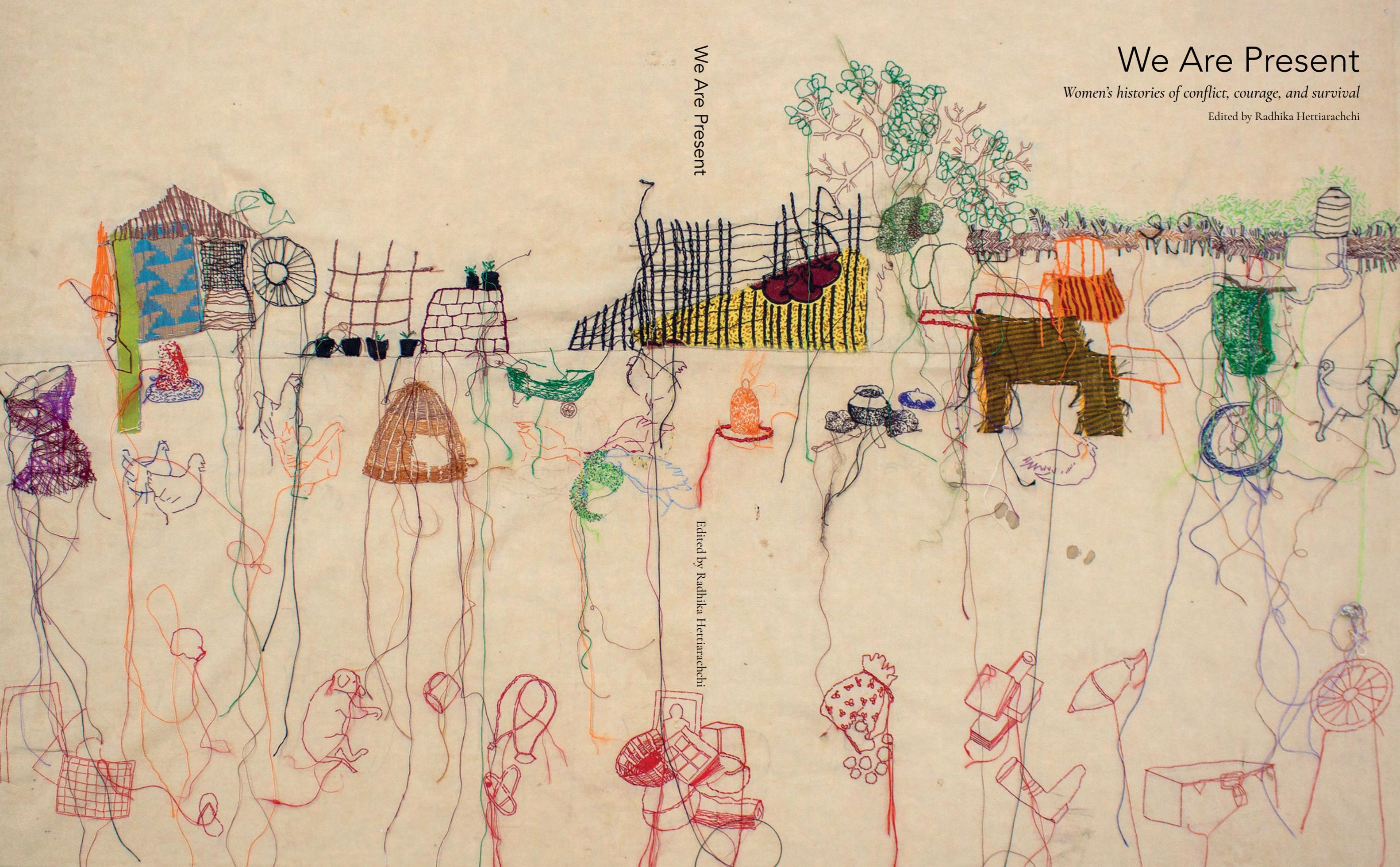


We Are Present

Women's histories of conflict, courage, and survival

Edited by Radhika Hettiarachchi

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Buried Alive Stories, 2020,
Embroidery on Cloth, 95cm x 104cm.

This is my grandmother's story. She was a mother of twelve children and she lost half of them to Sri Lanka's dark past of war and violence. One of her children has been missing for thirteen years. She is the sole witness to her children's lives, their existence and disappearance. Like her, many other mothers wait for the return of their loved ones. When my grandmother left her home in Kilinochchi during the war, she buried many things in the garden of her home. She left behind my grandfather's photographs, documents, jewellery and many other things that meant so much to her. She thought they would be safe in the ground until she returned a few weeks later. Weeks turned into months and in the end, it took her more than 20 years to return. When she did, many of the things she buried were no more or could not be found again. The earth had already swallowed up her memories. The objects may be lost forever, but her memories continue from generation to generation as a story.

Hema Shironi

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This publication of women's histories is not for sale.

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V with her daughters, Vavuniya, 2012

*Dedicated to women and children affected by conflict in Sri Lanka
and their continuing struggles for justice, socio-economic security, and peace*

Foreword

Memory

Radhika Coomaraswamy

Memory is the archive of history. Benedict Anderson in his work on nationalism¹ found that the cultural glue that bonds people is often the memory of collective suffering. Exodus in the Jewish imagination, the death of Ali in Shia mythology, the Armenian genocide, and the national wars of liberation are some of the historical events whose memory has shaped and redefined the lives of generations. They become the focus of commemoration and re-enactment. They determine how a whole people see their past and, as a result, their future. The construction of memory after a terrible war is therefore an occasion to reimagine and create a new vision of who we are. Memory is not only the art of remembering but also a process of creation; it is a force of power and strength. It is therefore not unusual after a war, that there is a struggle to control the memory and the narration of what actually took place.

Historically, the victors and their armed forces controlled the narrative of history. History textbooks are about victories and conquests, with the losers usually receiving a footnote. The individual citizen until recently had no history at all but that of being invisible – the collateral damage of violence and hatred. Monuments around the world of soldiers raising flags, of flying eagles and majestic lions, punctuate the landscape to remind people about who won the war and whose narrative is privileged. The victories are moments of enforced national celebrations, of military march-pasts, and of the national memory being constructed without an understanding of its parts. Memory, then, loses its basis in lived experience and enters the realm of mythology.

In other societies, for example in the Jewish experience of the Holocaust, there is the memory of immense suffering and persecution. Societies and groups, some transnational in character, are brought together and united in revisiting and reliving a tragedy that has caused a deep scar in their psyche. Although originating in individual and collective truth-telling, the memories may morph into political projects and programmes that attempt to seek justice and vindicate this shared belief in persecution. Yet, the politicisation of memory can also create myths of another kind – nation-building myths, for example – that over time are distanced from the root cause of the suffering, gaining a momentum and purpose of their own.

In my work visiting many societies, looking into violence and armed conflict, the most authentic voices that capture the deep pain and trauma of conflict are the works of their artists and the voices of many of their women. They are often voices that have not been conditioned by analysis and political frameworks because their experience is immediate and unfiltered. They capture the reality that Gayatri Spivak describes in her own work: the meditative period before post-colonial reason classifies and categorises memory.² You relate to the work and voices at a level that is more sublime and intense.

We Are Present is an example of such voices that demand to be recognised and acknowledged in their existence – unique and distant from the mainstream and paternalistic narratives. The stories are interspersed with articles by some of our best scholars to give time, place, and context. The book then is a repository of narratives that attempts to keep the record, so that history will also contain memories of those who will deepen the understanding of conflict, while challenging the structures of some of the belief systems that perpetuate the very processes that may again lead to violence. Without a trusted transitional justice mechanism³ in place, there is no other option.

Valentine Daniel in his book *Charred Lullabies*⁴ writes, 'Only the extraordinarily gifted or the excessively unmindful (mindless?) can write a book on violence without being troubled by the particular challenge the representational form of writing poses for the task at hand.' The editor and authors of *We Are Present* have been mindful of these dilemmas from the beginning – sensitive to the needs and respectful of the people who collaborated with them in building the archives that contributed to this book. That respect is fundamental because I believe women have always wanted their stories preserved as an authentic calling that is not linked to any agenda but their own. ■

Preface

Radhika Hettiarachchi

My work on peace and development with tsunami and conflict-affected people brought me in close and regular contact with many women over the years. Each time we met, they related detailed accounts of their experiences, pointing to a need to tell their stories and be heard. Some women whose lives were altered by war and violence, believed that their experiences were not only intensely personal and powerful, but also unique and definitive. When asked why they wanted to share their stories publicly, the answers were varied but familiar. Some wanted “others” – those who they considered dissimilar to themselves in experience, geography, socio-economic or ethno-political identity – to know, and in hearing about their experience, acknowledge what they had been through. Some were comforted simply by the catharsis of telling their stories. Some hoped that those who saw these stories would offer them tangible support to overcome their socio-economic circumstances. Others hoped that their experiences, once archived publicly, will help the next generation of Sri Lankans to understand the cost of war and violence. Almost always, however, women spoke of their derision for war and the hope that its devastating impact should never befall their children.

We Are Present affords a glimpse into the hundreds of narratives archived through *The Herstories Project* (2012), the *Community Memorialisation Project* (2016), and two previously unpublished oral history initiatives – *The Body Remembers* (2017) and *Women Sex-workers in Conflict* (2021), with which I have been closely involved. Since beginning to archive people’s histories in 2012, some of these narratives travelled across Sri Lanka in its original languages – as exhibitions to schools, playgrounds, community centres and local government offices. They hung on walls, trees, or even clotheslines where people – including those who had shared their stories – could engage with them through facilitated dialogue. As a record of people’s histories, they are also archived in digital and book form, at many local libraries, schools and community centres across Sri Lanka, in its original languages of Sinhala and Tamil.

We Are Present is meant to be a reference that enables a new generation of Sri Lankans – who were not part of the dialogue processes in the local languages – to be brought into the conversation on conflict, survival, and a future of justice, peace, and democratic values. While the narratives within this volume are edited and translated into English, most of the original and unedited Tamil and Sinhala histories can be viewed online by using the QR codes alongside each narrative. In translation, the essence of the “authentic voice” may be lost, but a conscious effort has been made to keep the original tone and personality of the narrator. In editing the narratives which are often quite long, and in curating a limited number of accounts to fit the constraints of a book, I am aware of the selective privilege of “editing”, and acknowledge that many accounts which contributed to the archives are not represented here. Accompanying these narratives are four essays by women academics and activists that provide the reader with insight into the historical threads that tie women’s experiences of war to the contemporary challenges that they face in post-war Sri Lanka.

A common thread in many of these narratives is that women's experiences, even for those affected by war and violence, are not always about grief, loss, the search for missing loved ones or victimhood. They are also memories of peaceful times, childhood, hope, and love. They often detail what women need to better their situations – a means of income and employment, help to reclaim ancestral land or rebuild a home, a well for drinking water or irrigation, or access to education for their children. Many of the earliest documented histories represented here – from Ampara, Vavuniya, Mullaitivu, Kilinochchi, Mannar, Kurunegala, Batticaloa, Matara and Monaragala – were revisited in 2021 and 2022. This is because of the assumption that a decade since first sharing their experiences, the women's lives, needs, and how they perceive their own security and the need to publicise their voices may have changed. Indeed, some had moved away without a trace, some had passed on, but many were where they had been when we first met. Seeing them again provided an opportunity to update their narratives. Over cups of tea and pictures of our families, many of them spoke about how their lives had changed over the last few years, and if they still wanted others to know about their life experiences, and what they thought their stories could teach the next generation about the nature of war and peace. One person chose to retract her life history from public display, which is and has always been, her right. Many years after recording the women's histories curated in this book, the fact that some of the same challenges and needs still hold true for many, is a reality that should concern us as a society.

This volume includes a map marking many of the places mentioned in the narratives, as well as a brief, historical timeline of pivotal moments in Sri Lanka's civil war and its precedents. However, neither the map nor the timeline is adequately detailed to reflect the scope and complexity of historical issues or incidents of Sri Lanka's civil war and other conflicts. The reader is encouraged to delve into the historical context further on their own.

The archives that *We Are Present* draws from, include hand-written letters, "trees of life", "body maps" and "memory maps" that helped the women trace their experiences through visual story-telling tools as well as unedited audio-video recordings, transcripts and accompanying photo libraries. The complete archives for *The Herstories Project* and the *Community Memorialisation Project* are deposited and publicly available at the National Archives of Sri Lanka. Informed consent for archiving and public sharing of these narratives, collected during the documentation process, are filed there together with the originals. There are contrasting perspectives in oral history and life-history disciplines on the use of anonymity to protect participants' identities. In this book, the names of the story-tellers have been redacted. However, the original archive ensures that for those who wished to be named, their identity and experiences are not anonymised thereby retaining their agency and legitimacy. Therefore, anyone wishing to explore these histories in more detail, including the owners of the narratives and their descendants, are able to access these repositories of memory permanently.

We are Present attests to the fact that women's experiences and specific needs matter, must to be acknowledged, and must occupy the nexus between historical record, justice, governance, and peace, if we are to create a future better than our past. It is my hope, and of all those involved in this volume, that it be an inspiration to listen more and seek out understanding of not just the root causes of conflicts or their continued social, economic, political and cultural impacts, but also what must be done to right the wrongs of the past. ■

Introduction

We Are Present: Conflict, memory, and women's histories in Sri Lanka

Radhika Hettiarachchi¹

Remaking the “nation”: Power, politics and the creation of historical narratives

Every post-war context is different: the root causes of conflict, its impact, and the processes required to transition from a period of conflict to one of sustainable and just peace, is therefore unique.² Since gaining independence from the British in 1948, Sri Lanka has weathered several conflicts, including some that erupted in violence.³ The civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL), which was a culmination of decades of ethno-political and socio-economic volatility, escalated into violent conflict in 1983.⁴ Despite four attempts at a peace process, the protracted civil war ended brutally on 18 May 2009.⁵

When the war ended, the nation-building priorities of the government included swift economic recovery, development of war-affected regions, and pacifying the nationalistic post-war anxieties of the majority Sinhala-Buddhist community.⁶ Selective narratives – usually those with a masculine lens that highlight military machismo and the cult-like veneration of the male architects of the “victory” – were employed in the service of legitimising the “right to rule”. In glorifying victory by reframing the war in the public imagination as a righteous act of humanitarian rescue from terrorism,⁷ undercurrents of Sinhala nationalism were brought to the forefront. All this came at the cost of reckoning with Sri Lanka’s difficult past and addressing the root causes of conflict.⁸ When “activated”, especially as memorialisation,⁹ such selective and thereby dominant narratives

can “remake” the past and reconfigure socio-political dynamics within the public sphere, to suit the agendas of those that are in power.¹⁰ Conversely, by suppressing dissenting narratives, such as the many different ethnic-minority perspectives, an equally one-dimensional dominant “counter-narrative” might emerge that then stands in opposition to the “victor’s narrative”. Where there is already marginalisation of counter-narratives and lost histories of conflict, dissenting voices of marginalised groups, particularly those of women, are then even more vulnerable to erasure. This struggle for “voice” in remembering or memorialising past experiences – particularly because there is political capital at stake for those who control the narrative – contributes to the complicated legacy of conflict, including the fractured relationships between Sri Lanka’s peoples that remain unaddressed.¹¹

Women’s histories¹² of conflict inhabit a peculiar space in official processes of post-war memorialisation in Sri Lanka, especially in narrativizing grief and loss. The legitimacy given to some women’s memories continues to highlight the patriarchal nature of how memory is publicly constructed and utilised by those in power in creating post-war historical narratives. Such memorialisation – whether they are physical memorials, parades, days reserved for remembrance or media campaigns – tends to be characterised from a male perspective.¹³ If they are about women’s experiences of war, then it is only about their grief, as a defining factor of women’s victimhood.¹⁴ All grief is valid: for those who choose to express their grief publicly, the space to do so is important. Yet, in such expression, there is grief that a state will sanction and use in the pursuit of agendas of power; and there is grief that is silenced, sometimes violently. The subtext is obvious – women’s experiences, specifically the grief and loss of mothers, can be commandeered in its symbolism. For example, the grief of mothers and wives of military war-heroes is made visible, sensationalised, and politicised, as seen in the saturation of media images of mothers in white grieving before military monuments on Remembrance Day (18 May) commemorations. However, unsanctioned people-driven memorialisation – which may also position the mother as the exemplar of grief¹⁵ – warrants no promise of acknowledgement or accountability.¹⁶ In state-sanctioned memorialisation, the implication in the public imagination is that violations against Sinhalese mothers signify violations against the “nation”.¹⁷ In post-war Sri Lanka, the spaces for public and private memorialisation of experiences that do not fit the dominant, legitimising narrative, such as the grief of women associated with LTTE cadres, are often minimised. During the war, in LTTE-controlled areas, mothers of deceased LTTE cadres, or “martyrs”, were similarly used in public expressions of grief legitimising the LTTE’s cause for a separate state.¹⁸

Countering patriarchal historical narratives by creating space for women’s histories

There is an indelible link between legitimising dominant narratives and what is considered to be the one singular “truth” that is often prioritised over other narratives in post-war nation-building processes. The structural forces of patriarchy – religion, class, ideology, culture – also play a role in what truths are thus prioritised. Just as multiple truths or vantage points can exist about a single event, “truth” itself can take many forms. History is made up of multiple perspectives but it can also be born of emotions. For example, a personal truth can simply be a testimony, in stark detail, about what one has witnessed or experienced. Yet, how one feels about an experience, that is welded on to the memories rather than the details of the incident, can also be a compelling personal truth. These many types of truths, particularly for women, matter in contextualising and fleshing out history. They provide a nuanced glimpse into the socio-economic, political, or conflict landscape of a time and place that go beyond a historical moment. Hence, documenting “lived-experiences” through story-telling becomes a tool in creating space for women’s histories.

As a result of extreme trauma¹⁹ and political circumstances, testimonies, particularly those that are in response to official inquiry, may contain deliberate silences that may be included in recollections of a more personal nature. In the telling of one's own "lived-experience", and the ability to control one's own narrative, many truths are able to co-exist, thereby contesting the dangers of the "one" truth. In the very act of documenting multiple and diverse oral histories,²⁰ the truth is then "democratised" and "peopleised". Without women's oral histories, gendered perspectives of war, peace, and security remain incomplete. Furthermore, when the generation that lived through war are no more, these citizen-led stories will enable their descendants to understand history through real-life experiences that go beyond the impersonal and generalised, aggregated facts and figures. If only half the history is known, then how can the true, human cost of war be understood?

