can also change from being the 'nurturer' to also being the breadwinner - or from being inside the house, to outside the house. One way or another women begin to participate in the 'public sphere' - be it as the breadwinner of the family, as a mother searching for her son, or even as a combatant.

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