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## **Birds of Freedom? Perspectives on Female Emancipation and Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam**

By Kim Jordan<sup>1</sup> and Myriam Denov<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

Over the last decade, females have been an integral part of fighting forces in both international conflicts and in armed struggle in at least 38 internal conflicts. While some scholars argue that recent wars have thrust women into new roles, enabling them to transform their social situations, identities and destinies, others question whether females achieve 'emancipation' through active participation in warfare. The *Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)* in Sri Lanka that has been engaged in conflict with the Sri Lankan government since 1983, and actively recruits female cadres, provides an interesting context to explore issues of female empowerment in the context of armed struggle. Drawing from interviews with four Sri Lankans living in Canada, this paper traces the perceived extent of female emancipation within the LTTE. While the participation of females in unconventional military roles represents a drastic change in behaviour expected of Tamil women, the militant movement appears to reinforce existing patterns of gender constructions, ultimately impeding the attainment of meaningful empowerment for females.

*Keywords:* Sri Lanka, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Women's Emancipation

### **Introduction: Armed Conflict, Gender, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam**

War has typically been perceived as the purview of men. Although there has been extensive literature addressing political violence and armed conflict – both analytical and operational – past scholarship has tended to be largely gender-blind, with women and girls' participation in conflict, whether active or passive, simply not identified. More recently, however, scholarly and policy literature has begun to address issues related to gender and war. Yet promoting a misleading binary, males have tended to be portrayed as the agents of conflict, while females have been identified as the victims, particularly of sexual abuse and forced abduction (Nordstrom, 1997). What is generally overlooked in such dichotomous representations is not only the reality of male wartime victimization, but also the active and critical roles that females take on in situations of conflict (Denov & Maclure, 2006; Keairns, 2003; McKay & Mazurana, 2004; Veale, 2003). Over the last decade, it has been estimated that females have been part of fighting forces in both international conflicts and in armed struggle in at least 38 internal conflicts. These international and civil conflicts include Angola, Burundi, Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Guatemala, Lebanon, Liberia, Macedonia, Nepal, Peru, Philippines, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Zimbabwe and

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others (Mazurana et al, 2002). While the proportion of females in fighting forces varies according to geographic region, it generally ranges from 10% to one third of all combatants (Bouta, 2005).

Women and girls are involved in myriad aspects of armed conflict as perpetrators, actors, porters, commanders, domestic servants, spies, bodyguards, human shields, and sex slaves (Veale & Stavrou, 2003; Fox, 2004; Zedalis, 2004). Their roles are multidimensional, fluid, often contradictory, and may vary according to age, physical strength, and the circumstances of the armed group (Denov & Maclure, in press). Research has continued to demonstrate the ways in which the militarization of women and girls' lives fuels and supports conflict because their productive and reproductive labour is key to the functioning of fighting forces (Honwana, 2006; Denov & Maclure, 2006; McKay & Mazurana, 2004). Moreover, in some cases, nationalist armies have actively recruited women, in an effort to enhance their legitimacy or add symbolic power to their war efforts (Bouta, 2005).

For females, the implications and consequences of being participants in armed conflict vary from context to context and are indeed influenced by factors such as race, religion, caste, class, ethnicity, location, political affiliation and a variety of intersecting factors (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2004). In the vast majority of armed conflicts, it would appear that the formal and informal militarized cultures of armed groups reinforce patriarchal realities of female subordination, victimization and ultimately perpetuate and exacerbate profound gender inequalities (Denov & Gervais, 2007; Mazurana et al., 2002). However, in some contexts, the non-conventional roles women and girls take on in war may provide them with greater ideological and practical space to participate in war as active agents (Alison, 2004). Nonetheless, the potential for the 'emancipation' of females within established military subcultures remains highly questionable and a topic of considerable discussion among scholars. Feminist scholars have debated the significance of girls and women carrying arms in pursuit of social justice weighed against modern feminist discourses on the liberation of women from repressive patriarchal norms. Some authors view women's active participation in warfare and mass violence as inevitable, and as a natural progression to the struggle for justice and equality in situations of generalized societal inequality and oppression (Jayamaha, 2004). In this light, it has been argued that some recent wars have thrust women into new roles, transforming their social situations and enabling them to subtly and creatively craft their identities and destinies (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2004). On the other hand, many scholars dispute the ideological interpretation of empowerment and question whether females truly achieve emancipation through active participation in warfare (Alison, 2004).

The militant nationalist group the *Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)* in Sri Lanka that has been engaged in a long-standing conflict with the Sri Lankan government since 1983, provides an interesting and relevant context within which to examine female roles and participation in armed conflict, as well as assess issues of female emancipation and empowerment during armed struggle. First, the LTTE is renowned for its active recruitment of girls and women into its forces since the mid-1980s. Females comprise approximately one-third of the LTTE fighting forces, and are inducted into all units of the movement (Bouta, 2005). Second, in its public discourse, the LTTE has declared its commitment to raising females to a revolutionary status and to ultimately assist in the

liberation of women in Tamil society (Jayamaha, 2004). Third, researchers emphasize the need for in-depth studies of the liberation struggle and its implications for females in Sri Lanka, as well as a need to record the unique experiences of female LTTE cadres (De Mel, 2003; Fox, 2004). Given these realities, the ethno-national armed conflict in Sri Lanka provides an interesting forum to scrutinize issues of gender roles in armed conflict, militarization, the mobilization of females to raise military efficiency, as well as notions of female emancipation.