Following on from projects such as the *Bearing Witness Archive* (2004)²¹ that documented the impact of militarisation on women during the war, the memory initiative *The Herstories Project* (2012-2014) was the first publicly-accessible documentation initiative to focus on women's narratives of war as historical record, after the war ended.²² Building on the "life-history" methodology²³ used in *The Herstories Project*,²⁴ the *Community Memorialisation Project* (2015-2019) was a multi-year documentation and dialogue initiative.²⁵ *The Body Remembers* (2017) and *Women Sex-workers in Conflict* (2021) are series of documentation initiatives that archived the experiences of particularly vulnerable women affected by conflict.²⁶ The projects are based on the assumption that although women and children are some of the most affected and most dispossessed by war, their voices are the least heard. This is mostly because their "full" narratives, especially those of courage and dignity that accompany their trauma and suffering, are hardly ever recorded. For example, some of these full narratives may record women's post-war needs, their courage in overcoming adversity, and their personal agency in challenging authority in their search for justice. Furthermore, it may record their opinions on the nature of war and peace, their memories of coexistence and the simple joys of everyday life before and after the war. By highlighting full narratives of women from across Sri Lanka and the spectrum of women's experiences or emotions, these archives attempt to address the gaps of the afore-mentioned patriarchal depictions of women as either grieving mothers or victims.

As a reclamation of identity, multiple as it may be, the act of memorialisation is intensely political. For many women, "breaking the silence" is a deliberate choice, not just in validating their experiences (and that of those they love) or activating their political agency, but also in the cathartic act of voicing their memories.²⁷ For example, letter-writing as a life-history documentation methodology, enables women to have control of their own voice and history. By writing their narratives in their own private space and in their own time, letter-writing prevents authorial intrusions that aim to shape women's narratives. The life-history methodology, also encourages women to cite lineage of place and family, allowing them to ground themselves through memory. This is a public act of "staking one's claim" to history, especially when some identities might have been lost to displacement, dispossession, and death.

Utilising women's histories for peacebuilding

Documentation initiatives can be more than just a "product" or an end in itself. It can be a process that goes beyond historical testimony to utilising memory for larger societal goals. For example, civil society groups, including women's groups, may become "memory activists", using memorialisation strategically to contest dominant narratives of power and facilitate a public debate towards a political end. This

“end” may be focused on policy-making, on justice and non-recurrence of violent conflict, or furthering democracy.²⁸ Whatever the goal may be, with memory activism – which are most often grassroots movements rather than elite initiatives – there are synergies to be found with the ground-realities and dynamism of larger political movements. Women’s memorialisation may therefore become a “frontier” for activism between the state (or other forces of power) and civil society.

The *Community Memorialisation Project* piloted the use of memory as an entry point to engage in dialogue from the village level all the way up to the national level.²⁹ It attempted to reach, build, and expand opportunities to share personal, lived-experiences with the proverbial “other” – in this case, those who may be from different ethno-religious groups or living geographically distanced across Sri Lanka. The project brought people in direct contact with each other through exchange visits hosted by conflict-affected families, or indirect contact through exposure to small travelling exhibitions, online-archives or reference books given to school libraries in local languages. It repeatedly returned to the same people, working with core groups and leaders, to anchor the process. Building on the catharsis of story-telling and the empathy of listening, particularly during inter-generational dialogue, the project highlighted the unique challenges they faced in the aftermath of the war. These interactions went beyond focusing on only their traumatic experiences. They extended to recognisable and understandable concepts built on visible similarities and feelings of connectedness, such as shared values, similar hopes for the future, and memories of coexistence.³⁰ These become vital details in helping the participating groups to rebuild trust, understanding, and new friendships after decades of severed ties.

Even years after the project ended, many of the participants stated that they remained in contact with their host families.³¹ Some people felt that not only being exposed to their stories but also coming face to face with those that had experienced them – seeing and hearing them speak about their lives before, during, and after the conflict – made the “other” relatable and their experiences undeniable.³² Although these are instances of personal revelation in small groups of individuals rather than behavioural or societal impact at a national level, the impact and power of memorialisation and people’s histories as a peacebuilding methodology is still evident. At least within the participating villages, the deeper awareness of the “other” helped them understand that ethno-political and socio-economic conditions dictate how conflict affects people differently, and as a result, affects their post-war needs differently.

The complexities of utilising memory as a “public good”

There is a distinction between how memorialisation has been practised for centuries as an instinctive reaction to violence, grief, and conflict, and memory initiatives that represent a more recent trend towards a structured and “projectized” memorialisation practice. There are often complexities and tensions inherent in these structured and unstructured forms of memorialisation and its use as a “public good”.

In this book, Shamara Wettimuny highlights the intrinsic value of documenting women’s narratives as “public history” in order to “correct the record” of histories of conflict. In her essay ‘Resisting the silence: A brief history of women in conflict’, she traces how women – not just the conflict-affected who are so readily utilised towards patriarchal or nationalistic goals, but also those whose contributions and actions fall outside the mantle of “victimhood” – need to be made visible from a historical perspective. It is conceivable therefore, that archiving women’s narratives, allows for them to play an active role in constructing history on their own terms. In effect, as an act of public truth-telling, this makes women’s

narratives – which are often marginalised and lost – “present” as part of the historical record. For example, a woman from the South stated that ‘My children are not interested [in hearing my experiences], but one day when they are, even if I am no more, my story will be available for them to read’.³³ However, in documenting and safeguarding memories as publicly accessible archives of “personal truths”, there is a danger that the permanence ensured by such preservation, may instead create fixed narratives that lose the natural fluidity of memory and story-telling. With ritualistic, community-driven, or personal everyday memorialisation, there is space for memory to naturally shift and alter with the slow erosion of pain over time.

Vasuki Jeyasankar’s article, ‘A practitioner’s reflections: Women, memory and community-based healing in Sri Lanka’, delves deeper into how women deal with trauma, healing, and mental health through such “everyday acts” of memorialisation. Survivors, especially women, use personal acts of remembrance to keep memories of victims alive, which they say is necessary for their own survival. For example, a young woman who witnessed the loss of three siblings to violence when she was herself a child says, ‘When we live in this memory, even if my siblings have been reborn, it feels like they are always here with us. That’s why we cannot move away from this memory’.³⁴ In personal or ritualistic acts of remembrance – for example, every time a community practices rituals of memory such as yearly poojas at a temple or yearly alms-giving in memory of the dead, or a prayer for the hopeful return of a missing loved one – there is also a “transfer of memory” (or an impression of a person or an incident) between generations. However, there may be little reflection or understanding beyond the ritual of why conflicts may have occurred and what conditions led to them. With memory-initiatives, there is opportunity to ensure that reflection becomes part of a more structured and public memorialisation process.³⁵ In acknowledging the violence of the past and making the unimaginable, “visible” for those who think of the cost of war in abstract terms, there are lessons to be learned from the collective and individual experiences of war and violence. Yet, it can be problematic to lay such peacebuilding objectives over the personal catharsis and healing that is hoped for from sharing one’s experiences with others. Memory-initiatives, unlike organic processes, might follow a prescriptive approach where old wounds are opened up without the requisite support system for managing mental health or safe spaces for dealing with trauma with respect. Conversely, living with trauma, might also distort the narrative or in worst cases, retraumatise the individual in reliving their memory.³⁶ There is therefore a need for a thoughtful and responsible praxis that builds in systems of support at a community level to deal with trauma, deliberately and professionally. Timing and sequencing of such goals become all the more important in ensuring that memorialisation is not imposed upon the unwilling.

It is important to understand that the process of awakening and dealing with the past happens in the present. The present context – including security concerns, socio-economic stability, and politics – will affect what is chosen to be remembered, and how it is voiced. As such, the right to remember becomes as important as the right to forget. People’s life histories do not stand in a vacuum. They belong to people who have “agency”. Asking them if, how, and when they want to memorialise is therefore necessary when practising memorialisation with a “public” purpose.³⁷ It should only be considered if, and only if, communities wish to do so. If they wish to document their experiences and share them with others (for a variety of motivating factors as the accounts in this volume highlight), then facilitating the space and the opportunity to do so is equally important.³⁸

However, while most people appreciate the opportunity to share their life histories, the “projectisation” of memory, particularly by non-state actors, has an impact on “how” and “what” is narrated. This has meant that as a negative side-effect of the countless NGO projects and Commissions that may have asked similar questions about specific experiences, some women instinctively focus only on the worst experiences of their lives, such as incidents of violence, damaged property or a person that is missing, when writing their narratives. There is also a certain responsibility that the story-teller feels for themselves and their families. This may constrain the narratives as external considerations such as security and societal pressure of stigmatisation may be of concern. To protect themselves from all these external pressures, it is their right to refuse to share or publicise their accounts. To counter these challenges, memory initiatives such as *The Herstories Project* and the *Community Memorialisation Project*, use the life-history methodology, to provide women with the space and the ability to self-censor by authoring their own narratives. Additionally, if they wish to do so, it enables women to document their memories – of negative experiences and of happier times – anonymously. The collaborative and voluntary nature of oral history documentation also allows women to tell their “truths” and share them publicly or retract them if they choose.

Despite the best of intentions, one of the drawbacks with memory-initiatives – whether they are about correcting the historical record, for education, or peacebuilding – is the question of privilege.³⁹ Perhaps due to the projectisation of memory and the civil society organisations involved in the process at multiple levels, it is often socio-economically and politically disadvantaged groups of women that are overwhelmingly represented in most archives. There is consequently at its most negative, a sense of voyeurism that might colour such archives. At the very least, there is a danger of over-romanticising “the local” – memories, memorial practices, and nuances of justice or healing – as the only authentic experience at the cost of others. However, for women who seek answers about and justice for their disappeared loved ones, keeping memory alive and voicing it in the public sphere collectively, is crucial and time-sensitive to achieving their end-goals. By delaying structured documentation initiatives too long or not engaging in them at all, there is a danger that fragile memories may alter shape, which in itself may be a disservice to the women who want to fight against the loss of their own narratives. For those who may not be easily linked as a collective – because they come from different ethno-religious or socio-economic backgrounds, or live geographically distanced from each other – a public archive of women’s histories may be a useful contribution to their cause. As a “collection”, it may add value to their struggles by corroborating each other’s experiences from different vantage points and validating each other’s search for justice.

However, subject to present political, cultural, religious and economic contexts, justice as it pertains to past wrongs, may mean different things to different women.⁴⁰ For some, it may mean accountability for their losses or at least a formal acknowledgement of their experiences by the state. For others, by documenting their lived-experiences and search for justice, the acknowledgment or validation they may seek is from their fellow citizens. An elderly Tamil women states, ‘They [Sinhalese community] must know the reality: all these things are happening because politicians are self-centred and they act only to keep themselves in power. They need to know that the Tamil people were also born in Sri Lanka and we too have rights’.⁴¹ Yet, “nuanced justice” as expressed in some narratives, does not diminish the critical role of and need for factual history, particularly within the international and national discourses on human rights and accountability. In her essay ‘Struggles from the periphery: Women in the space of truth and justice’, Ambika Satkunathan highlights that for some women who have survived and borne witness to the conflict, it is important that their agency – in some cases to choose the role of the “victim” if it means their

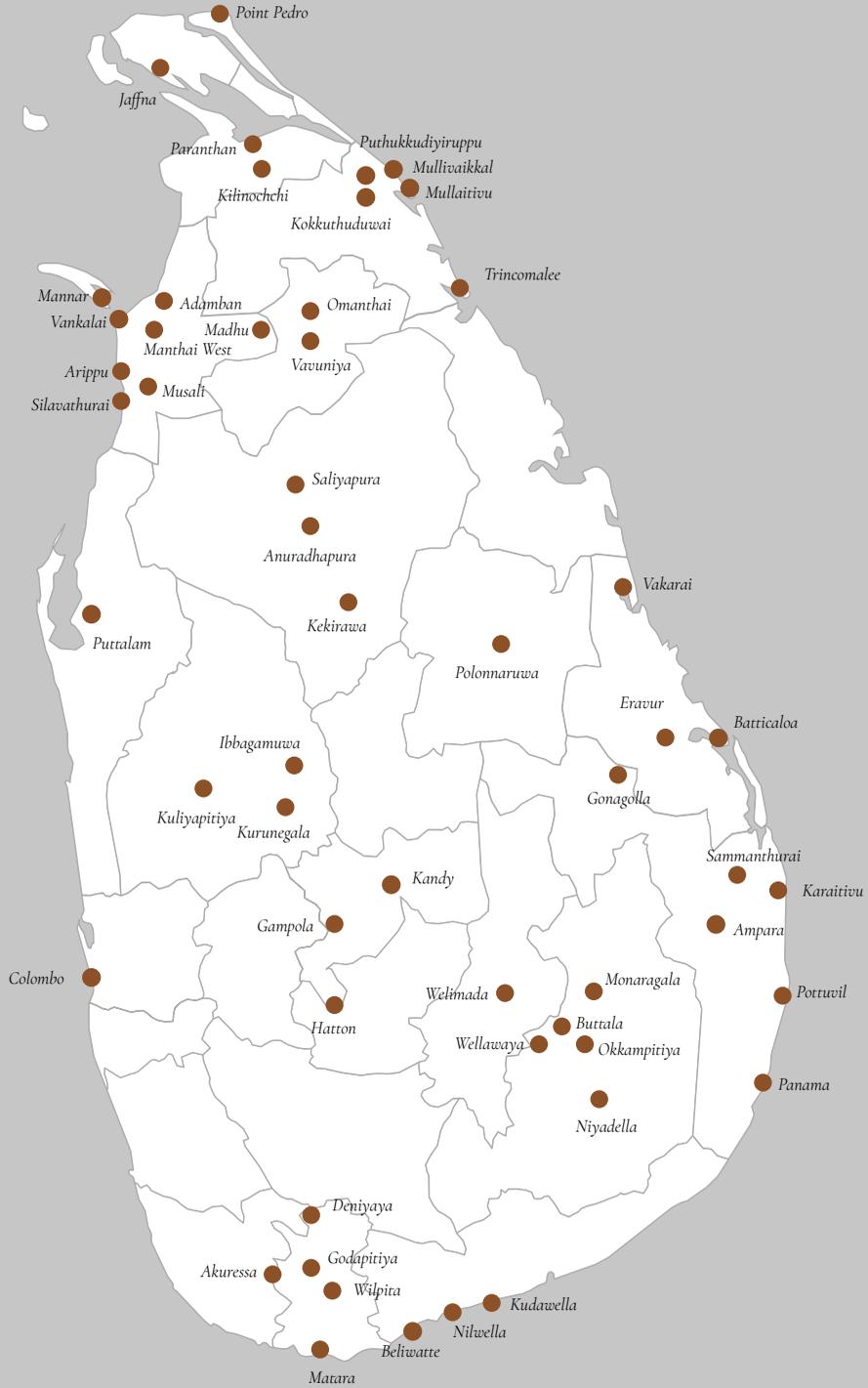
voice is amplified to call for whatever justice they seek – is at the centre of women’s narratives. In effect, this highlights the need to support memory activism, by enabling women to speak their own truths if they choose to do so, select and utilise memories as they need, and “perform” whichever role might enable them to pursue their need for justice.

Expanding the discourse on peace and development

The importance of “memory” in the post-war context is not only in narrativizing the past by those who seek the political capital that comes with controlling how history is constructed and utilised in the present but is also in the role memory plays in seeking and telling personal “truths”. It is in acknowledging people’s experiences publicly and symbolically. It is as a basis for supporting people’s need for justice. And, it is a way to educate and build the foundations in the present for non-recurrence of violent conflict in the future. It is in these larger objectives of memorialisation and its relationship to peace and justice, that documenting women’s lived-experiences are subject to the complexities and tensions in how women’s histories are shaped and utilised. Ultimately, memory initiatives and organic practices of personal, ritualistic memory serve different yet intrinsically connected goals. Although memorialisation, however it is practised, may be flawed and fraught with complexity, it is also relevant, and has wide-ranging impact.

Beyond “filling in the blanks” of history or their importance in “feminising” historical contexts, documenting women’s experiences have an impact on contemporary issues of post-war justice, peace, and development. For example, how do past abuses of power and inequality become entrenched or reflected in contemporary issues of marginalisation of women? And how do they reinforce the cycles of violence against women, particularly against those who are disproportionately affected in violent conflict due to their ethno-religious or socio-economic status? In the final essay of this book, ‘A “peace” of our own? Democracy, governance, and women as political citizens and agents of change’, Ramla Wahab-Salman is hopeful that women will continue to push the boundaries of majoritarian political restrictions they face to fully address the women-specific needs stemming from decades of conflict. This means that for women, for minority women in particular, there is a need to expand the boundaries of memorialisation and the discourse on peace and justice beyond the rigidity of institutionalised frameworks. They need to include and advance outcomes for greater representation and decision-making power for women in governance, and democratic and political spaces in Sri Lanka, at national and local levels, hitherto restricted by patriarchy. By supporting the documentation of women’s histories in their own words, the specific and complex needs of women in the post-war context – mediated as they are by socio-economic status, ethnicity, and politics – can be highlighted. It is hoped, that this in turn, will push public discourse to acknowledge and include the full range of injustices suffered by women affected by long-term socio-economic and political impacts of conflicts in Sri Lanka. ■

● Locations mentioned in the narratives



Timeline

A chronology of some key events from gaining independence to the end of the civil war

1940s

1948

Sri Lanka, then known as Ceylon, gains independence from the British. Tamils feel disenfranchised by the "Citizenship Act" which denies citizenship to significant numbers of "Indian" Tamils – descendants of indentured labour brought from India to work on tea plantations by the British.

1950s

1956

S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, elected on a wave of Sinhala nationalism, becomes prime minister. He makes Sinhala the only official language of Sri Lanka, alienating the Tamils and other minority communities. Peaceful protests by Tamils are broken up violently by Sinhalese mobs, leaving hundreds dead and displaced.

1957–8

Bandaranaike and S.J.V. Chelvanayakam sign a pact, agreeing to devolve a certain level of autonomy to the Tamil people of the country through the creation of a series of regional councils, intended to solve communal disagreements. Due to intense opposition by the Sinhalese-dominated political parties, as well as some Tamil leadership, the pact is abandoned.

1959

Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike is assassinated.

1960s

1960

Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the wife of the former prime minister, is elected prime minister. She continues the social reform agenda of her husband.

1965

The United National Party wins the general elections, resulting in the stalling of socialist reforms introduced by preceding post-independence regimes.

1970s

1970

Sirimavo Bandaranaike forms a coalition with left parties, and regains power.

1971

The Marxist “New Left” group, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), launches the first of two unsuccessful insurrections, with a membership primarily of Sinhalese youth from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

1972

Ceylon becomes a republic and is officially renamed the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. A new constitution enshrines an earlier law, making Sinhala Sri Lanka’s official language and Buddhism the country’s “foremost” religion, further alienating Tamils who are mainly Hindus and Christians.

1975–6

The Tamil New Tigers, created by Velupillai Prabhakaran with the objective of creating a separate homeland – Tamil Eelam, is re-named The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

1977–8

Rioting after the separatist Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) party wins all seats in Tamil areas leaves hundreds of Tamils dead.

Timeline

A chronology of some key events from gaining independence to the end of the civil war

1980s

1981

Riots break out in Jaffna. A state of emergency is declared.

1983

The first guerrilla-style ambush by the LTTE kills 13 soldiers. Anti-Tamil rioting erupts all over the country, killing hundreds of people. About 150,000 Tamil refugees flee to India where Tamil military training camps are established. What is later termed the “First Eelam War” begins.

1985–7

The government begins the first round of peace talks with the LTTE. The Indian government cracks down on armed Tamil groups in India. The Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord is signed, establishing new councils in Tamil areas. India agrees to deploy peacekeepers; the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), quickly gets drawn into the civil war. Heavy southern opposition to the Peace Accord sows the seeds for the second southern insurrection.

1987–9

A second “low-intensity” Southern insurrection is launched by the JVP. It is violently crushed using “counter-insurgency measures” by the Sri Lankan Government.

1990s

1990

IPKF withdraws from Sri Lanka. LTTE becomes the dominant Tamil armed group. Over 100,000 Muslims are expelled from LTTE-controlled areas in the North, many with just two hours’ notice.

1991

Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, is assassinated by a female LTTE suicide bomber.

1993

Ranasinghe Premadasa, president of Sri Lanka, is killed in an LTTE suicide bomb attack.

1994

Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga is elected prime minister. Just three months later, she is elected president. Kumaratunga begins peace talks with the LTTE.

1995–2001

The “Third Eelam War” begins. LTTE bombs Sri Lanka’s holiest Buddhist site, the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy. President Kumaratunga is wounded in a bomb attack. A suicide attack on the international airport destroys half the *SriLankan Airlines* fleet.

2000s

2002

A Norway-brokered ceasefire between the LTTE and the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) comes into effect. It holds for five years despite many incursions from both sides. A9, the road linking the Jaffna peninsula to the rest of Sri Lanka opens after 12 years. The LTTE abandons their demand for a separate homeland.

2004

Eastern commander Vinayagamoothi Muralitharan, also known as Colonel Karuna, splits from the LTTE forming the pro-government TMVP.

2005

GoSL and the LTTE sign the Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-Toms) by which the two entities agreed to work together to offer relief to the communities devastated by the 2004 tsunami. Lakshman Kadirgamar, Sri Lankan foreign minister, is assassinated by the LTTE. Mahinda Rajapaksa, wins the presidential elections on a majoritarian platform, with most Tamils in areas controlled by the LTTE, not voting in the election.

2006–7

The fourth round of peace talks fails in Geneva. The Sri Lankan military steadily pushes the Tigers away from their Eastern strongholds. The LTTE air force attacks various targets including the Colombo airport. S.P. Thamilselvan, leader of the LTTE's political wing, is killed in an air raid.

2008

GoSL formally withdraws from the ceasefire with the LTTE and launches offensive strikes. Amid attacks and counter-attacks, Sri Lankan forces seem to gradually gain the upper hand.

2009

January 2

Troops seize the LTTE's de facto capital, Kilinochchi.

April 20

GoSL gives the LTTE 24 hours to surrender as tens of thousands of civilians flee the fighting. The exodus exceeds 15,000 in just a week.

April 26

The LTTE declares a unilateral ceasefire. GoSL calls it "a joke" and demands surrender.

May 16

The Sri Lankan military takes control of the entire Sri Lankan coastline for the first time since the war began.

May 18

GoSL declares the LTTE defeated after army forces overrun the last patch of rebel-held territory in the northeast – Puthukkudiyiruppu. The LTTE is accused of holding civilians hostage as human shields. The government is accused of shelling civilians indiscriminately. The military declares that no civilians were harmed. An LTTE statement says the group will lay down its arms. The military says LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran was killed in the fighting.



CHAPTER ONE

The cost of war

The human cost of war is often acknowledged and highlighted in an abstract sense, replete with stories of collective loss, suffering, and grief. The true cost of war, especially on women, goes much deeper. This chapter comprises life histories of women who chose to remember what war cost them by sharing memories of not just the worst experiences of their lives, but also of happier times. They are personal “truths” that speak of family and childhood; of co-existence; of love, courtship and marriage; of hope; of courage and self-confidence; and of the simple joys of everyday life. The life histories in this chapter are accompanied by an essay that highlights why a more inclusive and gendered historical narrative, where women’s histories are not just relegated to grief and victimhood, is essential to our understanding of “history”.

Resisting the silence: A history of women in conflict

Shamara Wettimuny¹

Between Independence in 1948 and the end of the armed conflict in 2009, Sri Lanka witnessed multiple ethnic and youth conflicts. Religious conflicts, by contrast, preceded Independence, and accelerated in the post-armed conflict context.² Much of the historical narratives tend to focus on male actors, whether politicians, separatist leaders, militant party leaders, or even the rank-and-file soldiers and cadres. Where are all the women in historical narratives of conflict?

As histories of conflicts were written, the role of women tended to be occluded. Victimhood, which tends to be the predominant depiction of women in the grand narratives of history (especially conflict histories), is not the only narrative of women. This essay is not intended to be a comprehensive history of women in conflict; instead, it attempts to highlight the silencing, survival, and agency of women at pivotal moments in Sri Lanka's post-Independence history of armed conflict.

Women in power and the historical roots of the conflict

The post-colonial roots of the ethnic conflict can be traced back to certain historical events such as the institution of a language policy by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, who was elected prime minister of Ceylon in 1956. Bandaranaike's electoral campaign pivoted on a chauvinistic language policy

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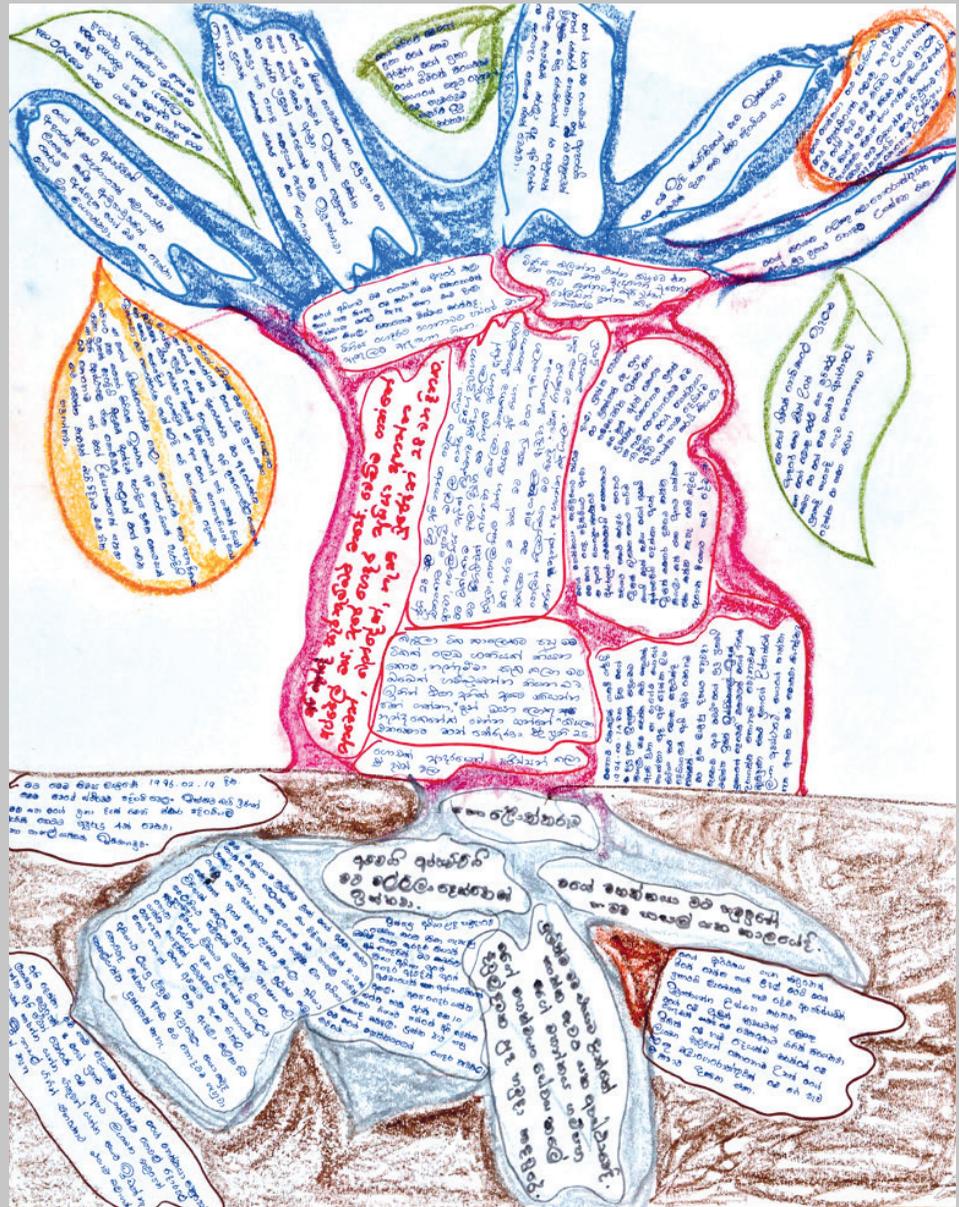


Ethnicity: Tamil
Location: Vavuniya
Format: Video interview
Year: 2012

I lived in Jaffna. One day, I visited a relative in Vavuniya who was in hospital, partially paralysed. He called me from the hospital using a stranger's phone. The owner of the phone called me later and we started talking. We courted for a while. Then he told me that he was paralysed from the waist down. I didn't believe him at first, so I visited the hospital and saw for myself. I didn't want to leave him because of his disability, so I married him. I lied to my parents and said that he was temporarily disabled due to an accident. But on the day of the wedding, his parents told mine that his paralysis was due to a shell attack, and then my parents were furious at me. My father wanted me to leave him and come back home. My mother worries for my future. But I cannot leave him – he will die if I do. I always reassure them that I can look after him. I don't want to take him to Jaffna because people will say things to hurt him. We are happy, but they don't know that. When relatives visit and they go back and report what they see here, my parents get even more worried. When we travel together, I can't afford taxis, so we take the bus. Generally, people help lift him onto the bus. I have registered us with a doctor from Mannar who helps us with 3,000 rupees a month from diaspora funding. He can generally take care of himself. I do the cooking and cleaning, and tend to his bed sores. We sleep inside the shop that I run because the situation here is not that safe. Sometimes at night I get very fearful. But he tells me that as long as he is by my side, I shouldn't be afraid. My only hope is that he will walk one day. ■



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In 2022: She lives with her son in the same house. She is proud that it is now bigger and has tiled flooring. She hopes to complete the first floor before her son, who is 29, gets married and moves in with his wife. Her son is being interviewed for a government job. Her beloved father passed away in 2021 but her mother and brothers are still staying with her. She has a small but successful ornamental fish business. With her supplementary income, she contributes to the financial wellbeing of her mother and that of her deceased husband's parents. She says that after all these years, the thought of her husband still brings her pain. She believes that there is no change in how men still try to take advantage of a woman who lives alone. The only change she sees is within herself: she is stronger and braver now than she was a decade ago and, if she is harassed, she will stand her ground and speak her mind without fear.



Ethnicity: Muslim
Location: Ampara
Format: Photo-essay
Year: 2012

My father was from Nintavur, and my mother from Pottuvil. My mother didn't have any children, so she made a vow at the Hindu temple that if she had a child, she would make rods [balusters] in silver as well as a gold candle-stand to be placed there. And I was born. I am 67 years old now and I have been working since I was 17. I married at 16, and had eight children. My husband worked in a quarry and also did agricultural work. I wove mats and boxes, stitched clothes, and sold hoppers to raise my children. I have five girls. Those who have wealth give land, a house, and money as dowry, but we didn't have anything to give. We had only a house and land – nothing else. When the tsunami came, people fled everywhere. I took all my children and ran to the mosque. We stayed the night there and came back the next day. We weren't directly affected by the tsunami. A lot of people lied about how they lost cattle and poultry, and took compensation. I didn't want to do that. Only when we work hard, will any good come out of it. Tamils, Muslims, and Sinhalese lived in unity here [historically]. When we had festivals, we exchanged food and rice. Tamils have the kovil and we have our mosque, that's the only difference. Sinhalese are also there and even though their story is different, the blood is the same. Whoever we are – Sinhalese, Tamils or Muslims – we have to live in unity. All are Allah's creation. Men shouldn't hate men. We are not cattle, we are human. ■





Ethnicity: Tamil
Location: Musali
Format: Photo-essay
Year: 2015

I was born and raised in Potkeni. My father was an indigenous doctor. I studied at a Muslim school till Grade 5, and I didn't go to school after that. The Tamil people that lived here were like our own family; they used to come to our house and eat our food with us. When my mother died, I was married off at the age of 16. I was young and I didn't know anything. I cried because I was afraid of what would happen after my marriage. My eldest son was born in 1987, and the fear left me. One day, the army came to our house at 6 a.m., breaking down the front door. We were not awake yet. They threatened us and took our elder brother who was sleeping in his bed. They shot him. The army gave us so much trouble – they would often come at 9, 10 or 12 at night. We couldn't bear it any longer and left home. In September 2003, my husband went to get some firewood from the jungle by himself. He was caught in a trap laid for pigs or deer. The trap was a little bit high, so he got entangled in the thread. It pierced his kidney and he died. We moved again in 2007. But the army kept us inside St. Bosco's Church. They told us not to come out or they would shoot us. Then they marched us in front of them. A lorry came with lots of bodies; they said four of the bodies were from the LTTE. They took our men. After three months we came back to our village, which looked like a cemetery. There were snakes inside the house. Muslim people gave us food. We will never forget their help. We don't want another situation like this. All the people, from all the races, should live in peace. I pray that, in the future, we should live like a family without racial and religious differences. ■



In 2022: She says that her family is doing well. They have received livelihood support. Her son got married and has one child. He lives in a separate house, while her daughter lives with her. The daughter is separated from her husband and is a seamstress, because it is difficult for a single woman with young children to find a safe and stable job with flexible hours. She feels that each year rolls into the next with no great improvement in their lives. She is happy to share her life history with others but worries if there might be any problems in doing so, even though there have been no repercussions so far.



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Ethnicity: Sinhalese

Location: Ampara

Format: Letter

Year: 2015

I lived about 20 kilometres from Ampara town. It was a beautiful village. There is the Wadayanthalawa lake on one side and the Weeragoda lake on the other. Beyond them stretches the Buddangala forest reserve. On one side of it, there is the Valathapitiya village and lake. Surrounded by these, my village looked isolated. But merchants frequently come to our village because it had fertile paddy fields and chena [farmlands]. Being the third of a family of six children, I had to help a lot in the economic activities of my parents. I had to work in the house, the paddy fields, and the business. But the unity between the peoples of the area made some of these difficulties less harsh. At one side of our village was a village called Kanapathipuram. The people there spoke Tamil. They visited our village often. We also visited their village for many purposes. Most of them were my father's friends. We had such a close relationship. On the other side of our village was Majidpuram. Muslim people who spoke Tamil lived there. They sang prayers aloud in the morning. We had a lot of friends. Because there were Tamils, Muslims, Malay and Javanese people in the Ampara area, the minority Sinhalese people had a lot of unusual experiences. When there were ceremonies in our temple, most of the sweets were sold with the support of Tamil and Muslim friends. I used to go with my friends to the Vel festival in the [Hindu] kovil. On some days, our monk also attended these ceremonies. We have participated in the Hajj festival of our Muslim friends. We joined our Christian friends to celebrate Christmas. I passed my O-Level exams in 1971. A lot of young lives were taken away by the JVP movement. The country was disrupted and there were many incidents which made life insecure. It was a sorrowful period. We were always worried about our brothers. With the passing of time, we understood that a lot of crises were emerging in the country. Power-seeking, miserable politicians openly used innocent people as political hammers [tools] for their own well-being. And so, the unity and friendship we enjoyed didn't continue for long. We lost it little by little. It began with my Tamil friends. The adults told us that they went for employment to Vavuniya, Mannar, and Jaffna, but why did they leave without telling us? Why? What? How? The 1980s began. The LTTE movement was becoming strong in the country and during this time, one of my old friends came looking for me. She lived in France. While there she had learned "war strategies" and she told me how they were planning to bring down the Government of Sri Lanka. She invited me to join them. I told her that I am married and unable to take such decisions individually. Although she was one of my best friends, she talked with an arrogant pride that day. She told me about the LTTE's power, the influence of their leaders and the strength of their weapons. She spoke disrespectfully about the army and smiled scornfully. That day I had no sleep. I was pregnant with my child. After two days, the army surrounded my house and took me in for questioning. It was very hard. I was interviewed by the head of the institution. I went home after an hour. But I felt that I was facing such problems without any justification. My husband was working in a service station in Trincomalee and I wasn't receiving letters from him. When days,

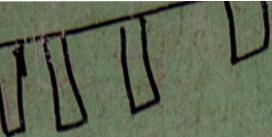
weeks, and months passed, I went to his service station looking for him. I heard that he and the vehicle he was in had disappeared and the LTTE had spread in that area. 'Aiyo...', my breath stopped. I was in Trincomalee hospital for two days after that. My thoughts were far away. I was disgusted by the whole world. But there was a baby in my belly, so I had to live. What should I do? To whom should I talk? I was just a shell of a body. I went to the temple. I stared at the Buddha statue. I slept in the shrine room. When I woke up, I went home again. I strengthened my mind and decided to live for the baby. After that day, I continued life as usual. Time passed, and weeks and months later, and I became a mother of a baby girl. My only weapon was the strength in my heart. I helped with pre-school classes, I sewed clothes, weeded the fields for daily wages, and reaped paddy to earn money. My daughter passed the A-Level exams in 2003, is married to a suitable partner, and has a good job. The dark shadows of the war have passed. There is some happiness there, like a silver line in that dark shadow. I am tired of the sorrowfulness of life, but I have not let go of the oars yet. ■



Ethnicity: Tamil
Location: Manthai West
Format: Audio Interview
Year: 2016

I am 77 years old. I lost my mother when I was eight. I had epilepsy. There was an indigenous doctor in Valkaipetrakandal. My father took me there. They found a nerve and burned it to cure me of epilepsy. Seven times, they burned me. The last time I even got blisters. After that I didn't get those fits. I then joined St. John's College to study. At that time, we had to pay 40 rupees for the hostel. They would give us beef but I didn't eat it. I would give it to the boy next to me and eat only the rice with the gravy. Then gradually I grew accustomed to eating it. After some time, I studied in Adamban village. During that time there was a priest. He was a white man. He was one of those people who ran the hostel. I stayed with him and studied. After completing the A-Level exams, everyone who studied with me started doing office work. They now get their pensions. But they say office work is like slavery. At that time most of the land of this village belonged to my father. He had goats and cattle. So, I did agriculture instead. I reared cows and milked them. My father became ill. I had three sisters. I started thinking about getting married only after getting them all married. Then I fell ill with tuberculosis. I went to Mannar to get an X-ray. There they said it was related to a heart disease. They advised me to eat well and I did so. They asked me to go for regular check-ups at the clinic. We got displaced and went to Madu. Later, we went from there and stayed in Thatchanamaruthamadu for about 15 days. After some time, we returned to our own village. Then after nine months, we went to Paaliyaru and stayed there for about six months. From there we got displaced to Kilinochchi. Later, we went to Mullaitivu. The army was all around us. We made bunkers and stayed in them. Then we went back to our native place with our family. The living costs had increased due to the displacement. Many of my belongings and assets had got damaged. My daughter cooked meals for the Movement [LTTE]. She refused to come back to the village. One day we heard on the Movement's news channel [list of the dead] that my daughter was dead. Still, I prayed and pleaded with God [for her to be alive], not wanting to believe the news. Then a person I knew confirmed that my daughter was actually dead and that he had seen her [body]. I was very sad. They [the government] gave 50,000 rupees as compensation. But we didn't take it since she died while being in the Movement. Discrimination based on ethnicity and where one lives should be stopped. But only a person who is ready to give up something for another can hope to progress in life. ■

In 2022: She is deceased according to her neighbours and there is no more information about her.