To critically assess gender roles and the extent of female emancipation within the LTTE movement, we draw upon the experiences of four war-affected Sri Lankans currently living in Canada who provide anecdotal evidence, and a variety of perspectives and insights on the conflict in Sri Lanka. We explore participants' views concerning the core values inherent to the LTTE, the reasons women appear to join the movement, the perceived extent of women's empowerment within the radical armed group, as well as the potential limitations to the actualization of female emancipation. We argue that while there appears to be some capacity for women in the LTTE to engage in non-traditional gender roles, representing a drastic change in behaviour expected of Tamil women, nonetheless, and quite paradoxically, the LTTE movement appears to simultaneously uphold and reinforce prevalent patterns of gender constructions through the reproduction of conventional cultural standards, preventing women from attaining meaningful levels of empowerment.

The paper begins with a brief overview of the history of the civil war in Sri Lanka, the historical development of the LTTE movement, as well as the role of women and girls in the movement. Following an outline of the study's methodological approach, we trace the perspectives of four Sri Lankans currently living in Canada concerning the LTTE's constructions of gender and female emancipation. Finally, we highlight the policy implications of female participation in conflict, particularly in relation to ongoing debates concerning gender, war, and militarization.

### **A Brief History of Sri Lanka's Civil War**

Sri Lanka is an island country southeast of India with a population of approximately 20 million inhabitants. Seventy-four percent of the population is Sinhalese, 18 percent are Tamil and 7 percent are Muslim (Alison, 2004). The eruption of the civil war can be traced back to existing tensions and deep-seated ethnic divides between the two main ethnic groups occupying the territory, namely the (mainly Hindu) Tamils and the (mainly Buddhist) Sinhalese. In attempting to explain the on-going armed conflict in Sri Lanka, some suggest that institutional decay, facilitated by linguistic nationalism, mobilized the Tamils for ethnic conflict (DeVotta, 2004). For over 2000 years, the two groups shared amiable relations until the Sinhalese, the major political party in power, proposed to overthrow the country's official languages that consisted of both Sinhala and Tamil, in order to institute Sinhala as the sole official language of the country (DeVotta, 2004; Somasundaram et al., 1988). Eventually, the manipulation of institutions designed to promote equality and impartiality, propagated divisive ethnic politics (Rogers et al., 1998). Feeling marginalized and oppressed by state institutions, Tamils mobilized to seek redress through the adoption of nationalist measures - fighting for linguistic nationalism and the establishment of an independent Tamil state.

Consequently, tension and hostility between the two ethnic groups escalated and led to violence, especially among radicalized Tamil youth (Somasundaram et al., 1988).

In 1970, Tamil youth formed the Tamil Student's Federation which was renamed the *Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam* (LTTE) under Mr. Vellupillai Prabhakaran in 1976<sup>3</sup> (DeVotta, 2004). Under Prabhakaran's leadership, the LTTE developed a political and military structure that provided organizational expression to the ambitions of the young Tamil militants (Gunaratna, 1999). From its inception, the LTTE embraced Tamil nationalism and declared that its primary goal was to establish a state for Tamils separate from the rest of the island. The LTTE articulated four principal demands: first, that the Tamils of Sri Lanka be recognized as a distinct nation; second, that the north-east of the country be recognized as their historical homeland; third, that the Tamil population be allowed the right of self-determination and finally, that all Tamils be granted Sri Lankan citizenship (Devotta, 2004: 171). Initially, LTTE leaders maintained that the movement would be essentially nonviolent. However, the Tamil militants soon became disenchanted with non-violent political agitation and resolved to counter the repressive Sinhalese state through rebellious acts and armed struggle (Gunaratna, 1999).

By the early 1980's, the LTTE became increasingly daring in their attacks against police and military personnel while Sinhalese groups retaliated by attacking Tamil civilians and raping Tamil women. The year 1983 is considered to mark the beginning of Sri Lanka's savage nationalist ethnic conflict. Between 1983 and 2002, the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE engaged in a brutal civil war which has resulted in the deaths of an estimated 65,000 people and the displacement overseas and to other parts of the country of over a million people at various times in the two decades of conflict (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2004). The civil war between the Sinhalese and Tamils is believed to be one of the deadliest and most prolonged ethnic conflicts in modern times. Highly organized and having its own penal code, education system, court system and police force, the LTTE is nonetheless recognized as one of the most violent separatist groups of the twentieth century (Van de Voorde, 2005; Jayamaha, 2004). Although a cease-fire between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE was reached in 2002, the Tigers withdrew from peace talks in 2003. Violence has escalated since the end of 2005, prompting fears the island is slipping back into war.

The organization's enduring violent struggle as well as its level of sophistication can be attributed to the development of an international network built to sustain its struggle against a Sinhalese Government for the creation of an independent Tamil state (Chalk, 1999). The primary objective of this transnational structure is to exploit political and economic support from Tamil communities established abroad. In essence, the LTTE allegedly run elaborate fundraising campaigns to boost its financial capacity, thereby, increasing its ability to supply its forces with highly efficient technological war material.

The means by which the LTTE appeal for funding to maximize profits is an issue of great controversy among governing bodies worldwide. The major part of the financial support is said to come from six main areas, which are largely inhabited by expatriate Tamils: Switzerland, Canada, Australia, the UK, the US, and the Scandinavian countries

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<sup>3</sup> Numerous competing rebel groups were formed along with the LTTE, yet were eventually marginalized and eradicated, leaving the LTTE as the sole group fighting for a separate Tamil state (Somasundaram et al., 1988).

(Chalk, 1999). Numerous studies in various countries indicate that many expatriate Tamil communities willfully donate money to support the struggle for a separate state, believed to be the only long-term solution to alleviate their grievances and end the ethnic clash in Sri Lanka (Davis, 2000).