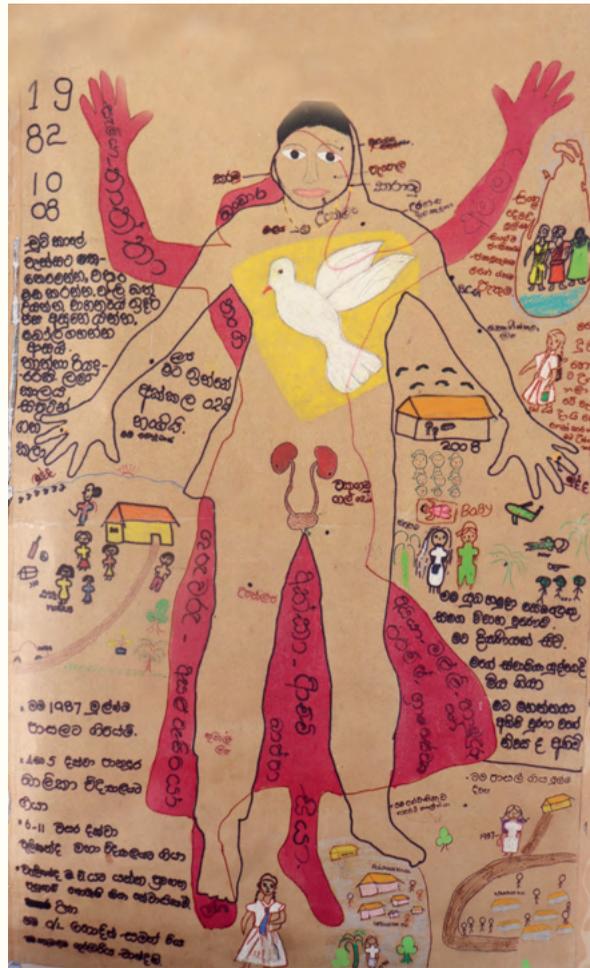
high school.



சென்னை



Ethnicity: Sinhalese
Location: Polonnaruwa
Format: Body map
Year: 2017



My childhood was a very happy one. These are some of my happy memories: when I was very young, I liked to get wet in the rain and play in muddy puddles of water; I used to pretend cook sand as rice; my father was a driver and I liked to travel in the front seat of the vehicle; I loved playing with a ball. I also remember my first day at school in 1987. After that, I went to school in Panadura, Welikanda, where I stayed in the hostel. I have two elder sisters and one younger sister. I am a Buddhist. I passed my O-Level exams well and my best teacher was Chandani. There are several scars on my body: a mark on my lower right arm, a birthmark on the left side of the chin, chickenpox scars on my face, a BCG injection scar on the upper left arm, a birthmark on the lower abdomen, marks from injuries below the right knee, a broken left shoulder bone, and a caesarian scar. I had kidney stones. I wear earrings, a necklace, a ring. I got married to an army soldier. I have a daughter. My husband died in the war. When I lost my husband, I lost my house too. I am trying to provide my daughter with a good education and make her a worthwhile, useful person. Initially, Sinhalese and Tamils lived in unity. My wish is harmony between the races once more. ■

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Ethnicity: Muslim
Location: Puttalam
Format: Audio Interview
Year: 2021



കോടതി റെജിസ്ട്രാർ

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Ethnicity: Tamil
Location: Ampara
Format: Photo-essay
Year: 2021

In 1990, when I was studying in Grade 7, the conflict was all around us. I moved to Karaitivu and studied there up to my O-Level exams. When we were travelling to Karaitivu, many houses were torched. They had put six or seven boys into a house and burned them. We were small then, but we saw these incidents with our own eyes. Once, to escape the army, two men jumped into a well thinking there would be water, but there was no water in the well. The soldiers who were there threw a big stone and killed them. When we saw these things, we cried. My father told us that we needed to go somewhere else and took us away from that place. When we were staying [displaced] at the Veeramunai temple, the army took our father. Our father raised us without ever beating us when we were naughty. But when they took our father and beat him, we cried and held on to their feet. We begged them not to beat him. My father didn't even kill an ant. And yet they took such a kind man. We searched for our father everywhere, including in Colombo. We keep asking for information about our father still, but we have learned nothing. They gave us a death certificate from the DS office which we have with us. We came back to our home in 1992 [after displacement]. We saw bodies dragged out in the open and eaten by dogs. There was a bad smell, which we couldn't bear. We built small huts and had no electricity. We lived there until the Red Cross gave us some assistance. I fell in love and married my husband in 1996. We live happily with our extended family. I want to support the education of other students in the same way I want my own children to study. I tried to get educational material for the orphaned children here. I am doing many projects, in collaboration with various organisations, for widows and people who have lost their children. My aim is to live for other people and to dedicate my life to social service. I have taught my children the same. ■





Ethnicity: Muslim
Location: Sammanturai
Format: Letter
Year: 2016

I was born in 1964 and I am the eldest child born after 12 years of marriage. I have a sister and a brother. My father died when I was two years old. My mother suffered a lot to bring us up. When I was 13, my mother married me off. When I was 14, I gave birth to my first child. After two years, I had a baby girl. Three years later I had a baby boy. Forty-five days after my youngest son was born my husband left me. We divorced a year later and he married someone else. I heard that he married three other women after me. He was involved with a lot of women. I was so young in those days, I didn't know about such things. I suffered to bring up my children. Atrocities, misgivings, suffering – I couldn't bear any of it. I went to work in a mill to make ends meet for my children. I used to bring discarded paddy from the field and eke out rice from it. I would sell it for a little money. No one should suffer like we did. I was always afraid that everybody around me will tell "stories" [spread gossip] because I didn't have a husband at home. I was so ashamed of my situation. I cried a lot and I couldn't share my sadness with anybody. And then my situation worsened because the war came to our village in 1989. I remember several incidents. In 1990, the LTTE attacked the police station. We were so scared. Once when we were sleeping, we heard explosions of bombs and shells in our area. They told us to run away but what could we do? We ran inside a hospital. One day, at around 5 p.m., we saw smoke rising from a distance. It was [the village of] Udhayapuram burning. The people from Udhayapuram were running everywhere. Some people came to our house. I told them that we were also going to flee and so we ran away. When we returned, thieves had looted all the things in our house. I put everything in God's hands and did my best to educate my children. Watching me suffer, my eldest son stopped going to school and found work. So did my other children and I was so very sad about this. But now I have 12 grandchildren. My children look after me. I am very happy. I will end my life story there. ■



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Ethnicity: Tamil

Location: Mannar

Format: Audio Interview

Year: 2015

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Story-telling as healing

Conflict-related violence leaves deep scars long after those that suffer through war emerge on the other side as survivors. For women, there is a recurrent violence inherent in carrying these memories with them in such stark detail. This chapter recounts women's memories of how they held their families together and shielded their children from the horrors of war as much as they could; the people they loved and lost; and "everyday" details of who their loved ones were and what losing them felt like. These are also stories of how they coped with their pain, or what they did, and still do, to heal. The narratives also reveal how much holding on to memory matters for survival, and how faith, ritual, and "telling and re-telling" their stories help them move on, despite the pain that rarely dulls with time. These memories are accompanied by a practitioner's reflections that chart the importance of the space for community-based memorialisation in healing trauma that is passed on from generation to generation.

A practitioner's reflections: Women, ritual, and community healing in Sri Lanka

Vasuki Jeyasankar[†]

In my experience of working on memory, I have witnessed women who have found various ways to mourn, hold on to, and celebrate their memories, both individually and collectively. Through these practices, they also transfer their memories, trauma, and healing to the next generation. More often than not however, patriarchal structures – within the home, the community, and the national machinery that drives memorialisation – often control how women express their memories by relegating their commemoration activities to the private sphere.

Power, politics, and the use of memory

Mainstream or “official” memorialisation practices, across different political positions and power spectrums, are usually dominated by paternalistic narratives of “powerful men” and their “people”.² The inequalities, denial of rights, and hatred and suspicion that are fed by ethno-political segregation, are also reflected in the way war and recurring violence in its aftermath are memorialised.³ Whether it is to mourn their own losses or to boast about their victory, a victor’s memorialisation – as events or memorials – hardly ever stands in a vacuum. More often than not, by design or through negligence, they allude to the loss of “others”⁴ to make the point of being victorious, which simultaneously humiliates the other and threatens future violence, should new conflicts occur.⁵ To those that were “vanquished”, such memorialisation

hardly offers any consolation or evokes gratitude for being “rescued” from war. It may, instead, bring to the surface painful memories of those who were killed, of the disappeared, and of sexual violence. It is possible that beneath such commemorations, in their appearance and timing, there is an entrenched mistrust, fear, or hatred towards the “other”, particularly heightened by decades of social separation due to war. For example, the military monuments constructed in areas populated mainly by the Tamil community (such as at Elephant Pass⁶), neither carry direct memories of the civilians that were affected by the war, nor celebrate their resilience.⁷ Instead, they stand like scars that evoke the internal pain and anger of the civilian community. Worse, they never allow for healing. The same is true of the statue of a soldier raising the Sri Lankan flag at Puthukudiyirippu, the site of the last battle where the distinctions between the civilian and combatant melted away in the final assault.⁸

Memorial-building carries on long after the war. Each of these new memorials becomes yet another tool in the race for control and power among different groups who have fashioned themselves as eternally opposite to one another within and between ethno-political divides in Sri Lanka. In such situations, a memorial becomes both a symbol of power and of powerlessness. For example, a long-lost memorial to fallen soldiers of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) was “re-discovered” within the Palali airport compound. The memorial was restored and celebrated by the army, even as local people’s stories and memories of suffering at the hands of the IPKF are rarely memorialised.⁹ The same can be said of the LTTE memorials that were constructed during the war to celebrate their heroes, when there were members of the Tamil community with opposing political views who were gunned down by the LTTE, and as such, could not memorialise their own. Similar to the memorials sanctioned by the state, some of the memorials constructed by various Tamil groups long after the war ended, also display an undercurrent of anger or perhaps even revenge as they fight for recognition of their memories against the backdrop of the plethora of victors’ memorials. For example, the memorial originally constructed at the Jaffna University, to remember civilians killed in Mullivaikkal, evokes feelings of pain and anger.¹⁰

As always, women are “allowed” to become part of these processes by those in power. They are used, to further agendas of power, strictly in the ways prescribed by those in power.¹¹ They can only publicly remember within their prescribed roles as mothers or wives, or within formerly LTTE-controlled areas, as the relatives of “martyrs”. The experiences of women – violence against women including sexual violence; their personal victories by way of their resilience through years of war; their key role in creating and recreating lives, sometimes many times over; the use of food to show love or gather in solidarity; or other collective spaces that nourished their resilience and survival – are not acknowledged in these normative memorialisation processes.

The way women often remember the narratives or their loved ones, the way they express their ideas and creativity, are irrelevant to the mainstream memorialisation processes that intersect with power. In spite of the heart-wrenching nature of many of these memories, women’s commemorations are mostly woven around positive stories and images. In my experience, the memories women who are left behind hold dear are those of the human being – their goodness, or their traits. Over time, they become more prominent than revenge or the incident that caused the loss, each time women speak of their bereavement. This doesn’t mean that they forgot the injustices that are responsible for the loss of that person. Why and by whom the loved one was taken away is never forgotten. The tone and the emotion with which the story is told and re-told, is one based on love. Each time they remember the person with love, they speak

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Ethnicity: Sinhalese
Location: Gonagolla
Format: Video interview
Year: 2015

I am 27, married, and have two children. Both my husband and I are home-guards [civilians with basic arms-training in charge of village security]. My father was a farmer and my mother was a housewife. There was an alms-giving in the village. That day was the worst day of my life. That was the day that I became an only child. That night, my father was away, working. My mother was helping out at the alms-giving. When she got back, we went to sleep. I remember my mother shaking me awake saying 'My child, the Tigers are coming.' I stood up and grabbed my sister's hand and carried my other sister. My mother grabbed my brother. At that moment, the Tigers came in, and started looking around. My brother started shouting, 'Father! Father!' And because of that, they started looking around more. They went outside. I remember the sound of my mother breathing a sigh of relief. But as she did, they came back through the door with two machetes. My mother begged, 'Kind sir, please don't harm my children.' My brother started screaming again shouting, 'Father, Father!' They first hacked my brother, three times. He fell on his face. Then my little sister screamed. As she did, they held her up by her arm and hacked her across her body. I never saw them strike my other sister. My mother started screaming, 'My children...', and as she did, they kicked her a few times and then hacked into her head twice with the machete. She rolled across the kitchen outside the house. There was a sack of rice next to me. I stood up holding on to it saying 'Mother'. As I did, I was hit. I slid back on to the floor. As I stood up again, they hit me a second time and I felt my eyes go dark and my body go weak. As I was falling onto the mat on the floor, I felt the third strike. The village monk had brought a three-wheeler and taken us to the hospital... When I graduated from school, all I ever wanted to do was join the army. Even when I was at the temple offering flowers to the Buddha, I never lost my hatred. All I ever prayed for was that I might be able to kill a few Tamils. That is my shameful sinfulness. Over time, I realised that ordinary, innocent Tamils had nothing to do with what happened to me. But still, we can't forget this and need this memory to survive. When we live in this memory, even if my siblings have been born again into another lifetime, it feels like they are always here with me. That's why we cannot move away from this memory. My father won't even let us fix this part of the house. Whenever he walks through, he wants to be able to see this room, and remember them. If something like this were to ever happen to someone else [you], don't ever think, 'This terrible tragedy has happened to me. I am all alone. I will never be able to move beyond or do anything.' Nothing is impossible. If you knew the state I was in, you'll know why I am so proud of everything I am today. ■



Ethnicity: Tamil
Location: Vavuniya
Format: Photo-essay
Year: 2012

My parents are originally from Ingiriya. We moved to Kilinochchi because of the ethnic problems in the 1970s. I was seven years old. My father moved back to Horana. My mother lives in Kilinochchi and I now live in Vavuniya. We lived close to an LTTE camp. When the shelling started, the shells hit our homes, so we fled with our belongings in 2008. We then moved three miles further away but this time we couldn't carry our belongings. We had to move from there as well because the children couldn't bear the sound of shelling. We had no place to live so we lived under the mango trees. Here, my mother-in-law had a heart attack when a shell fell close by, and died. The LTTE then started taking away our children. We have five children. My eldest daughter was taken but she escaped and came back. I took off my thaali [gold necklace symbolic of marriage in the Tamil tradition] and made her wear it. I put the red pottu on her forehead [a signifier for a married woman] – because married women were less likely to be taken away by the LTTE. Then to make things more convincing, I folded a sari and wrapped it around her stomach so that she would look pregnant. It was in February 2009 that I was struck on my foot and in my lower stomach [during shelling]. It struck my brother on his arm. We were caught in the crossfire. We [still] don't know if it was the army or the LTTE. When we made it to the camp, my husband and I got separated. An ICRC ship took my daughter and son. I was first at the Trincomalee hospital and then at Dambulla hospital. Afterwards, at Menik Farm [the largest and longest-running displacement camp], I was reunited with my husband. The army took my older daughter on suspicion of being an LTTE member. She was sent for rehabilitation and released a year later. My two daughters are now in Kilinochchi. They are married. My other three children are with me, and my husband works in a shop. ■

In 2022: She has four girls and a boy, and they are all married now. Her eldest daughter's husband lost the use of a leg when he was shot during the war. So, like her, he uses crutches. She has had two heart attacks in the last decade, has high blood pressure, a chronic neck ache, and attends the government clinic despite her disability. Heavy work is no longer possible for her. The house that existed a decade ago with a tin-sheet roof and temporary sheet walls is no more. In its place there is a larger house which they completed with their own money (grinding and selling chilli powder) after the initial construction was funded by a local NGO on land given by the government. She lost many relatives during the war, and most recently, her mother. She says the grief that she felt during the war will not change even though her socio-economic status is better. She yearned to return to Kilinochchi but after a decade, has resolved to settle permanently in Vavuniya. Her only wish is to build and operate a small spice mill and shop on her land so that her husband does not have to do daily-wage work. She would like 'the world' to see her life story.



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මම දුටුවේ මෙය වූවාය. පුතේ මෙ අවසරය නො දුන් අතර මෙයට පසුව මාගේ ජීවිතයේ මෙයට වඩා වැඩි දුකක් මට හට ගත්තේය. මාගේ පුතා මාගේ ජීවිතයේ මෙයට වඩා වැඩි දුකක් මට හට ගත්තේය.

1945-10-25 වන දින මා පුතාට මාගේ ජීවිතයේ මෙයට වඩා වැඩි දුකක් මට හට ගත්තේය. මාගේ ජීවිතයේ මෙයට වඩා වැඩි දුකක් මට හට ගත්තේය. මාගේ ජීවිතයේ මෙයට වඩා වැඩි දුකක් මට හට ගත්තේය.

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In 2022: Her elder son, who is married, has a good job. Her younger son now works in the army and looks after her. Both her sons care for her welfare, which makes her happy. She says though that she still faces economic hardship every day. She says that when she first recorded her history, she felt comforted by it but expected that some [tangible] help may come out of it. She feels that the war lasted 26 years, but no help has come from anyone and that her socio-economic status hasn't improved. She feels that there is no personal gain from sharing her story because it didn't change her life in any way. But she feels raising her sons by herself and so well, amidst much difficulty after having lost her husband so long ago, is an example to others and one that must be shared. Her expectations for the future are that her sons live happily. With her younger son's marriage, she will have no separate space in which to live and she hopes for a small house elsewhere to live out her days.

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2021/07/15

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1984 දී මෙහි මාරු කළ හැකි වන බවට තීරණය කර ඇත. මෙහිදී මාරු කළ හැකි වන බවට තීරණය කර ඇත. මෙහිදී මාරු කළ හැකි වන බවට තීරණය කර ඇත. මෙහිදී මාරු කළ හැකි වන බවට තීරණය කර ඇත.

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Though I was born in Vavuniya, I live where my husband is from, in Kokkuthoduwai. We have six children. We were displaced in 1984. As a result, we live in great misery, facing many difficulties. Since 1984, we have lived temporarily in Alampil, Thanneeroottu, Koolamurippu, Puthukudiyiruppu, Maththalan, Pokkanai and Wattuwal. In 2007, the LTTE conscripted many A-Level girl students, took them to Chencholai, and gave them training there. My daughter was also taken by them. Kafir aircraft carried out aerial bombardments and my daughter escaped with injuries. As she resumed her studies, the war raged on and intensified in scale. She joined us in Maththalan. We kept her in hiding. And yet, a bullet hit her head and she died instantly. In Wattuwal, we took cover in a bunker. A shell landed on the bunker. My eldest son, my youngest son and I were injured. The eldest was admitted to a hospital and treated but a shell fragment still remains inside his chest. As a result, he cannot do any heavy work. On 15 May 2009, my 14-year-old fourth son died in an artillery shell attack. So many people in my family lost their lives on account of the war. Within the space of five days, I lost two of my children. I think of them every day and it makes me cry bitterly. We came to the welfare camp on 19 May 2009. Here also we didn't get proper food, water, or sanitation facilities. Even though we have now returned to our own village, we don't even have a temporary house and we have no employment. We suffer because of such difficulty. I also have cancer. I was admitted to the Maharagama hospital and received treatment. Now I attend a clinic once in three months to get my drugs. My life is full of tragedy. ■



Ethnicity: Tamil
Location: Mullaitivu
Format: Letter
Year: 2012

In 2022: She is now deceased. In 2018 she suffered a heart attack. Her son, who lives in the same village, stated that his mother was always heartbroken at the loss of her two children, often sinking into 'extreme sadness'. He feels she died because of it. He is one of four remaining children; her youngest son is still studying while the others are married. Once they returned to the village, he says only a part of their ancestral lands was returned to them by the security forces. They farm this portion of land. After struggling to rebuild their house, they are now in a better socio-economic state.

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Ethnicity: Muslim
Location: Mullaitivu
Format: Body map
Year: 2017



I was born in 1976. I'm from Mullaitivu. My father was a mason. There were ten females and three males in my family. We are a Tamil-speaking Muslim family that has traditionally practised indigenous medicine. We lived in a small cottage and I studied herbal medicine in my family garden. I was happy doing gardening. Economic hardships were a barrier to my education. I was displaced many times and this also affected my studies. From 1985 to 1986, I was internally displaced and saw many lose their lives. I once saw a person whose head had been cut off. From 1987 to 1989, I was displaced to Kalpitiya in Puttalam. In 1989, I returned to Mullaitivu. I finally completed my studies in 1990. We walked a distance of 4.4 kilometres to school. We lost our lands. From 1998 to 2013, I joined a community development organisation. I had three children, but my marriage was bitter. In 2002, there was a peace accord, but in Mullaitivu there was terrorism and threats. In 2004, when the tsunami struck, I worked as an assistant [in community development]. During this time, my grandmother died. I'm disabled. I lost one hand completely. I have an old scar from a wound, a rash and pain. I need a Sri Lanka where there is equality. My family should fare better. There should be economic development and better education for children. Women should have the opportunity to be self-employed. ■





Ethnicity: Tamil
Location: Mannar
Format: Audio interview
Year: 2015

I was born in Vidathaltivu in 1989. My mother worked in a hospital and my father was a mechanic. I studied up to my O-Levels. When I was studying for my A-Levels, during the LTTE troubles, they were recruiting 18-year-old youth into the Movement. To avoid being conscripted, I hid in the temple in my school uniform as there was a belief that they wouldn't take me if I was in school clothes. We hid there because it was the Bishop's demand that they should not enter a sacred place to snatch people. They would take the parents, lock up fathers and mothers, demanding their children be given up to be recruited. They caught me at home and forcefully made me join them. I was only 17 then. They took us and put us in training camps. We suffered without proper food. They trained us for three months and then sent us off to the battlefield. When we were with our parents, we had a carefree life, but here, we didn't get food on time or get medicines when we got wounded. We would be haunted by the memory of our parents. I was with the Movement for about two years. I studied medicine in the Movement. There was an urgent call for people to work under the medical team, so I was sent up to the front with two other girls. We got caught in a shell attack when we were walking close to the Puthukkudiyiruppu bus stand. I was standing under a Bodhi tree. I lost my leg on the spot. The tree was burned down. I fainted and didn't even realise that I had lost my leg. They took me to the hospital. While there, when they were fixing a leg for me, it was bombed by a Kafir aircraft. Then from there they took us to different places. They thought that I was dead and left me with some corpses. But then when they came to take the bodies, they found that I was groaning. After realising that I was alive, they took me back and treated me. I didn't think that I would come out alive from that. When I got injured, my parents came and asked them to release me, but they didn't hand me over. They didn't let us leave. Finally, a brother I know came and asked me whether I wasn't going to the 'other side' [army-controlled area]. I told him, 'I don't have my parents, how can I go? I don't have a leg. I can't walk [all the way].' He then carried me and left me at Omanthai and they [army] sent me to a rehabilitation camp. There I was down with typhoid for 21 days and I was admitted to a hospital. When I came back, my parents could only visit after three months as they were also in a camp, and could come and see me only if they were permitted to go out. Only after the resettlement process started, were they permitted to come and see us. That too was just once every 15 days. On 11 May 2009, when everyone entered the [army] controlled area, I too came and stayed in the rehabilitation camp. I sat for my A-Level exams there and got three passes. In that situation, we were mentally affected and were suffering without proper food. We came out after one month of being in the disabled section. Initially, there were so many issues. After losing my leg, I couldn't accept my disability. Later, in the camp, I met people without both legs and both hands. Looking at them I consoled myself. While in detention, we were not allowed to talk to people. Once when we were talking to someone, the army officer caught us and warned us not to talk. We didn't have

permission for that. Every month they would come and register our presence. They kept registering us till the government changed [2015]. After the change of government, till now, we haven't faced any issues. We go to places and do things like normal people. We got resettled in our own village. So far, the government hasn't helped me. No livelihood support or money was given for my disability. Some people have received livelihood support and loans. After coming here, a man showed an interest in me. I wasn't interested because I didn't have a leg and believed that marriage was not for me. But later my family and the village elders convinced me, saying that he would take care of me well. So I got married to him in 2012. I have one child. Now I work for a small fisheries organisation. Though I don't have a leg, I do all of my work on my own. I am able to live like a normal person. Because I got married, I received support from the Indian Housing Scheme. My husband is a friendly, easy-going man. We don't quarrel; he adjusted well to me. I usually finish all the housework in the morning before leaving to work. If I can't do it, he would cook and take care of the child. He is a fisherman. I don't like other people looking down on me because I am disabled. I can do everything. I am skilled. ■

In 2022: At first, they had difficulties in readjusting to life after being resettled, but through their own efforts, labour and strength, they were able to build their house, improving upon the one given by the Indian housing scheme. She feels that at first the government did not support them adequately although in the recent past, she feels that they have begun to do so. She has been receiving disability benefits for the past two years, and received fishing-related livelihood support in 2016 as well as a Samurdhi loan. She says that time passes as she stays busy with the children's education and caring for the family. But that doesn't mean that she has forgotten the terrible experiences of her past, which she is reminded of when she meets someone or talks to someone that triggers a memory, or goes somewhere that reminds her of it. At first, she says that she was down-hearted and thought that she might never escape her situation. But now, she is determined to overcome her difficulties and build a better life. She hopes that her life experience will set a good example to others. She hopes that there will be more opportunities for alternative skill-building, improvements in education and a renewed interest in good values, so that her children could live with self-respect.

I was born in Okkampitiya. My mother is from Kurunegala and my father is from Bemmulla. They had come to live here after their marriage. I am a Sinhalese Buddhist. I was 14 when my mother died. My husband used to work in a mine and in those days, he was a lodger at my parent's place. We fell in love and with the blessings of our parents, got married in 1987. I have three children. Two sons and one daughter. Since this a border-village [to the war zone], we lived in fear during the war. I remember the LTTE killed three people very close to our house. I saw it with my own eyes. It was raining that day. I saw two people sitting by the roadside, eating. The Tigers hacked them and another girl to death. The plates they were eating rice from were in pieces. The rice had become red with their blood. I was terrified and very sad. Another image that I can't forget is the bloody handprints of a woman on the walls of her house after she had been attacked. Her blood had become thick. I had to pick her clothes through a window with the aid of a stick to get her dressed to go to the hospital. We didn't even light a lamp in those days. We closed the doors early in the evening, and didn't open them for anything. My son joined the army when he turned 19 because of the financial problems the family was facing after their father's death. My son was serving in Uliyankulama, Kilinochchi, at the time of his death. That day, my daughter and I were alone in the house. The neighbours had received the news of his death and they came to our house. I was told that my son had been shot and he would be brought home. It was only later that I got to know that he was dead. Army officers helped a lot for the funeral of my son. Last year they visited us and gave us a clock. They occasionally visit us. My son's tomb is in the public cemetery. I wanted to build it on my own land, but my sister didn't let me do it. She thought that every time I saw the tomb, I would think of him and get depressed. I always remember my deceased son. When I do, I feel sad. But when I see my little grandson, I feel happy. My younger son joined the Commando Regiment in 2007. He left the army after his brother's death, and so doesn't receive a salary any more. He still says that if there is a war again, he will re-join the army. He likes it. He feels that after the war ended, ex-soldiers are not treated with dignity or status. Therefore, he prefers to live with the war. I am now 49 years old. I live in Galpeella village. I live in a two-roomed house. Myself, my son, daughter, daughter-in-law and grandson live in this house together. Like my father before me, I do farming for a living. The land is not a large one so I cultivate it on my own. This time, we are cultivating corn. I am grateful for my courage to survive as I have done, with the children. I receive the salary of my deceased son and this is a great strength to me. It is good that I can release the pressure in my mind by telling my story. ■



Ethnicity: Sinhalese
Location: Monaragala
Format: Tree of life
Year: 2012

In 2022: She is deceased. Her family stated that she never really got over the sadness of losing her son. She was chronically depressed, never displayed much zest for life and was often pensive. As her health suffered in her later years, she developed high blood pressure and high blood sugar.



Ethnicity: Tamil
Location: Vavuniya
Format: Photo-essay
Year: 2012

There is so much that we want to forget. I was pregnant when I fled my village. Sometimes, when we were being shelled, we had to step over people who were injured but still alive. This is something I can't forget. It keeps coming back. There are so many things that affect our minds. We need to deal with all of that. My husband was arrested. Now he's undergoing rehabilitation at a camp. He will be released in October 2013. It's difficult when we lose our husbands because we have to face certain challenges from society. I now live with my mother. I have two children who are eight and two years old. My mother and brother look after us. This is not something that's happened just to me. In every home people have experienced this. And so, we've finished with the fighting. It's pointless now. We need to live, not die. We've had a life full of pain. I would like it to be different for our children. I want to educate my children. In the past, we had very little interaction with Sinhala people but now that has changed. We think it's a good thing. We understand them better. ■



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Ethnicity: Sinhalese
Location: Kurunegala
Format: Photo-essay
Year: 2012

My son was four days shy of 20 when he died. When my son wanted to join the army I said, 'no'. But he was adamant. I remember how he hit the wall with his fists - he wanted to join so badly. He said he didn't have a proper job and needed one now that his father was dead. My husband didn't have a permanent job, being a gem miner. He also hadn't saved any money. We had some assets including a vehicle, but my husband's parents, in their anger that I wasn't giving them my children [after he died], took it all. When my son died, I lost my mind. I would spend almost all my time sitting by his grave. I mourn for him much more than I mourned for my husband. It's an unbearable pain that I feel when I think of him. I have come to live here because this house is my son's house. I got this house because of my son, my only son. I brought him up with so much love. I keep his picture garlanded like this because of the extent of my love for him. It was only when I came to this village [Ranavirugama] that I was able to come to terms with my loss: it was because I saw other people who had similar experiences and had all gone through so much. My three daughters are very strong women. My eldest daughter married from the army, but a mortar struck her husband and he is wounded. The other is married from Ratnapura. My youngest daughter is going through so much because she married a man who is not very good. That's why I am taking care of her children. She works in a garment factory. I use my son's salary to take care of these children. Even now, I do feel some anger towards the Tamil people. But there is a saying that goes like this: 'If we cut ourselves, it's the same blood we bleed.' So then, what's the point of hatred? ■

In 2022: She no longer lives in the village and her house is currently empty. She now lives elsewhere with her daughter and helps take care of her grandchildren. Her neighbours have no more information about her.





CHAPTER THREE

Searching for answers

For many women who are affected by war, there is no fixed point of return from the upheaval of conflict to the way life was before it. This chapter bears witness to women's search for answers while highlighting their strength and will to hold themselves and their families above the fray. These are stories of the search for truth and justice for missing loved ones and scattered families, for lost heritage, and for the land they left behind. These are memories of those who have been displaced many times over, even as they reclaim their lost identities by grounding themselves in their own life histories. Accompanying the narratives is an essay that traces women's continuing struggles for truth and justice in Sri Lanka and the need to rethink what a more nuanced and inclusive system of justice could look like.

Struggles from the periphery: Women in the space of truth and justice

Ambika Satkunanathan¹

The presence and absence of women

In Sri Lanka, wartime violations as well as other periods of violent conflict have impacted women to varying degrees, directly and indirectly.² The dominant narrative in post-war Sri Lanka often portrays conflict-affected women and their activism, especially those that search for answers or redress for such violations, as persons without agency with the primary focus on their sexuality, as misguided or misled terrorists who have to be “shown the right path”/ rescued, or as destitute victims of war.³ The “silence” or “invisibility” of women in these narratives, can usually be attributed to multiple factors that include state intimidation and harassment of those from conflict-affected areas who seek justice, as well as the stigma attached to certain kinds of violence, such as sexual violence.⁴ However, women are not always passive victims waiting for others to “recover” their stories or speak on their behalf. Some women also choose to be silent and not engage with initiatives that seek truth and justice for many reasons such as economic pressures, which force them to focus only on fulfilling the basic needs of their family.⁵

Those women that choose to seek answers, particularly about the plight of the disappeared, have often faced unimaginable challenges.⁶ In their struggle for truth and justice, they traverse long distances with no hope of finding the “whole” truth or obtaining the justice they seek. For instance, Sandhya Ekneligoda, the wife of disappeared political cartoonist Prageeth Ekneligoda,

has travelled a total of 411,220 kilometres in search for the truth about what happened to her husband and to attend court sessions.⁷ Inevitably, they have developed a nuanced understanding of “the truth” – truths they choose to share and truths they have to hide – in order to navigate their lives within both the private and public spheres. This has meant that women’s struggles for justice have often been focused on their families and communities rather than centred on their own experiences of violence. For instance, women in the conflict-affected areas have rarely spoken of sexual violence nor made it the focus of their campaigns, at least publicly. This is in contrast to human rights groups, including international actors, who have tended to show a particular interest in sexual violence.

There are also women whose loss is still in the shadows and rarely feature in the dominant narratives of women that seek justice for wartime violations. For example, those whose family members were forcibly recruited by the LTTE and thereafter went missing; those who the LTTE conscripted as children and whose plight is unknown; those who were part of other Tamil armed groups and were killed by the LTTE; those who were disappeared by the LTTE’s breakaway group – Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Puligal (TMVP) that functioned as a paramilitary force.⁸ With the military defeat of the LTTE and the death and/or enforced disappearance of their leadership, this category of women are unlikely to find out the fate of their family members. Justice may also be out of reach for those women who have been affected by the violence perpetrated by individuals such as Pillayan and Colonel Karuna Amman, leaders of the TMVP who aligned themselves with the ruling regime and continue to deny that they perpetrated rights-violations.⁹ They have not been held accountable for the violations they allegedly committed including attacks against civilians, the abduction and killing of many Tamil men, and sexual violence against women who were part of or affiliated to the LTTE’s Vanni faction after the North and East factions of the LTTE split in two in 2004.¹⁰

Reclaiming space by creating space

From the genesis of the armed conflict, women affected by violence and human rights violations mobilised in different ways to challenge both state and non-state perpetrators. Some mobilised as organisations. One such formation is Poorani, established in Jaffna in the 1980s.¹¹ Although at first, the members of Poorani focused solely on helping women affected by war and rape, they later addressed the broader needs of the community within which the centre was situated, because providing more services to the community would widen their reach and enable the mobilisation of more women to agitate for their rights. One such intervention was assisting women who had little or no education or personal documentation, and whose husbands were killed in the ethnic conflict, to claim compensation from the government. As such, they challenged both the state (in organising women to go to government departments to demand that they be provided compensation to which they were entitled) and the LTTE (for instance, by refusing to leave the LTTE office until women were provided passes to travel to the South).¹²

My research work of over a decade in the conflict-affected areas has illustrated that although women may not always see themselves as victims, they do use the dominant paradigm of victimhood to gain space to make their voices and stories heard, particularly to directly address those in positions of power and authority.¹³ They do this because the obstacles to obtaining justice seem insurmountable if they don’t make themselves visible by aligning themselves with the narratives that are given space in the mainstream media. The inherent danger in this approach is that when victimhood is used as a strategic tool, the state, and even civil society, will construct the notion of a “good victim”¹⁴ to which everyone would have to adhere. This creates a hierarchy of victims and delegitimises the experience of some, while validating the

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Ethnicity: Tamil
Location: Sammanthurai
Format: Photo-essay
Year: 2015

I was born in this same house I am living in now, in Sammanthurai. I had eight brothers. I married at the age of 16. I had eight children. In 1990, there was heavy gunfire all around us. We couldn't stay here, so we moved. There were checkpoints everywhere. My father, mother, and my children went on ahead. I was pregnant with my fourth child. We walked. At one point we got into a tractor and got off at Addalaichenai and walked again to my aunt's place in Akkaraipattu. I gave birth to the child there. From there we had to flee once more and we faced many difficulties [along the way]. My father died at the [IDP] camp. When we came back home, there was nothing left there. My house had been vandalised. [I believe] the Muslims did it with the help of the army. There was no house for us to live in. The government gave us 25,000 rupees and we fixed the roof with it. When they took my eldest son, he was 16. My husband was sick that day, so my son and I went to cut paddy. We have not seen him since. The army told us that they didn't take him. When we persisted [in our search], they hit my husband. Even if we get compensation, it is useless. The police asked us for records. My son had nothing. They told us to register [our complaint] and I did so. We got nothing out of it; there was no action taken. The only thing I want is for my son to come back alive. My other son had a motorbike accident and died after 13 days in the Intensive Care Unit. It's been five years since. My two younger brothers were captured and taken to Veeramunai and were burned to death. My husband died in 2004. But I always went ahead [in life] like a man. I had that kind of courage. I still have it. I can build a fence alone and I can collect hay alone. I used to pack 25 to 30 sacks of paddy alone. [But] our time is gone. Our children's future should be better than the hardships we have faced. ■



In 2022: She says that with a housing loan of 200,000 rupees from Samurdhi [government welfare scheme] as well as the money she earns by working in a cloth weaving factory and her son's income, they have built their house well. Their joint earnings provide some relief to pay off the housing loan as well as manage their daily expenses. However, her greatest challenge is to save enough money for dowries to marry off her two youngest daughters, with their only family-asset being the house they built together. Without a dowry and the possibility of a "good marriage", what might become of their future worries her.