However, funds are not always procured directly from the Tamil diaspora. The LTTE have been recurrently accused of collecting money through illicit activities and businesses operating overseas. Chalk (1999) has suggested that the LTTE regularly siphon off donations intended to finance Tamil social service, medical and rehabilitation programs advocated by Sri Lankan humanitarian organizations. This form of financial acquisition is considered ideal since it is often extremely difficult to prove that funds raised in the name of charitable causes are being diverted to propagate terrorism and other illicit activities.

Moreover, the separatist movement has been accused of being directly involved in the trafficking of narcotics. However, definitive proof linking the LTTE to an official policy of drug-related activities has yet to materialize, despite the existence of a fair amount of circumstantial evidence implying some sort of nexus between the LTTE and narcotics operations (Chalk, 1999; Davis, 2000). Overall, evidence implicating the LTTE in any form of illegal activities is inconclusive and lacking.

### **Women and Girls in the LTTE: The Birds of Freedom**

Almost all Tamil militant groups in the history of Sri Lanka have made deliberate appeals for females to enroll into armed forces (Alison, 2004). Due to a shortage of manpower, in the early 1980s women were initially targeted out of necessity - particularly women who were involved in political movements and actively participated in public demonstrations, protests and campaigns against state oppression, as well as women who were enrolled in university (Ponnambalam, 1983).

In 1983, the LTTE founded a special section for females called the *Vituthalai Pulikal Munani* (Women's Front of the Liberation Tigers) and by 1989, the unit had its own leadership structure (Fox, 2004). Initially, females cadres in the LTTE, who are referred to as '*birds of freedom*', performed mainly supporting roles. However, after 1985 females were increasingly being used in active combat and provided with extensive training in mining, explosives, weapons technology, electronics, intelligence work, and combat (Ann, 1993; Bouta, 2005). Although abductions and coerced recruitment by the LTTE have been documented (Hogg, 2006), many females appear to join voluntarily, often to escape abusive home situations or due to nationalist loyalty, poverty, sexual violence, or perceived social injustices (Fox, 2004; Alison, 2004). Currently, female soldiers comprise approximately one-third of the fighting forces and are inducted in all units of the movement including its naval force (the Sea Tigers), and its suicide squad; an elite force known as the Black Tigers (Alison, 2004; Bouta, 2005). While involved in an array of military activities, girls and women are deliberately chosen for suicide bomb missions because they may not undergo as close a body search at checkpoints as males (Singer, 2005). As LTTE fighters, females wear the rebel's trademark cyanide capsule around their necks, which they are trained to take upon capture (Keairns, 2003; Jayamaha, 2004). Adele (1989) emphasizes that through the development of their own forces, LTTE women fighters have subsequently earned international recognition as "the most fierce, extremely disciplined and courageous women combatants in the world" (p.

9). According to the leader of the LTTE, Mr. Prabhakaran, the development of the women's military wing of the Liberation Tigers "is one of the greatest achievements of the movement" (De Mel, 2001: 208).

### **Female Emancipation and the LTTE**

Importantly, the LTTE represents an anti-state group that perceives itself as "liberatory", fighting to protect the interests of its nation, including the liberation of women from conventional feminine roles (Alison, 2004; De Mel, 2003). The LTTE leader has asserted that the liberation of women originates within the national liberation movement and will evolve alongside the deliverance of the Tamil nation from a 'tyrannical' Sinhalese government (Jayamaha, 2004; Twum-Danso, 2003:10).

The LTTE's explicit discourse promoting the liberation of women from conventional Sri Lankan roles and expectations, as well as the inclusion of females in combat roles and suicide bombings, clearly contradicts accepted cultural conceptions of gender ideals. Within Sri Lankan society, the female is constructed as subordinate to the male and is socially constructed to symbolically represent the nurturer of the entire nation (De Mel, 2003). Young women tend to be under the control of their father and brother, and generally remain under the control of a male figure throughout their lives (De Mel, 2003; Sornarajah, 2004). As Rajasingham-Senanayake (2004: 142) notes: "South Asian women are rarely born great, though they may be born of great families, and they rarely achieve greatness without great men...South Asian women rarely appear to be agents of their destinies – in war or in peacetime".

The decision by young females to join the nationalist struggle and take up arms is therefore a major departure from behaviour expected of Tamil women (Alison, 2004). As Ann Adele (1993), wife of Mr. Anton Balsingham, political advisor to the LTTE, writes:

The emergence of the Liberation Tigers on the Tamil national political scene has provided Tamil women with opportunities and horizons that would never have entered the minds of Tamil women a decade ago. The very decision by young women to join the armed struggle – in most cases without the consent of parents – represents a vast departure of behaviour for Tamil women. Normally, young women remain under the control of the father and brother...the decision to break-out of this cycle of suffocating [male] control is a refreshing expression and articulation of their new aspirations and independence (p. 17-18).

Despite the discourse of emancipation, the struggle for gendered empowerment is a complex matter within armed groups. While female combatants may be involved in the ideological struggle to pursue gendered 'liberatory' goals, in practice they may in fact internalize traditional gender role constructions rather than attempt to revolutionize existing military roles (Alison, 2004). In other words, although engaging in non-traditional gender roles within a military group may, at times, be beneficial to women, some have argued that females may simply adopt customary masculine and militarized attitudes and values, as opposed to actively influencing or 'feminizing' the armed group (Bouta, 2005).