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Ethnicity: Muslim
Location: Sammanthurai
Format: Letter
Year: 2016

Sammanthurai is my home town. Our family, made up of my father, mother and four sisters, is very poor. I don't have any brothers. My father was unwell and yet, he was the only one who looked after the family. I was in Grade 6 at the time. We were living in Hayar-Palliyadi, which was near Veeramunai. The war was raging and some of the farmers that would brave it to go to their paddy fields never returned; they were caught by the terrorists and shot and killed. My father also once got caught to the LTTE. Luckily, he returned home. We were scared to be home. In the 1990s, after the riots, we left our place and took refuge in schools and mosques along the way. After the war we went to see our house. What we saw shocked and saddened us: there was no house. Nothing was there. We didn't have any idea where to go, so we went to our relative's house and stayed there for a while. We were suffering without clothes to wear or food to eat. My father was seriously ill. So I went to Saudi Arabia [as a housemaid] at a young age to ease my family's burdens. But my employer didn't pay me. My family was suffering a lot. After two years I returned home. I managed to support my family with self-employment. I went abroad again and built a house for my sister and got her married. I was a housemaid for eight years before returning home. Two months after that, my father passed away. I am married now. One of my other sisters is also married. My mother also passed away. Now I'm looking after my younger sister. ■

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Ethnicity: Tamil
Location: Monaragala
Format: Photo-essay
Year: 2012

It is four years since my son disappeared [in 2008]. The war was between the LTTE and the government, but we couldn't protect our sons who were not part of it. When my son went missing it was as if I was living half a life. About 15 young men disappeared on this estate. All the parents got together to look for our sons. We went to the Red Cross, to the Human Rights Commission, and to the police. I went to Colombo several times. I was taken to the prison to see whether he was there, but he wasn't. The disappearances stopped the day the war ended. We have lived here for 25 years. My son worked at the rubber plantations. He would bring us money at the end of the week and buy my medicines. Now that he's gone, we are resigned to a future without our son and living from hand to mouth, making most of the little we have. Our daughter went to the Middle East and we haven't heard from her for a long time. Her husband also disappeared. So we look after their two children. We make about 500 rupees a day making spoons. I would like to tell those parents who did not lose their children that they must have done something good. We must have done something bad for this to happen to us. We are happy that the war ended but there is no ending to our sadness because our son disappeared. I would like to tell our leaders that if they had done what was right, this would never have happened. ■

In 2022: She passed away in 2019. She had searched for her son tirelessly, petitioning many government institutions, together with any organisation that offered to help her seek answers. Her daughter, who had gone abroad to work, did not send her any money to support her own children. The mother died the same week her daughter returned to Sri Lanka, but before they could finally see each other after many years of separation.



Ethnicity: Tamil
Location: Trincomalee
Format: Body map
Year: 2017



I was born in 1981. My mother was a housewife and my father was a labourer. I have one sister. I played with Tamil and Muslim friends. I was a very naughty child. On my body I wear earrings and a chain. The invisible scars that I carry with me are headaches, chest pain, piles and blisters. I studied from Grades 1 to 3, from 1986 to 1988. After that I was displaced till 1993 from Eachchantheevu – Upparu – Kandalady – Alankerny Vinayagar Maha Vidyalayam Camp – Trincomalee – Mullaitivu – Jaffna – and back to Eachchantheevu. From 1994 to 2000, which is from Grades 8 to 13, I went to school here. In 2000, I became a voluntary teacher. I was affected by the tsunami in 2004 and received humanitarian assistance. In 2006, I had my first child. I was displaced again to more than 20 places: Eachchantheevu – Sampur – Verugal – Vaharai – Trincomalee – Kumpirupiddi – Nilavelli – Vanni – Viswamadu – Vattapalai – Putthukudiyiruppu – Venavil – Kompavil – Theripuram – Vallipuram – Maththalan – Valaincharamadam – Pulmoddai – Omanthai – Vavuniya – Arunachala camp – Vavuniya – Trincomalee and only returned to Eachchantheevu in 2009. In April 2009, I went through the Vanni and then to Pulmoddai by ICRC ship. In 2009, my husband went missing. From 2009 to 2015, I dealt with so many inquiries by the CID. I still live with my two children but without my husband. ■

My parents are from Pottuvil and I was also born and brought up there. I got married to my uncle's son. It was arranged by my parents. He was from a village named Inspector Eaththam. I have four children, we educated all of them very well. In the 1990s, during the war, my husband was taken. The military had rounded up the area and arrested 20 people. My elder brother and my husband were taken from our house. They took them saying they were being taken to help with loading trucks with goods and will be released afterwards. None of them was released. Later we received a note informing us that they were dead. More than 200 people, along with my husband and brother, were killed at the police station. We were all in our elder sister's house. She was married to a Sinhalese, so we all stayed there [for safety]. The military came and our mother told them there was no one at home. They broke into the house and found all of us squatting in fear. It was the STF who took them away. But, when we went to the police station to make an entry, we were told to blame the LTTE for abducting them in the official entry we were there to register. But we didn't write that. How could we do that, it was not them that did this to us. Would Tamil people do that? It was the military who came and took them. They rounded up the place and even checked inside the wells with a stick to see whether anyone was hiding there. After my husband was taken, there was no man in the house. So out of fear, we left our homes and went to Komari. We stayed there for about two years. Later, the assistant Government Agent's office told us to return to our homes, so we returned. ■



Ethnicity: Tamil
Location: Pottuvil
Format: Audio interview
Year: 2016

In 2022: She said she receives a meagre income of 3,000 rupees per month as a Samurdhi benefit [government welfare scheme]. She says that other people from her village received much more. She says that some others received as much as 200,000 rupees to buy goats and do animal husbandry, which she has not been given [or not eligible to receive]. She has a plot of land where she does a little farming to make ends meet. However, she says her four sons are all married now and none of them takes care of her, which saddens her immensely.



Ethnicity: Sinhalese
Location: Kudawella
Format: Photo-essay
Year: 2015

In this area, oh, God...! Doors of houses had to be closed at six or seven in the evening. There was a lot of trouble. In an emergency we come out from the back of the house and not from the front. All our identity cards were also collected by them [JVP]. No boy was safe, as somehow, they were recruited [to the JVP]. The boys would talk to them, and even unwillingly, they would join up. At that time, in this area and from all the places around here, they captured young boys and conducted lectures on this and that. At that time, boys were dragged [away] by force. They were physically dragged! It was compulsory to go. If not, they would have been taken away at night. Such things happened. They [JVP] had guns at the time. During that period, if somebody talked against them, they would come at night, force open the doors, and take them away and kill them. Ask nothing...that was how it was. Several people were killed around here in that manner. One such person [from this village] had talked against them. They [JVP] came at night and knocked on the door. When the man opened the door, he was killed on the spot at his own doorstep. Two gunshots...yes. When taking that body to be buried, they had to carry it below the knees [a dishonour, as per JVP decree]. We could not carry it [higher]. Some of those people [JVP], covered their faces. They would go along this very road. Some people from this village also had links with them. It was very fierce in Kudawella and Kottegododa. But it was not that dangerous here. There were only two or three persons here, that had joined them. They [JVP] were in the forests. They were caught from time to time [by the army]. Not easily, as they were hiding here and there. Most of them were killed. Yes, the JVP cadres were killed. They were suppressed. The army did it by shooting and killing each one. There was no use in complaining [to the police] about the missing. The police were also not that interested [in searching for the missing] during that period. These memories will be there only until we live. The children have no interest in that. I think, the children nowadays do not care for what we have to say. It's not a lie; they don't listen. It is at such times, that incidents like these might happen. ■

In 2022: According to the community based organisation that has worked with her long-term, she is generally well but was unable to meet with us as her mental faculties had begun to deteriorate with old age.



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Ethnicity: Sinhalese
Location: Deniyaya
Format: Audio interview
Year: 2016

I was born in Viharahena, Matara. I was adopted. There were seven brothers and sisters. Out of them, only two are alive now. I grew up here in this house. I looked after the mother who raised me. She told the others not to discriminate against me. She said to them, 'I raised her like my own child, so all of you have to live affectionately.' That is why I live at the ancestral home. I heard stories later from others that my biological mother had wanted to leave me on the road so that a bus would run over me and kill me. My adoptive mother's friend had told her about me and brought me to this house. This was at an age when I was crawling. I am not sad about these memories because I grew up well here. One of my sons also lives in this home with his wife, son and daughter. During the JVP insurrection, although riots did not occur here, there were a few incidents. There were some JVP [affiliated] persons in the village. Some of the persons [attackers] were JVP cadres. They attacked the line rooms [on the adjacent tea estate] and destroyed some. The goats and the poultry were stolen. At that time, we couldn't refuse them anything. I remember, the Muthukuda Watta bus conductor. He was the first person to vote [in this area]. They [JVP] came in the evening and he was taken away, tied to that banyan tree and his throat was cut [as a warning because the JVP decreed that no one was allowed to vote]. We were not even born when they started to grow tea around here with the ancestors of the people that work at the estate now. They are long dead. The people who were here when we were young [the next generation] are also dead. It is their next generation that is here now. There are people belonging to three generations living in that estate. That means about 120 or 130 years. When we work in the tea estates, we all work there together [Sinhalese and Tamils]. We all live here together. All human beings are equal, no? But, when we go home in the evenings, that's when our lives are very different. We go to our homes and they go to theirs. But they do not have any right to their homes. They have to leave when they are asked to leave. These are private estates [not government-owned tea estates]. The new owner [of the estate] has asked the previous owner to file a case to evict these people from the land. They want to evacuate them and to construct a building of about two storeys or whatever here. They [Tamil families] go to the courts to appeal their cases too. There are about thirteen families here. They have no other place to live. How can they be driven away after living here for three generations? ■

At a very young age a boy was interested in me, but his mother said that he was too young to be married. My parents also got into an argument as my father was determined to marry me off to that boy, but my mother wanted to wait till I had reached puberty and wanted him to become a Christian. But he came with a bottle of poison, threatening to kill himself. The neighbours prevented him from drinking it. Then he started working. At the age of 15, they stopped me from school and got me married off at 16. At the age of 18, in August 1978, I gave birth to my son. When my son was about one-and-a-half years old, my husband got a driver's licence and worked as a lorry driver. The troubles started then. He was taken away and got beaten up in the camp [army], tied up with chains, saying he was supporting a certain politician and later released with a warning. He was asked to place his signature every month [at the police station]. He told them it wasn't possible since he has to travel far for work, but they insisted. He got scared and on 17 January 1991, went to Colombo for work as his elder sister was there. But since then, I never saw him. We checked in at his elder sister's place, but they said that he had left them saying he was going home. It is only then that they realised he was missing. We had thought he was there and they had thought he was here. We don't know what happened to him, whether the military had done something to him or not. We don't know. He just went and never came back. He loved us so much. He couldn't bear not seeing the children for even half a minute. He wouldn't even hit the children; not even with a small stick. He has never hit me. He would take us in his lorry to buy slippers and dresses. When he was here, I would wear a pottu [a sign of marriage on the forehead] and a flower in my hair. I even gave his photo to be published in the newspapers, but I don't know if they published it. During the ceasefire, many [who were missing] returned. What am I supposed to do? Take care of the children or go in search of him? I still live in hope that he is alive. When the commission came and I went to register and sign in Agarapathana, they scolded me asking if he could be alive after all these years. They asked me to get a death certificate immediately and so I got it done. Only God knows how much I suffered to raise these children. When there was no soap, I would wash clothes in just plain water. When there was no raw rice, I would pound the par-boiled rice and make porridge before I go to weed the paddy fields. I would build sand walls for about 200 or 300 rupees a day. I weave palmyra leaves to thatch the roofs of huts. If somebody asks me, then I would take care of patients in the hospital for a daily wage. This is how I educated my children and bore all the other expenses. I educated my daughter up to Grade 10. The youngest son didn't study; he doesn't know a single letter of the alphabet. If he [their father] was alive, would he have left the children uneducated? I educated them as best as I could. Now I am 56 years old. This is my life story. ■



Ethnicity: Tamil
Location: Pottuvil
Format: Audio interview
Year: 2016

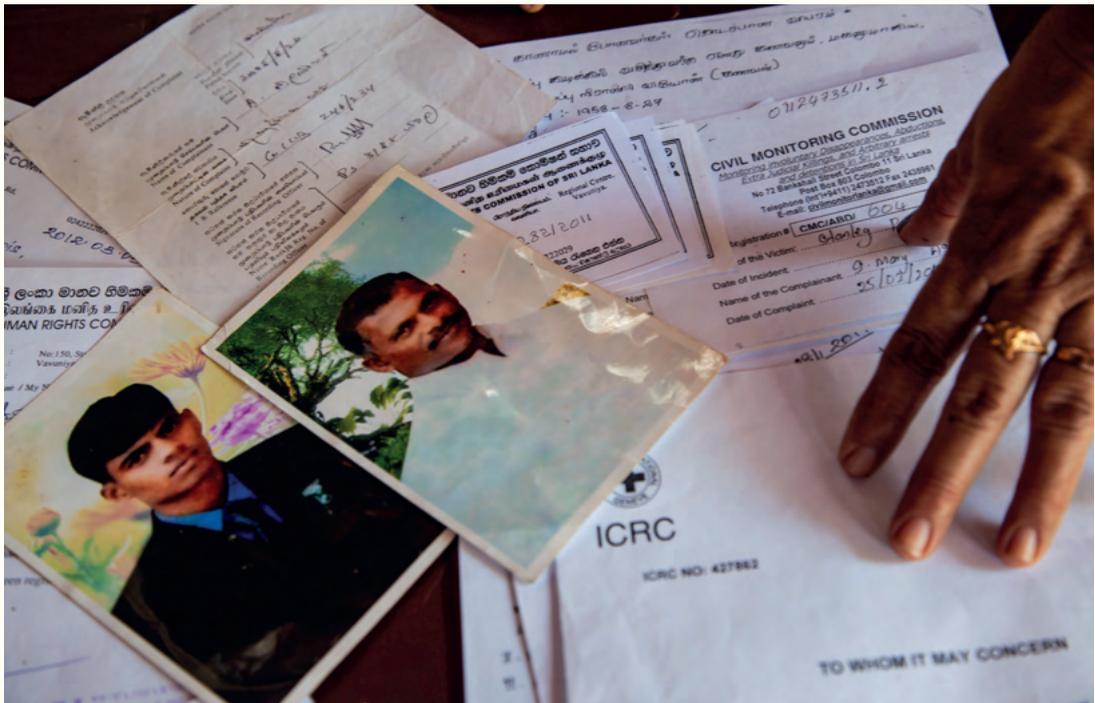






Ethnicity: Tamil
Location: Arippu
Format: Photo-essay
Year: 2015

My birthplace is Vankalai. I had three sisters and four brothers, and I am the second daughter. I studied up to my O-Levels. I married in 1982, and was happy. One of my younger brothers joined the EPRLF, while the other went to India by sea because he was running into problems with the LTTE and felt unsafe. The LTTE asked for my brothers and arrested my father when they couldn't be produced. My husband was on good terms with the LTTE, so we asked them to release our father. It was very hard, and eventually they all went to India. In 1988, a few armed men came into our house when there were no males present, and they asked us to remove all the gold we wore and took it, even the small children's earrings. Even though I lost everything, I didn't cry and I thanked God that there were no lives lost. During the 1990s, they bombed us, so we moved to the other side of the river. We made tents, dug bunkers, and stayed there. The LTTE told us to run away and as we couldn't stay there [anymore], we started walking. They [LTTE] put our children and belongings in a bullock cart and took us to Nanattan. We walked from there to Murungan and thereafter to Madhu. When we came back in 1994, there was nothing left. Even then we were not safe. Men in helicopters shot at us. They [LTTE] came again and chased us, telling us to leave as they were going to fight. We didn't go far. We stayed again beyond the river in the jungle for one month. My husband was harassed by the army as well as the LTTE. Nobody joined the LTTE from our family. But we gave them food and when they asked for the motorcycle and tractor, we had to give it to them. The army looked at us like culprits. We were frightened. The LTTE was like a government here; they made us suffer. The two are the same. They didn't give us anything. The LTTE was abducting people from homes. So we took one of our sons to Negombo and left him at Don Bosco's for his safety. A foreigner took a liking to him and asked if he could take him away. But when we all went to Colombo to get him a visa, my son and his father were kidnapped in a white van. They came to the house where we were staying and told us that they were from the Pettah Police Station. There were eight of them. Two were in uniform. When the home-owner and the foreigner went to the Pettah Police Station to inquire after this, they were told that they didn't take anyone. So they made an entry at the Kotahena Police Station. Even the ICRC gave us certificates saying that they searched everywhere. The Government said that they will search for them. But not all of them are dead. Some are. Some were tortured. Some were burned in buses. They are the government and we are the minority. We want our sons back alive. We have lost too much. How many years have we suffered like this? More than ten years... and now, I am not afraid of anything. The government has done wrong and they have to answer [for it]. For there to be peace, the government should be truthful. A new government has come [the "good governance" government elected in 2015]. But land issues and missing persons issues persist. Building roads and houses mean nothing to us – we are used to living in bushes. It's our relatives that we want back. If they can't give us solutions, then these cases should be taken to the UN. I shared this story on TV too, and I was present at every subsequent protest, including a hunger-strike. I go on with life in the hope that they are still alive. ■



In 2022: She is deceased and there is no more information about her.



WELCOME



CHAPTER FOUR

Looking to the future

Violent conflicts destabilise and disrupt communities. Yet, conflicts are not inherently problematic: they can be catalysts for positive change in a country by highlighting the need to defend and promote the dignity and rights of all citizens. The narratives in this chapter highlight some of the challenges that women, particularly those affected by war and violence, face in its aftermath. These are narratives of single motherhood and female-headed households; of disrupted education for a generation of women; and of how access to land and resources, economic development, health, feeling of wellbeing, and security are coloured by ethnicity, socio-economic status, and political freedoms or the lack thereof. The stories are accompanied by an essay that highlights the importance of women-centred policy-making for a just peace, by tracing the structural barriers that women face to achieve full participation in politics, governance, and democracy, in peacetime as in war.