Although there has been a growing literature on women and girls in the LTTE (Alison, 2004; Jayamaha, 2004; Keairns, 2003), several issues remain worthy of further exploration. These include a study of the military and ideological values of the LTTE and its relationship to gender, a greater understanding of why women appear to join the movement, as well as perceptions as to whether females experience 'liberation' in the LTTE. To examine these complex issues in greater detail, interviews were conducted with four war-affected Sri Lankans. Before exploring the views of participants, we address the study's methodology.

### **Methodology**

This study relied upon qualitative interviews with four war-affected Sri Lankans currently living in Canada. Qualitative research is not concerned with ensuring representativeness but seeks to gain in-depth data from a small number of participants (Mason, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). A semi-structured interviewing method was chosen as the most appropriate measure to obtain participants' perceptions, thoughts and perspectives surrounding females implicated with the LTTE. It is important to note that given the small sample size, the data gathered can be considered as anecdotal evidence, severely limiting the generalizability of the data. Nonetheless, anecdotal evidence is an important means to illustrate individual perceptions on a topic, to highlight emerging theories, and perhaps most importantly, to pave the way for future research, particularly on a topic that has received only marginal attention.

To ascertain a broad understanding of the LTTE, its core values, goals, constructions of gender and emancipation, and its impact on Sri Lankan society, it was important to not only obtain the perspectives of 'insiders' in the LTTE movement (ie - individual LTTE fighters), but also the perceptions of 'outsiders' (Tamil individuals who were not directly affiliated with the LTTE movement, but were nonetheless directly affected by the conflict). As such, the research sample consisted of three females and one male of Sri Lankan origin and living in Canada who were between the ages of 23 and 40.

Research participants were recruited for the study by contacting Tamil community organizations in one Canadian province as well as representatives of Tamil student bodies in two Canadian universities. Advocates from humanitarian organizations located in Sri Lanka were also contacted via e-mail in the hopes of accessing participants in Canada but to no avail. Of all potential Tamil organizations, the director of a single organization located in a Canadian city enthusiastically supported the study and assisted in locating potential interviewees through a snowball sampling technique. This sampling technique is especially useful in secret and impenetrable populations which are usually difficult for researchers to access (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004).

While an estimated 14,000 expatriate Tamils are now living in Canada (Davis, 2000), access to willing participants was severely restricted to a few individuals. While six candidates expressed an initial interest in the study, in the end, only four agreed to share their insights of women in the LTTE. One male participant desisted from the study, and an ex-female combatant decided not to participate for fear of potential retaliation from members of the community or the insurgent armed force itself.



## **The Participants**

Panbu<sup>4</sup> lived in Sri Lanka for 25 years and voluntarily joined the LTTE movement. After serving in the rebel group for approximately five years, she made the decision to immigrate to Canada with her family, claiming that Sri Lanka was an unsafe place to live.

Sivani was born and raised in Sri Lanka and left her native country at the age of 20. She now lives in Canada with her husband and children. Her knowledge of the LTTE organization was acquired while growing up in the war-affected area, through encounters with LTTE members, and by maintaining regular contact with knowledgeable relatives in Sri Lanka.

Mani came to Canada at the age of 30 alongside family members to escape the instability of war-torn Sri Lanka. Mani remains closely tied to Sri Lanka and has close friends and family who have been directly or indirectly implicated in the rebel movement.

Nila was born in Sri Lanka but moved to Switzerland as a refugee with her parents at a young age and chose to come to Canada to further her education. Based on her deep-rooted attachment to Sri Lanka, Nila conducted her own personal research on the LTTE while growing up and keeps updated information on the movement. She frequently travels to Sri Lanka and has had numerous discussions with LTTE male and female members during visits to official LTTE campsites. Of the four participants, Panbu is the only interviewee to have served in the LTTE.

All interviews, which lasted between one and two hours, were conducted by the first author. Participants were questioned about the ongoing conflict in Sri Lanka, particularly their perceptions of the LTTE's core values, recruitment practices, and constructions of femininity and masculinity, as well as issues surrounding nationalism and emancipation for Tamil women.

Upon completing the data collection, a content analysis of the interviews was undertaken to identify recurrent themes and concepts. Material within different categories was then analyzed to discover connections between themes. Rubin and Rubin (1995) emphasize that a thematic content analysis of the data is important because uncovering related themes helps the researcher build towards a broader description of an overall theory or explanation.

## **Study Limitations**

There were several limitations to this study that need to be acknowledged. The most important limitation relates to the very small sample size. As interviews were carried out with only four individuals, the data collected can be considered anecdotal evidence and should be interpreted with caution. Although the data cannot be generalized to the larger population of war-affected Sri Lankans, participants' perspectives and insights can nonetheless be seen to contribute to theoretical understandings of militarization, gender and conflict, as well as provide paths of inquiry for future research. A second limitation relates to the snowball sampling method used. With this method, there was potential danger that the interviewees held similar values and beliefs regarding the LTTE movement and the war in Sri Lanka as a whole. Finally, relying on information gathered from individuals who have not directly been involved in the LTTE movement raises an important limitation. Although it was critical to garner the

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<sup>4</sup> The names of all participants have been altered to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

perceptions of war-affected Sri Lankans who were not directly involved with the LTTE, the limitations associated with second hand knowledge in contrast to the evidence obtained from the ex-female LTTE member must be underscored.

### **Perspectives on Women in the LTTE**

This section explores the perspectives of participants in relation to several key issues related to Sri Lankan women and armed conflict, including participants' perceptions of the LTTE movement, participants' understandings of LTTE recruitment practices, as well as their perspectives on female emancipation within the movement.

#### *4.1 Perceptions of the LTTE movement*

The four respondents showed a great deal of uniformity and unanimity in their perceptions of the core values and practices of the LTTE. Reflecting traditional Sri Lankan values, participants identified discipline, loyalty, the condemnation of pre-marital sexual relations, and the encouragement of intermarriage among LTTE members as the central values of the LTTE.