A “peace” of our own? Democracy, governance, and women as political citizens and agents of change

Ramla Wahab-Salman¹

A “just” peace, particularly one that addresses some of the root causes of marginalisation and structural impediments to the full participation of women in democratic processes, governance structures, and socio-economic arenas, requires thoughtful reconsideration of how to increase women’s access to these spaces in a meaningful way, especially in a post-war context. When women’s voices are left out of the processes of decision-making in politics, governance, and peacebuilding, they also disappear from consideration and contention in policies that determine self-actualisation and human security for women. The near absence of women within the arenas of “real” power, leaves out, not just the specific socio-economic issues women face, but also the specific concerns or challenges of women who have experienced violence and war that restrict their personal security. For instance, nearly 25% of all households in Sri Lanka were women-headed households by the end of the war in 2009.² The economic and social challenges faced by women-headed households are unique in the aftermath of war: the struggle goes beyond access to and ownership of arable land alone (even after the women are resettled or have received land). Finding ways to hire labour/support to farm the land is crucial to women’s economic and socio-political independence which becomes difficult for women living alone.³ Women are vulnerable to sexual bribery and harassment when interacting with male service providers or government officials. This vulnerability may extend to physical, psychological, and sexual violence in some cases.⁴ Women-headed households are also particularly

vulnerable to economic shocks (such as the impact of Covid-19 in more recent years)⁵ and are susceptible to micro-finance loan scams that entrap women in cycles of debt.⁶

Sri Lanka accounts for some of the lowest numbers of women in governance structures among South Asian countries.⁷ This is further exacerbated when ethnicity and socio-economic status are factored into how and when women could realistically have access to enter politics and hold political office.⁸ A historical thread can be drawn through the wide and varied set of challenges women face in entering the field of active politics, even up to the present. Especially in times of peace, it is a key measure of a political system that all its citizens are enfranchised and able to vote in representatives that reflect their particular socio-political needs.⁹ As of 2021, many of the legal frameworks for women's full political participation are in place irrespective of class, caste, or religion. However, as this essay will explore, despite Sri Lanka's early success with universal franchise in 1931, systemic and structural issues – such as a woman's presumed subordination within the family unit, an unsupportive socio-religious community, unequal men-women relations, and a lack of gender sensitivity in professional political spaces – still exist. In addition, financial, societal, religious, and cultural limitations are among the challenges women face in pursuing a career in public office, government, and full democratic participation in post-war Sri Lanka.¹⁰

On the wings of patriarchy: A brief history of women entering the field of politics

Agnes De Silva, a reformer of Burgher descent and the secretary of the Women's Franchise Union of Ceylon, contested the first election under universal franchise in June 1931. She did not win.¹¹ In 1932, Naysum Saravanamuttu, a Tamil doctor, was elected to a Colombo constituency and Lady Adeline Molamure, a Sinhalese woman from an aristocratic political family won the Ruwanwella seat. They became the first women legislators of Ceylon. Ayesha Rauf, the founding Principal of Muslim Ladies' College, was the first Muslim woman elected to the Colombo Municipal Council in 1949 and went on to become the Deputy Mayor in 1952.¹² The Women's Suffrage Movement in Ceylon has a long history that culminated in these early victories for "women in governance",¹³ and paved the path that led many bourgeois women to come out of their homes and into various professions, including social work and politics. However, some nationalist reformers of the period, bemoaned what they believed to be the negative influence of education, interfering with the traditional role of women as wives and mothers.¹⁴ This echoes the undercurrents, sometimes overtly expressed, of today's male-dominated political, technocratic, and economic spaces where policies and practices often accommodate the male ego at the cost of women of similar or higher qualification. The removal of the first female Deputy Inspector General of Police, just six months after her appointment, is a striking example of such a perceived slight to the collective male ego.¹⁵

Sirimavo Bandaranaike brought the world's gaze on Ceylon, becoming the world's first woman prime minister, following her husband's assassination. Her daughter, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, followed her parents' political legacy, taking up the position of Sri Lanka's first woman executive president in 1994. She famously campaigned for a liberal peace in the war-torn island through her "battle for peace" slogan against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).¹⁶ Ferial Ashraff made history as the first Muslim woman to be a cabinet minister after a historic voter turnout in the Ampara district in the 2000 general election.¹⁷ She became only the second Muslim woman to be elected to Sri Lanka's parliament. From the North, the late Rasamanohari Pulendran held a deputy ministerial position and represented Hindu women's interests in parliament.¹⁸ These stories of individuals, in positions of inimitable power that could change

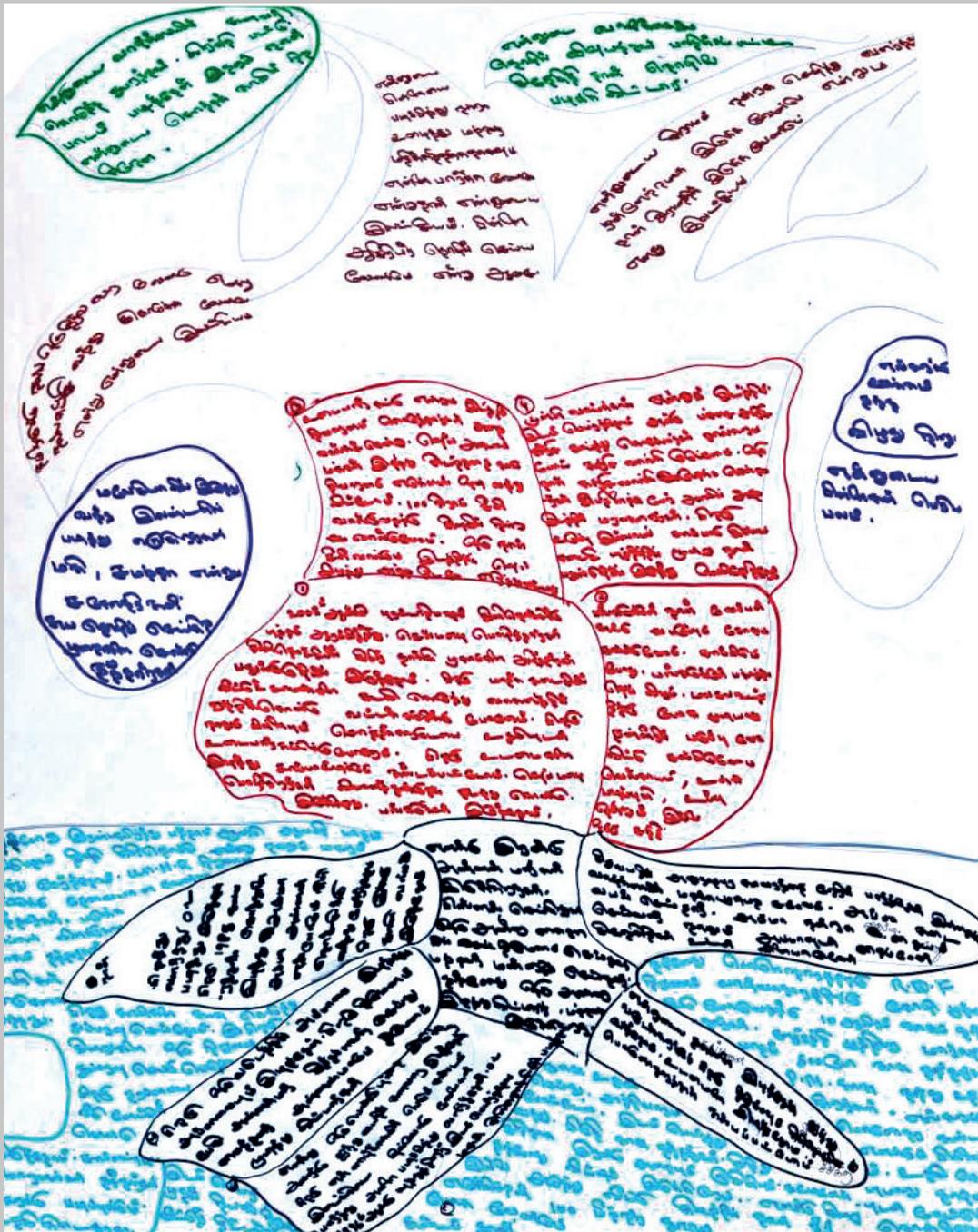
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Ethnicity: Tamil
Location: Jaffna
Format: Audio interview
Year: 2021

Even during the war, we lived happily with our parents. But, as the war raged, our lives got difficult, and we couldn't even get food. At that time everyone over 18 had to join the Movement [LTTE]. That's why my parents got me married. My husband was already in the Movement. When he asked to marry me, my parents hoped that I would live in peace. But he was under constant pressure because he was working for the Movement. I don't know why, maybe he was depressed... the beatings got worse with time. He nearly killed me once. When he came back after months away he used to suspect [my faithfulness]. Then he would beat me. He struck me with an axe. That's how I lost the use of my arm. Even if he brought nothing home, I bore [the burden of] it somehow. Usually, when he goes on the Movement's work, he returns after 1 to 3 months. One day, he left and never returned. I tried to find out more. They said he had died. That caused me a lot of pain. I didn't have happiness with him and life was hard. But he was still my husband. In a way, I was also happy to be without him. But I worried about how to tell the children. After that we went to the Vavuniya camp. That's where I befriended a woman [that helped me]. Knowing that I had two children to raise without any money, she made me a proposition and said, 'You can earn enough to raise the children.' The first time I did [sex work] I was terrified. I had never done anything like this while married. Yet there was no other way to survive. Thinking of my children, I went for it. We didn't stop this work even during the war. I have gone with many men, even with the police and the army. I was so frightened of them. They are very rough. It is scary to be with them. They don't treat us gently. Because they are away from their wives, they are sexually deprived. So they are abusive. They torture us. Now we live about 15-20 kilometres from Jaffna. The children understand a bit more so I can't do this a lot. It's tricky. I don't directly "deal" [negotiate with a customer] on the phone. That's because my children also use it. My friend sends clients to me. She sets them up for me secretly. That's how I get "deals". I don't have many clients from Jaffna. I go away to do sex work. I lie to my children that I am going for work as a labourer. I thought I could eat well and raise my children. But till now, I haven't made that much. I still have a lot of problems. But, what can I do? ■

When you say you are the wife of a war hero, there is great acceptance, especially by the government. After I finished my education, I was interviewed for a job. But I didn't go for it because I met my husband and got married instead in 1992. In 1994, I had my son. In 1997, my husband died in the war. After he died, what really affected me was "society". To be honest, living alone, away from my family home and village, is difficult. For six or seven years after he died, what really affected me was the way society treats you – as a woman, as a mother, and as a widow. It's only after he died that I realised what society was. It's not easy to go somewhere alone. If people find out you're a widow, they will try to take advantage of you or harass you. If you're living with family, they know who you are; they know your friends and who comes to visit. When you live alone, however, everyone in the community is inquisitive about who is visiting, or why they are there. Then they gossip. When you go somewhere to ask someone for help, and they know that you have no husband, then they have ulterior motives for helping, and expect something in return for the favour they are doing you. Over the 16 years since my husband has been dead, all of the challenges that I have faced from society has moulded me into a strong woman, immune to all of it and able to overcome anything. I don't expect praise from anyone. I run a small spice-packaging business. I want to give my son a good education and bring him to a respectable position in life. I want to live my life with courage – to never suffer any dishonour, to protect my husband's good name, to live well with my neighbours, to not just depend on my husband's salary, but to grow my own business and live well. ■



Ethnicity: Sinhalese
Location: Kurunegala
Format: Video interview
Year: 2012

In 2022: She still lives in the same house with her son. While working on her business, she is learning to make batik prints. She has been volunteering with a women's development organisation and feels that it has made her stronger and has been able to help younger women through adversity. She finds companionship and camaraderie through this work; she enjoys going away on trips with the women that work with her; she loves to laugh, dance, and sing when she goes away with them. Despite the fulfilment she finds in this work and in having raised her son without the support of a husband, she is open about the fact that living alone is difficult. She wishes she could find love: a companion she could 'talk through the night with about [her] joys, sorrows, and hopes'. But she feels the society she lives in, dooms wives of deceased war heroes to a life alone as "mother" and "wife" but nothing more.



Ethnicity: Tamil
Location: Vavuniya
Format: Photo-essay
Year: 2012

We left our village because of the war. After that, we were in the camps and finally ended up here. I didn't really want to go back. When I think about my village, I feel a lot of fear. We got this plot of land from a local NGO. It's still difficult being here, but I still feel better here than I felt in my own village. My son has done his O-Levels but he wants to find a job because he wants to make sure that his sisters continue to study. My husband too is not entirely well; he has a piece of shrapnel embedded in his body. My husband is a labourer. When the war ended, I was happy. I feel more secure and there is a sense of peace now. It is important that we coexist. I pray that there will never be another war. I would like to tell the president to let there be peace all the time and to please make it possible for our children to have a good education. I would also like to tell him that there are many children without parents who need to be looked after. I have five children myself. I work in a nursery school. There are many children who come to the school whose parents have died. Some of the parents have gone abroad. So we have to act like parents to those children. ■

In 2022: Her daughter has finished her studies and is now giving extra lessons to A-Level students. Her son got married, has a job, and is living happily. Her other children are still studying. She herself is continuing to further her own teaching career, having completed a diploma for early childhood education and some courses with the National Apprentice and Industrial Training Authority (NAITA). She says that she is happy with her own efforts, and is grateful to her husband who supports her continuing education. She said that her economic situation is much better now, and that she has no further problems by 'God's grace'. She is glad that she shared her story and hopes that young people, especially students, will see it and understand what hardship she has had to overcome to achieve what she has.





Ethnicity: Tamil
Location: Mullaitivu
Format: Video interview
Year: 2012

I was displaced to Mullaitivu in 1984. I was seven then. I eloped when I was eighteen to Nirayapitti, where I had four children. My only daughter got hit by shrapnel in the last stages of the war. Even today, she is in constant pain. My children are still afraid. Even now, when they see fire, they are terrified. I can see the impact of the war on them. The scars are still fresh. It's not just my family, every family has suffered this type of pain. During the war, we didn't step out of the bunker because of Kafir airstrikes or shell attacks. There was constant shelling. It could have been the army; it could have been the LTTE. We don't know for sure which one it was. But ultimately, they make war and the innocent suffer. I didn't take any of my children's important documents with me because I didn't think that we would survive this war. Now we are resettled, I notice that so many have similar problems. One of the biggest issues is the "land problem". Before 1984, even if there were five siblings, we'd all live happily on one acre. After the war [and years of displacement], once we are resettled on our own land, without my parents' knowledge [of landmarks] or documents, we can't trace the original borders. Our family owned paddy land in Munthiriya Kulam and Idayakaruthan, which are a bit further from this village. But we can't access it for farming. Sinhalese people who have been settled there now farm our land. We want our land back, we are farmers and this is our livelihood. We have no other means of survival. I hope that we will be able to earn a living and live peacefully one day. We used to see soldiers and we used to think they were enemies. But now as we interact with different communities, we know that Sinhalese people are also people like us. But we need our rights. We cannot give up our basic rights. ■

In 2022: She says that her children live well. Sadly, her husband died in 2021. She says that she still has the old deed to their lost paddy land, and has submitted papers to reclaim it, but has not been successful. She says all the relevant authorities know about the land issues in the area, but have not provided a solution to the people. While there is talk of receiving alternative land, they have yet to be given any. The plots of land that they have received are too small for cultivation, and was not traditionally used for farming, as they are too close to the village. There is destruction by wild elephants, a lack of natural fertilizer, a lack of pesticide and so the crop on the land they've already received is diseased or failing. However, she feels that in the last 12 years there has also been a lot of development in the village, and they have personally built a better life, including her well-built family house, because of self-employment opportunities. Yet, she says the scars of the war remain: she grieves for her lost relatives and carries anger in her heart for the pain they have suffered. She is the president of a women's association working on issues of cultivation, land, and women's issues. While she believes that sharing her story for the purpose of educating others is useful, she feels that there are still risks and challenges to voicing such concerns or protesting publicly.



Ethnicity: Tamil
Location: Kilinochchi
Format: Body map
Year: 2017



I was born in 1989. I am the third child in my family. I still live in the [same] village. I like dogs. My father and mother worked on a farm. I went to school happily. During school I experienced much fear and many challenges; I lost my mother due to the war and I was displaced during my A-Levels. This lost education during displacement is my grievance. After resettlement [our] economic burdens worsened. I sat for my A-Level exams again and passed them. I became a primary school teacher in 2013. From 2014 to date, I work as a voluntary teacher. From 2014, I had a romance which ended in 2017. I hope that my future house is filled with happiness. [I believe] Sri Lanka needs laws to ensure that all three ethnicities living in the country have freedom, peace, and justice. ■