#### Discipline & Loyalty

The LTTE was recognized by respondents as a stringent and extremely disciplined military organization in which members must abide to very strict rules and regulations imposed by the LTTE leadership structure. Interestingly, this appears to be an expression of the obedience and discipline that is generally expected of Tamils in civil society but is seemingly amplified within the movement:

As a civilian I find [society] sometimes very harsh. Tamil society is very harsh in terms of how disciplined we ought to be, so the LTTE is even harsher than that.

Most participants did not differentiate between the levels of discipline imposed on male and female LTTE members, suggesting that discipline and obedience are expected in the military subculture regardless of gender:

It is a military so [LTTE members] obey military rules. Whether you are male or female, you obey your commander.

Nonetheless, one participant suggested that “female camps are subjected to stricter rules and regulations” than corresponding male camps.

Alongside discipline, loyalty appears to carry a significant meaning for women at every stage of military involvement. The former LTTE fighter expressed a strong sense of loyalty to the insurgent group and for the LTTE cause, when she asserted:

We are part of a group to liberate the homeland. The LTTE are fighting for the good of the people.

Moreover, according to respondents, Tamil individuals who display loyalty as an inherent personality trait tend to be motivated to join the movement:

The vast majority of [young people] who join [the LTTE] are the great kids. The bullies, the machos, they didn't go to the LTTE because they were not moved by societal issues. The ones that were the loyal to their parents, who were studying or working hard in the field, they were the ones to join...I know one of my cousins, they had two children, and one [of them was always loyal and] always looked after his mom. He is the one who went to the LTTE.

Loyalty appears to be a quality of the highest importance in the LTTE movement and, in fact, can be seen as a reflection of conventional Tamil values and norms.

#### Condemnation of Pre-marital Sexual Relations & Intermarriage

Another core value identified by participants was the LTTE's explicit condemnation of any form of physical contact between its members. Participants claimed that premarital sexual contact is strictly forbidden:

While cooperation and teamwork is expected of male and female comrades, these relations are restricted to the establishment of professional relationships which are friendly but not physical in nature.

Sexual relationships are frowned upon in the LTTE group and female members do not experience rape and sexual abuse.

In propagating such values, it can be argued that the LTTE reinforces existing patterns of Tamil gender constructions and prevents the possibility for women to detach from conservative constraints imposed on female sexuality and freedom of expression.

Despite tenets against premarital sex, according to participants, members of the opposite sex are nonetheless strongly encouraged to marry while actively participating in the nationalist movement. Intermarriage within the movement was said to inspire a greater sense of commitment to the LTTE cause. The research participants discussed the presence of a 'marriage committee' initiated within the LTTE movement:

An assembly of elders is responsible for arranging marriages between members. LTTE cadres who wish to get married go to the department and they organize a five-minute marriage ceremony. Once the couple is married, the movement provides them with their own private place to stay as husband and wife.

Efforts to unite comrades into marriage may serve as an extension of traditional Tamil customs practiced in the larger society, symbolizing women's persistent dependence on men for their well-being and security.

#### *4.2 Participants' Understanding of Recruitment*

Participants noted that many young women hold a strong sense of devotion to the LTTE cause and make a conscious and voluntary decision to actively join the LTTE:

Tamil women want to help. They voluntarily approach the LTTE leaders and offer their services to participate in the movement.

There is instability in the Tamil nation. We [women] are part of a society - we are not safe at home because of the military atrocities, so it is that condition that made us believe we need to be part of a group to liberate the homeland, so we volunteer.

When asked about the realities of forced recruitment, Panbu, the former LTTE fighter, maintained that she never encountered a female member who had been abducted or forced to join the movement. However, others acknowledged that there may be a few instances of forced recruitment but underlined that “this practice is a rare occurrence”.

To encourage recruitment in the Tamil population, participants maintained that the LTTE established its own media department responsible for promoting the struggle for Tamil Eelam. Advertisements targeting the recruitment of Tamil individuals such as “You Join Us!” are reportedly widespread in the public sphere. The use of propaganda was also noted as a means to recruit potential members:

The way the LTTE recruit people is very different from the way a traditional military would recruit... They will have propaganda materials about how bad the government army is, how the occupation is making our land worse, how we are suffering...they [encourage] the people to come together, on a voluntary basis. So typically, your son or daughter will be exposed to this material, and then someday you will see they are not there, they just disappear [to the LTTE].

To support the argument that conscription into the group is mainly accomplished through voluntary recruitment, Mani added:

Most of the time, LTTE propaganda is not successful [in recruiting] and there are times when they need thousands of people and...they cannot recruit people...Then the government military will drop an aerial bomb where 50 people die and the LTTE will get 500 people from the village who volunteer.

In addition to recruitment, propaganda and publicity in the context of Tamil warfare apparently served another salient function. Mani shared his insight of LTTE solicitation for funds from the Tamil diaspora:

In terms of fundraising, I heard stories ranging from people willingly giving money to the use of some pressure tactics similar to the ones you find by savvy marketers of any product. In rare cases, I also heard a few stories where people were forced to give money.

However, Mani alluded to the notion that most of the organization's funds originate from LTTE-owned and operated industries located in specific areas of Sri Lanka:

They have a huge tax regime in place and almost all industries in the area are directly or indirectly controlled by the LTTE. Visitors observed that much of the fishing industry and agriculture industry in the North are being controlled by the LTTE. They have also been known to levy taxes on traders in the government controlled areas.

#### *Incentives to join the LTTE*

In an effort to understand the growing desire for females to implicate themselves in the conflict, it is important to consider the motivations that incite women to join. According to the research participants, factors such as nationalistic beliefs, the experience of rape and sexual violence by Sri Lankan government officials, the search for security, and the loss of loved ones provide women with particular incentives to join the LTTE.

According to participants, one of the primary reasons for joining the movement is the strong dedication to Tamil nationalistic goals and objectives:

Because we are part of the country and the people, Tamil females tend to hold a personal interest in the cause and join in an effort to support the struggle in order to improve the situation for the Tamil population.

The LTTE exists to protect the good of the Tamil people, for the people to live happy and free...everybody's goal is to make a peaceful motherland.

Participants noted that the experience of rape and sexual violence also appears to be a motivating factor to join the movement. During previous attacks and government invasions of Tamil communities, women were systematically targeted for sexual violence which, according to participants, had important implications for recruitment:

When the Indian peace-keeping force came...there was massive raping by the Indian army ...In our culture rape is talked as a stigmatized thing...if you are raped, you are doomed for life. A women cannot get married because she is not a virgin anymore if she is raped. It's a huge stigma on the family and on the woman too...some women ...commit suicide...If someone [learns] that she [has been] raped then she [may] kill herself or people are going to push her away and isolate her. So a lot of the women, since they were raped, rather than just killing themselves, they decided to [join the LTTE] and get revenge.

Alongside revenge for sexual violence, participants noted that the need for security appears to also play a major role in a women's decision to join the LTTE. Reliance on the LTTE for protection may be particularly useful as a deterrent against experiences of violence, sexual assault, or exploitation from enemy government forces.

The loss of loved ones and/or death of family members appeared to be another commonly identified reason for joining. Participants noted that losing a family member or loved one “made the decision a lot easier for them to join the movement”. As Mani noted:

[A cousin of mine]...For him it was unbearable what was happening...He lost his friend by a military attack, he went to the funeral, and the following day, he ran away [to the LTTE].

#### **4.3 *Perceptions of Female Liberation and Emancipation***

According to participants, females in the movement achieve a significant level of emancipation through the non gender-stereotyped roles and responsibilities they are assigned as well as the opportunity to enjoy equal gender relations. As these participants explained:

Women are equal in the movement... The leader encourages women to be equal and that is one of their goals. [The women] do everything the men do... Females are currently implicated in all hierarchical military ranks ranging from administrative roles to frontline fighters to suicide bombers to leadership roles.

At home, women have a lot of limitations. What they can do is restricted by family constraints. In the LTTE, women can achieve a lot.

The cooking, cleaning, that sort of stuff is duty bound, whatever the women do, the men also have to do...[Women] will never have to cook and clean and that sort of subordinate role for the group...for the men.

While it was recognized that women are generally underrepresented in decision-making and leadership roles within the movement, this was perceived to be a result of smaller numbers of LTTE females, rather than to gender discriminatory practices:

In terms of number count, there are more men than women in the organization. Therefore anything that [women] haven't been able to achieve...has more to do with [there being less] women than the fact that they are women.

Respondents acknowledged that females implicated in the movement are assigned to responsibilities and roles which represent a vast departure from traditional roles associated with feminine standards in Tamil society. Moreover, participants articulated that women appear to adopt a new self-concept as a result of participating in a revolutionary organization:

The women feel they are making a positive contribution to their motherland which in turn instills a sense of pride and makes them feel important for the Tamil nation.

At home you are just another person. At home, you are just another pretty face, and you go on and you study and marry and things like this. Whereas once you go into the movement, you are now important for the motherland, you have done something for the liberation, something important as opposed to just being another person.

According to participants, women may achieve a sense of independence from the traditional lifestyles imposed on Tamil women, instilling a sense of pride and accomplishment. The adoption of a new self-concept as a “revolutionized woman” provides a strong indication that women may feel empowered as a result of “not being confined inside their homes anymore” and actively contributing to the development of a progressive and self-sufficient motherland.

Despite the LTTE’s explicit public commitment to furthering women’s interests, respondents suggest that in fact feminist goals of emancipation are considered secondary matters by female cadres in the movement. The participants highlighted that only a fragment of female combatants may be concerned with the emancipation of women as a primary goal. Instead, female emancipation is a secondary goal to the creation of an independent Tamil state:

There may be one or two [women] that go there for that purpose [the liberation of women], but many of them are going as part of the liberation, to liberate the homeland. Most females join the movement with the purpose to better the situation of the Tamil nation.

The liberation of the whole nation is the priority, and personal [female] empowerment will come later.

### ***Glorification of LTTE women***

Throughout the interviews, the research participants articulated that the LTTE movement tends to be idealized by the general Tamil public. Participants expressed that LTTE members are generally regarded as “great heroes”:

The LTTE in general are viewed [by the public] as “their kids”, kids who are taking care of them, who care for them and who are fighting for them.

Tamils regard people [in the LTTE] as extraordinary. They have great respect for the LTTE soldiers.

It was even suggested that women may be even more respected and admired than the LTTE men:

Women in the movement are glorified. My theory is that women [in the conflict] are often perceived as [victimized and] raped, but they [regain] their human dignity by entering [into] the movement...that is the perception of the public. The public glorifies these women and they are redeemed.

While public resistance to women's active participation was apparently evident in the initial phases of female conscription, according to participants, women now appear to be respected as important players essential to the cause. This suggests that in the face of crisis, traditional values may be turned upside down.

### ***Desistance from the LTTE movement***

According to the majority of participants, women have "full-agency" to leave the movement and to step down from their role as an LTTE member. The ex-LTTE member stressed that "women and men can leave when they want to". However, while it was suggested that women experience the freedom to leave, it appears that members must receive 'permission' to be released from the LTTE and must provide justification for their desire to leave. Mani specified that when a family has previously suffered the loss of a child and the female LTTE member is the only surviving daughter to the parents, the organization will authorize the eventual discharge of this individual to prevent the experience of further suffering should the woman die while in combat. Such rules and practices raise serious doubts concerning the extent of decision-making power afforded to women upon their decision to renounce their military duties.

### **Discussion: Birds of Freedom? Critically Assessing LTTE Practices and Female Emancipation**

According to the four war-affected Sri Lankans, female LTTE militants have the capacity to engage in non-traditional gender roles and experiences, which represents a drastic change in the expected behaviour of Tamil women, and a disruption in conventional gender constructions. Nonetheless, quite paradoxically, the LTTE movement appears to simultaneously uphold and reinforce prevalent patterns of gender constructions through the reproduction of conventional cultural standards. To further explain these realities and paradoxes, we explore their relationship to militarism and gender role constructions.

### **Understanding LTTE Recruitment: Women and Militarization**

The militarization of society entails a major transformation of cultural, institutional and ideological norms in order to prepare civilians for armed conflict. The militarization process penetrates all aspects of social life to manipulate people's thought processes and behaviours in order to prepare society for violence (Enloe, 2000). Interview accounts support the notion that warfare generates a society structured on ideologies of violence and terror where violence is normalized and rendered as routine. Through successful propaganda and recruitment campaigns, women appear to accept violence and warfare as legitimate means to establish a self-governing Tamil state. Nonetheless, the data indicate that Tamil women who join the organization make a conscious rational decision to become involved.

The atmosphere of insecurity pervasive in a country torn by war appears to have a strong influence on women's decision to join the LTTE in an attempt to escape numerous societal insecurities. Some women were said to join based on their perception of individual vulnerability and gender-specific insecurities. Through military strategies and propaganda, women perceive the movement to offer protection against rape and abuse,



while providing them with an opportunity to eradicate social injustices. According to participants, women appear to adopt militarized ideologies such as embrace LTTE promises to fight for and protect the rights of Tamil people through armed conflict, as well as to depend on the LTTE to secure their well-being. In this sense, it may be more appropriate to consider women's voluntary involvement in armed forces as a means by which they are driven to assume a "voluntary obligation", despite the fact that they may not be physically coerced into the movement.

Indeed, 'voluntary recruitment' is a point of contention among scholars who question an individual's agency to volunteer in a military organization founded on an ideology of martyrdom and violence. According to Maclure & Denov (2006), an individual's decision to participate in acts of violence and terror cannot occur in a form entirely detached from social circumstances. They caution that interpretations must assess the intersection between one's ability to make autonomous rational choices and the broader social circumstances that impact decision-making. The LTTE movement may thus appear as the only available option to women who live in an environment torn by violence, fear, and social chaos. Under these circumstances, it is debatable whether women's rational decision to join is strictly on a 'voluntary' basis.

Furthermore, the concept of militarization appears to provide a rationale for the unequal number of female tigers in the organization as the militarization process seeks to ensure that the military culture's image of a male-dominated territory is not damaged or disrupted. In accordance with the conceptual framework of militarism, an equal number of female bodies could destabilize the military culture dominated by men and the LTTE would subsequently lose its appeal among the male population (De Mel, 2003; Enloe, 2000). While the induction of females is evidently integral to a successful military crusade, it is nonetheless beneficial for the LTTE to recruit a limited number of female militants.

### **Emancipation or Reproduction of Tamil Culture?**

The interview accounts suggest that the LTTE's ideological commitment to women's liberation is translated into practice made visible through women's access to groundbreaking roles and responsibilities. In this way, the experiences of female soldiers underlie a disruption in conventional gender constructions. Moreover, it would appear that female tigers have earned the respect and admiration of Tamil people as legitimate fighters in the struggle for a separate state. However, while public approval and rhetoric regarding LTTE women suggests an acceptance of women 'as equals', the glorification of the women fighters can be seen to reinforce the perception of females as the symbolic nurturers of society. According to participant testimonies, the public respect and depend on female soldiers to "act as saviors" on behalf of the Tamil culture. As such, the wellbeing of the nation remains dependent on women's preservation of their traditional 'care-giving' role.

Moreover, while females may benefit from more egalitarian relations within the LTTE than within traditional Tamil society, women's empowerment is made possible through the adoption of masculine behaviours as opposed to consciously attempting to 'feminize' the military subculture. This reinforces the assertion that female actors are permitted in armed conflict as long as their inclusion does not disrupt the masculine

image of warfare. Moreover, it suggests that women may maintain a status subordinate to men even in radical movements.

Importantly, non gender-stereotyped access to roles does not necessarily absolve women from traditional requirements and expectations. The information disclosed by the participants suggests that the LTTE military infrastructure is modeled closely to Tamil society whereby conventional standards of Tamil culture are adopted and implicitly reproduced in the insurgent group's system of values and customs. In this sense, the LTTE movement appears to uphold and reinforce prevalent patterns of gender constructions through the reproduction of conventional cultural standards. The reproduction of ideological doctrines such as discipline and loyalty, as well as traditional customs, such as the moral restriction on pre-marital sexual relationships, and the need to request permission to leave the movement, are highly reminiscent of traditional (and gendered) Tamil culture. These values may be disadvantageous to females LTTE members and may work to impede their ability to realize equality within the movement. Furthermore, governed by a rigid code of conduct, women are reduced to soldiers obeying orders which is not inherently empowering or liberating.

Nonetheless, as Nila pointed out, women "come from ground-zero", having held few rights in the 1980's, in contrast to an increased power in current day society. As such, Nila asserted that it is unrealistic to expect the attainment of "total power" but that progress is continual as women are gaining increasing rights and power. Nila's statement reflects an imperative argument put forth by Ann (1989:11) who cautions that "it would be foolish to suggest that male chauvinism no longer exists. Nowhere in the world has male chauvinism been eradicated and it certainly has not disappeared from the Tamil society". In essence, women's emancipation constitutes an incessant battle that cannot produce radical changes overnight. Rather, achieving 'total' empowerment will require a relentless perseverance together with a long-term collective dedication and commitment to female emancipation.

## **Conclusion**

The insights and perspectives gathered from the four research participants shed light on the militarization of women's lives and offer paths of future research inquiry in relation to gender and war, female empowerment and the mobilization of women. The interview data suggests that female tigers in the LTTE are perceived as achieving some form of empowerment as they acquire a status of gender equality never before witnessed in Tamil culture. However, that this new construct of femininity is forged through violence characterizes a dichotomy around women's role as combatants. On one hand, female tigers may experience emancipation by gaining access to non-gender stereotyped roles and responsibilities in the movement. On the other hand, their sense of empowerment is defined and dictated by political structures largely dominated by male authority and by violence. The implication of this paradox is clear; women's emancipation is dependent on the attainment of violent social transformations controlled and limited by patriarchal norms. This sends a potentially dangerous message to women and to the larger community that acts of extreme violence are inherently empowering. Moreover, women may be collectively silenced as they are denied individual personalities and self-expression within a militarized culture and environment.

The interviews also suggests that even as women transcend the bounds of the conventional feminine identity, existing cultural norms are translated into military rules and emerge as traditional constraints imposed on female fighters. As conventional restrictions materialize within the military subculture, female tigers are ultimately denied absolute power.

Moreover, despite the LTTE's policy of 'equality', the privileged wartime experience of female tigers may not guarantee that women will receive similar treatment upon return to community life. In fact, research has shown that men have dominated the negotiations between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. Although a '*Gender Subcommittee*' was formed after lobbying by women's groups, women have not been present within the early phases of the negotiation process (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2004). As a result, women's concerns have tended to be ghettoized and there has been little public discussion of how an adequately gendered peace may be achieved.

The expanded space for females attained in the context of armed conflict may therefore not automatically translate into tremendous post-conflict social changes ultimately beneficial to women. In fact, Alison (2004) notes that civil society is uncertain how to respond to female ex-combatants in times of peace. Some of the most negative aspects of women's reintegration into society post conflict entail a need to hide their past participation in war from the Sri Lankan governmental authorities. Similarly, "when women return to civilian society they have to give up their power and independence, and they also have to revert to more feminine roles like looking for a husband" (Jamayaha, 2004: 23). Thus, despite the fact that female combatants identify themselves as fighters protecting the interests of their nation, and are conditioned to believe that female empowerment is achieved through nationalistic armed struggle, there is a recurring global pattern of female re-marginalization where women are expected to resume traditional roles in the aftermath of war.

Issues pertaining to female empowerment in the aftermath of armed conflict have direct implications for peace-building policy initiatives. Should peace prevail, Sri Lankan peace-building operations will need to adopt and implement internationally-based policy measures aimed at the restoration of civil communities. Questions pertaining to female fighters will prove to be important for restructuring a functional civil society. As such, a comprehensive strategy will need to include advocacy tools to raise awareness concerning issues related to women and girls involved in armed conflict. As a framework for action, it is highly recommended that policy initiatives advance the goals of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security which underscore the impact of armed conflict on women and girls. Among other things, it demands the active participation of women in peace efforts as well as the integration of gender-sensitive training for those involved in peacekeeping operations (GPWG, 2004). It is critical that women be fully implicated in the decision-making process to enjoy equal benefits in the post-war era and be key players to the successful social, political, and cultural reconstruction of Sri Lanka in the aftermath of conflict.

As a general recommendation for most conflicts, peace developments need to implement programming aimed at the social and psychological reintegration of former-female tigers back into civil society following active participation in armed conflict. While the anecdotal evidence obtained from participants in this study did not uncover any indication of physical and psychological trauma experienced by ex-female LTTE

members, some girls and women may require some form of psycho-social assistance. In this case, specific programming options such as disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programs will be relevant in the aftermath of conflict in Sri Lanka. Such program developments will need to adopt a gender-sensitive approach to facilitate the return to community life for ex-female combatants. More specifically, appropriate programs will need to address their role as the primary instigators of mass violence coupled with an assessment of the specific needs of girls and women in the aftermath of war. As a first priority, women should have access to reintegration benefits that meet their basic needs of food, shelter and medicine. It will be important to provide ex-female militants with reintegration assistance kits; including a clothing kit (shirts, underwear, trousers and blankets); a domestic kit (soap, razor blades, glasses, pots and plates); a sanitary kit (condoms, sanitary pads, brochures on sexual, medical and mental health) and a food kit (Schroeder, 2005; Bouta, 2005). In addition, psychosocial counseling and trauma healing should be offered along with other programs to assist and support females with social reintegration (Schroeder, 2005). Successful programming strategies will require an assessment of the psychosocial effects of being a soldier on the wellbeing of women to develop gender-appropriate rehabilitative measures for women. Given the non-traditional roles taken on by LTTE women, a return to civilian identity is likely to be challenging. As such, community education and public sensitization will also be necessary to prepare society for the return of ex-female combatants.

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