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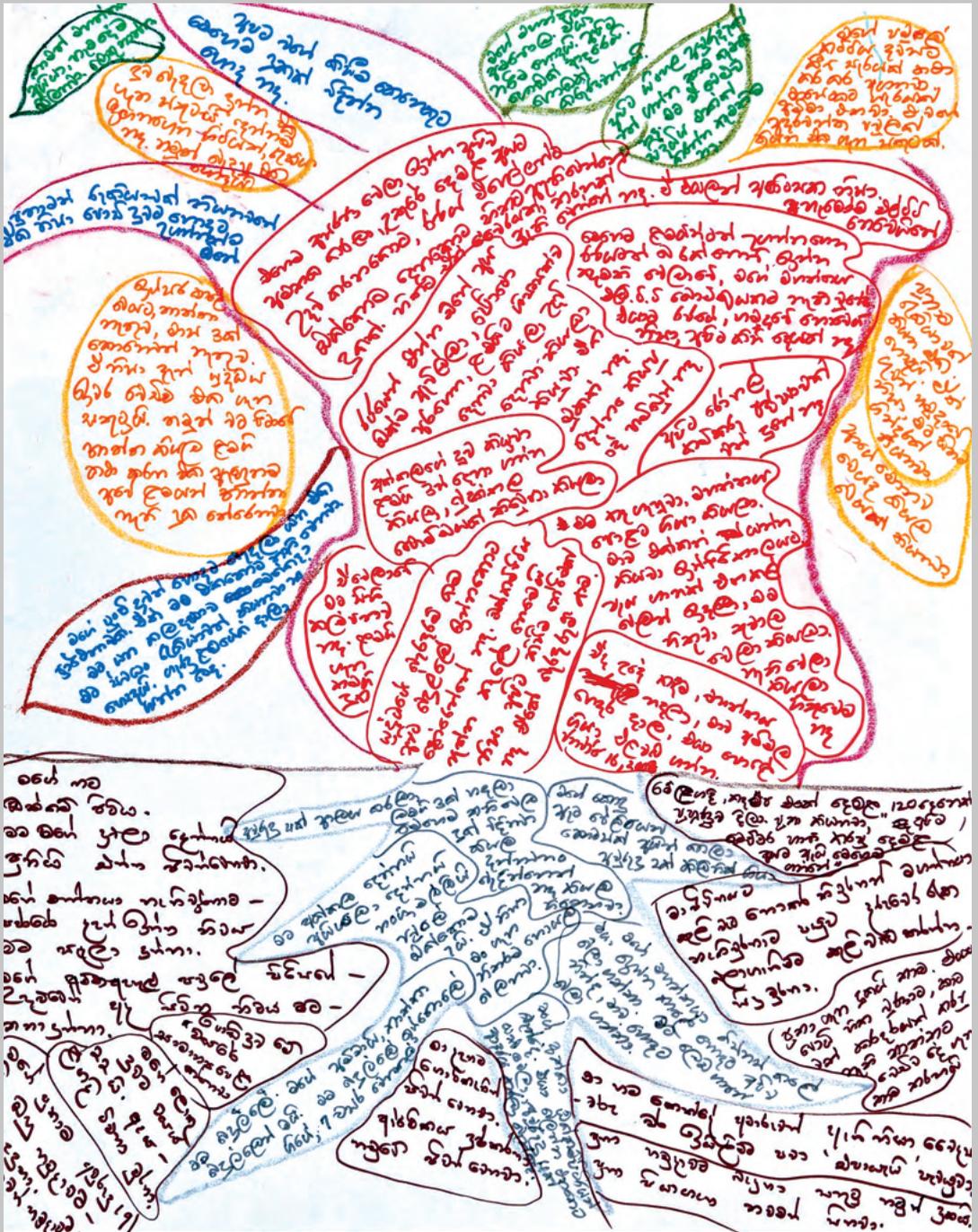
we were able to come to this side [army-controlled area] without any harm to my children or husband. When we returned, the army was occupying my house. They had taken over the land by the sea and put up camps there. After the Indian Housing Scheme was introduced, they built us this house. Back then, when we were under the Movement [LTTE], all our earnings went to pay their taxes. And now, we are stuck with debt issues. But at least now, there is no trouble [war] and we can have a peaceful sleep. It was not like that before: sometimes a Kafir plane would bomb the seashore while we were eating and we would leave the plate and run, to find that the food was eaten by a dog or a cat when we got back. Or we would run away without locking the drawers and people would take any money [that was there]. Our legs were always wounded by all the running we did, reacting even to the slightest sound. Now, my eldest daughter is educated, married and is a teacher. The second just did her A-Levels and is waiting for a job but isn't married; I got my third daughter married off last month. ■

In 2022: She is now 60 years old and her husband is 63. The house they live in was given to them in 2016 under a livelihood project. They gave the house as dowry to their daughter when she got married. Her husband is disabled, but he maintains the elder son's land and they live off that income which she says is "a normal life". She tried to hire some help for a little shop she started, but without enough money to do so, the shop failed. One of her children has a government job, which the child achieved through her own hard work. One daughter is not married as none of the proposals of marriage has worked out yet. She believes that giving her last child in marriage will bring her peace of mind. She lives with her while her husband lives with the married daughter. Their children provide them with rice from their paddy lands. They rear and sell broiler chicken and eggs. She feels that even if they have rice gruel to eat, because there is no more war, and because they are living under one government, they are able to live peacefully.



Ethnicity: Sinhalese
Location: Okkampitiya
Format: Tree of life
Year: 2012

I am from Badulla. There are seven children altogether in the family – two elder sisters, two elder brothers, one younger sister and one younger brother. I live in Okkampitiya with my two daughters and son. My elder daughter is 22 years old. She got married recently. My son is 19. He joined the air force. One of my sisters was married off in Okkampitiya. I met my husband when I visited her. We were in love for four years before we got married. My husband was a businessman. He was a kind-hearted man. He loved us so much. After having a love affair for four years, and bringing three children into the world, today I live alone. If I knew that this would be my fate, I would never have gotten married. The day was 16 January 2008. Leaving me at my parent's place, my husband went to the market to buy vegetables. Living in Badulla, we never knew about the horrors of war. Then one day, my sister's daughter said that there was a bomb explosion in Buttala town. I lost consciousness at that moment. My worry was about my children. I wailed because my husband went to the market [in Buttala]. I asked them to take me to the hospital. I thought that he had only been injured. I never thought that he had died. When he was alive, he looked after me very well. But after the death of my husband, I had to work for a daily wage doing farming. I live amidst financial problems. After my husband's death, my mother and other family members built this house for me. Government representatives came, took photos of the children, promised a hundred things including scholarships for the children's education and left. But we received nothing. My husband's life was destroyed by an LTTE attack. But my husband was not in the army so we didn't receive any compensation. When the government forgets us – who live so desperately, living on our own, raising our children [like this] – and do everything for the Tamils in the North, we feel so sad. We are not angry with them [the Tamil people]. They are also innocent. Every Tamil is not a terrorist. But my son is still very angry about what happened to his innocent father. Recently, about 120 Tamil people were given training [possibly livelihood support or rehabilitation] at the [army] camp. My son said, 'Why are these people who did so much harm to us, treated very well like this?' It is great that the war is over. But when I see other children with their fathers, I feel sad. I wish my children had their father with them. My family is my strength. They call me several times a day to ask me how I am. Once a month, my mother comes to see me. I am fortunate to have such a loving family. My husband's elder brother also still looks after us. ■



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Ethnicity: Sinhalese
Location: Kurunegala
Format: Tree of life
Year: 2012

I am from Colombo. My husband is from Gampola. When he was in the army, we met in Colombo and later got married in 1995 with the blessings of our parents. He was disabled in a mine bomb explosion in Jaffna in 1991. He was disabled when I met him. For two or three years after the marriage, we only met on the weekends. I was not much worried as he was not in the “front” [frontlines of the war]. I am a mother of three children. My daughter is 18 years old now and has a job. My two sons are still going to school. We don’t have financial problems at home. We live without being indebted to anyone. Our economic situation improved after my husband’s return from Haiti where he was a UN peacekeeper. My husband still works in the camp. He comes home every evening. Since my husband is not at home all the time, it is me who participates in community work in the village. But it is so difficult to live in the village. There are a lot of retired disabled army soldiers in the neighbourhood. They can’t work because they are disabled. They get together, drink, and get boisterous. These issues persist, because this is an artificially created village [disabled ex-soldiers and families are given houses in “Ranaviru” war-hero rehabilitation villages]. People who come from various places live in this village. Even after 15 years, this has not yet become a “collective” community. Females face special problems. People always make up stories [gossip]. People try to spoil the unity between husband and wife by telling false stories about the wife to the husband. My husband is the most important person in my life. He is very good. He trusts me. Therefore, I can participate in anything confidently. He is a strength to me. I also appreciate my own courage. In fact, I am a strength to myself. I am not scared of anybody. I will not give up. If somebody hits me, I will hit back. I run a small grocery store. I started this business after taking a bank loan, so we have that loan to settle. But I am not worried. I live like a man. ■

In 2022: She says that her family’s economic situation is good. Her house has been built well and her family has a van and a three-wheeler. She feels that although it hasn’t been easy, her success is due to her family being united and her own determination. She feels that the “village” is still not a cohesive unit like a village that one is born into, where one is linked to the land and its people for generations. She likes going on trips with her family, playing sports with the women and children with whom she associates, and watching teledramas. She wants to make her son’s upcoming wedding a “grand affair”. Together with her husband, she hopes to continue to improve her house, buy a bigger car, and support her children achieve their own successes. With pride, she says that she is still, and always will be, fearless.









Ethnicity: Muslim
Location: Samanthurai
Format: Letter
Year: 2016

There are four girls including me and two boys in my family. My father wanted me to study well. He worked so hard to give us an education. He was a farmer. What my father earned was not enough to run the family. We spent as little as possible on food to survive. The expenses for education and meals were too much. My father passed away. God gave us misery after misery. My main aim was to finish my studies and start a small industry and reduce the burden of my family. When I was studying in Grade 7, I went to the fields and did odd jobs. The money I got, I spent on my studies. The balance money I gave to my mother. I borrowed books from others and studied. My sisters also went to the fields for work. I was the outgoing person in the family, and moved with people freely. My father told me often, had I been born a boy, all this hardship would have gone away. I completed my studies and became a pre-school teacher in 1991. I taught children from three to five years old. I went from house to house and took all the children who didn't come to school and gave them free classes. All the staff in the school contributed 300 rupees each and gave me 1,800 rupees per month. I trained students for cultural programmes. One day, the principal called me and asked me to fill an application form to become a welfare officer. I applied and went for the interview. I was selected and got my appointment in 1994. I worked as a welfare officer for one-and-a-half years. I heard a rumour that this job was limited to Ampara town and was going to be stopped in the area. So I applied to become a Samurdhi [rural development] officer and got the appointment at the District Secretariat. But suddenly, the chairman at that time, told them not to give me the letter of appointment because my brother had worked for the United National Party [rival party to the chairman's party]. I was so shocked and I didn't know what to do. I told them that my brother will get married soon and move away. I asked them to give me the appointment letter. They refused. I went home and cried a lot. I believed in myself and taught myself not to trust anyone. So I went back to a school and taught there and it's been 12 years. Now there are 75 students and four teachers here. I work as the principal of the school now. It is all God's grace. ■

In 2022: She is happier now that her daughter, who is studying in Grade 9, is able to move freely with other children of different ethnicities. Her daughter passed her Grade 5 scholarship exam [a standardised all-island assessment that offers a scholarship to a better school with more facilities] by getting the highest marks in her school. Her only expectation is that she is able to educate her child so that she will grow up not only to get a good job but one that can help her community. She reminisced fondly about the exchange visits organised by the CMP project [where people from other ethnic communities from other districts got a chance to stay in her home with her, and she subsequently visited]. She says she keeps in touch with them, and they inquired about the family's health during the Covid-19 crisis, which makes her very happy. She says that if at least half the youth that read her life story understood what happened in the past, she would consider sharing it, a success.

This is a preview. The total pages displayed will be limited.





Ethnicity: Sinhalese
Location: Monaragala
Format: Photo-essay
Year: 2012

People are innocent and poor in my village. Poverty is like their shadow. They mostly cultivate the land, and they mine for gems. In the late 1980s I experienced the terror of the JVP insurrection. We couldn't speak our minds; we could only speak about the good things done by the JVP and never the atrocities, because we were constantly watched and followed. They would question us all the time, often at gunpoint. We were terrorised. I also remember "Black July" in 1983. There was so much turmoil and tension. There was suspicion and mistrust among the Sinhalese and the Tamils. I know that there were Tamil people that simply left their shops and ran away when the killings started. In 1991, with the LTTE problems, people were asked not to go to the jungle. This had a harsh impact on people who did gem mining. And then people only cultivated one season with rainwater so they experienced very difficult times. I am the only girl in a family of six children. One day, we were working in the field when I heard a rumour that the LTTE was attacking the Niyadella village. When I got home, I heard that my aiyya [elder brother] had gone there to harvest paddy. I lit an oil lamp to pray for his safety. But I forgot all my gathas [Buddhist prayer chants]. At around 1 a.m. my father shouted, 'Aiyya came, aiyya came'. I woke up to find that it was just a dream, and he was already dead by that time. Twenty-three people, including women and children, had been killed by the LTTE that day. This happened in April 1991. When I feel angry about the LTTE, I start thinking about why it was formed. I recognise that the LTTE was fighting to gain rights for the Tamil people. No one was willing to hand them their rights on a platter. But I wish they had fought their war without hurting innocent people. Neither my mother nor my father has the slightest hatred towards the Tamil people. They are clear that the Tamil people are not to blame for my brother's death. This country belongs to all communities. We need to build that sense of shared ownership. For this, we need to dispel the suspicion and mistrust that's grown between us. We must give people their right to live. They should also have their rights to their language, to their land, to education, and to work. That's the only way we can have a secure and happy future for us all. ■



In 2022: She still believes that building a “Sri Lankan identity” is necessary to prevent violent conflict. She has one son, whom she wants to raise to love humanity and contribute towards peace. She continues to do social work with a women’s organisation. While she works with women on socio-economic development and well-being, she says she has noticed that people in her community are susceptible to outside influences, including “fake news” that disturb their peace. She says that the women in the communities she works with do not want their daughters to suffer as they did – they wish for economic development, education, employment and the ability to save some money to provide dowries for their daughters, so that their daughters can begin their lives with a sense of stability. She says she feels the fatigue of long-term social work, especially against deteriorating socio-economic stability, in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic.



Acknowledgements



V with her daughters, Vavuniya, 2022

For many women who experience personal loss in violent conflict, preserving memory as a “public good” is secondary to greater and more immediate needs – social, economic, political and psychological – that they must struggle to secure. Their courage in the face of insurmountable adversity is true heroism. Even though we could offer them no support towards their immediate needs, we are grateful and honoured that so many extraordinary Sri Lankan women still wanted to archive their life histories, often in stark detail, and share them with others.

The Herstories Project would not have been possible without the late, great Shanthi Sachithanandam, whose indefatigable spirit and ability to stand up to anyone, anywhere, made her a force to be reckoned with. Under Shanthi’s guidance, the Viluthu Centre for Human Resource Development was instrumental in implementing the project, together with Zahira Ismail and the late Satgunarajah Sinniah. Working with grassroots organisations to archive women’s histories ensured that a community-based organisation, trusted and working long-term with the women on their more immediate socio-economic needs, was always present and accessible if the women needed to withdraw their stories from the archive. The contribution of the following organisations and their dedication to always do right by their communities is gratefully acknowledged: Federation Institution for Rural Management (FIRM) and Women’s Development Centre (WDC) in Vavuniya, Praja Sampath Surakeeme Madyasthanaya in Monaragala, and Deva Sarana Centre (DSC) in Kurunegala. The project was supported by the Commonwealth Foundation and the Prince Claus Fund.

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The body maps from *The Body Remembers* project are reproduced here with the kind permission of the Institute of Social Development in Kandy, Periyasamy Muthulingam, Suresh Karthigainathan, and Shirley Gunn.

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The cover artwork by artist Hema Shironi, in its celebration of her matrilineal heritage of memories, could not be more apt for this book. The cover photograph of the original work is provided by the Saskia Fernando Gallery.

In the publication of this book, the International Centre for Ethnic Studies’ continued collaboration is valued. The initial financial support of Judith Compton for a book of women’s histories, when few understood its significance, is gratefully acknowledged. As always, the generous support of the International Coalition of the Sites of Conscience, without whom this book would not be possible, is greatly appreciated.

Contributors

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Ambika Satkunanathan is currently a Fellow of the Open Society Foundations. For more than twenty years she has worked with community organisations and communities impacted by human rights violations, in particular, assisting them to access redress. From October 2015 to March 2020, she was a Commissioner of the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, where she led the first ever national study of prisons. She continues to work on the rights of imprisoned persons and re-imagining the carceral approach of the criminal justice system. Her current work includes research, advocacy

and interventions on drug control, detention and rehabilitation in Sri Lanka. Her research on the issue, the first such study, was published by Harm Reduction International in August 2021. She is a member of the Expert Panel of the Trial Watch Project of the Clooney Foundation and a member of the Network 5ustralia. She has a B.A. and LL.B from Monash University and a LL.M from University of Nottingham where she was a Chevening Fellow.

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She also tutors global and imperial history, and supervises undergraduate dissertations on Muslim consciousness in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. She is the Lead Researcher for the Virtual Museum on Religious Freedom, which is a space for archiving, learning, and critically reflecting on complex histories and contemporary issues of religious freedom in Sri Lanka. Prior to beginning her DPhil, she led the Politics Research practice at Verité Research, a think-tank based in Colombo. She advises organisations in Sri Lanka and the UK on countering violent extremism, particularly in online spaces. She holds an MSc and a BSc in International Relations and History, both from the London School of Economics and Political Science, U.K.

Editorial Team

Radhika Hettiarachchi is a researcher, curator and peacebuilding practitioner working on oral history and memory, socio-economic stability, conflict transformation and peacebuilding, based in Sri Lanka with nearly 20 years of experience. She has designed and developed oral history projects and facilitated dialogue processes, such as *The Herstories Project* implemented with Viluthu Centre for Human Resource Management, *The Community Memorialisation Project* implemented with Search for Common Ground Sri Lanka, and *The Sex Workers in Conflict* initiative with Grassrooted Trust to create a public discourse on gendered narratives of war, justice and peace and to strengthen community resilience for non-recurrence of violent conflict. She has curated arts festivals, such as *Colomboscope (2014, 2015)*, multi-country exhibitions, such as *sharedJourneys. online* and the curatory roadmap for Sri Lanka's first ever travelling history museum *It's About Time*, all with a focus on challenging dominant narratives of power through hidden, lost or marginalised histories. She has worked at UNDP, International Alert and Search for Common Ground on development and peacebuilding. She read English and Communications Theory at York University, Canada, and holds a MSc in Development Management from the London School of Economics and Political Science, U.K.

Tanya Hettiarachchi has worked in the field of international development and Child Protection in Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Pakistan and France. Apart from editorial work, she has also worked as an English teacher to adult learners in Paris and Colombo. She studied English Literature and International Development at York University, Canada and has her TEFL certification from the University of Toronto, OISE, Canada.

Sharni Jayawardena is a documentary photographer and filmmaker on human rights, conflict, gender, identity and memory. As a photographer, she has collaborated with Radhika Hettiarachchi on all of her archival projects spanning a decade. She worked with social anthropologist Malathi de Alwis on a documentary initiative on devotion to the Goddess Pattini/Kannaki – an inspiring example of Hindu-Buddhist syncretism in Sri Lanka. She was also the photographer for the Archive of Memory Project which foregrounds personal stories recalling turning points in post-independence Sri Lanka.

Thilini Perera is a multidisciplinary designer who works at the intersection of the arts and social justice issues. She has built a varied portfolio comprising graphic and editorial projects, publications, theatre set design, art direction for films, and physical and virtual exhibition designs. From 2014–2016, she headed the design team of RMIT university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. She consults as a designer and art director for local and international rights-based organisations focusing on feminism, and human rights. She currently manages design and communications for the Geoffrey Bawa Trust, designing all their online and on-site projects including the year-long *Bawa 100* programme (2019-2020) and the first exhibition of the Geoffrey Bawa archives, *It is Essential to be There* (2022). Her image-making work has been published in the comics journal, *InkBrick No.05* (2015), and most recently in *The Bystander Anthology* (2021) – the award-winning South Asian comics anthology on gender, identity, and boundaries, published by Kadak Collective.

Glossary

A-Levels	GCE Advanced Level Examinations
Burgher	Eurasian or those descended from Europeans
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
CMP	The Community Memorialisation Project
DS	District Secretariat Office or District Secretary
EPRLF	Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front
GCE	General Certificate of Education
GS/GN	Grama Sevaka/ Grama Niladhari
GoSL	Government of Sri Lanka
Group, The	LTTE (colloquial reference)
HRC	Human Rights Commission Sri Lanka
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally Displaced People
INFORM	INFORM Human Rights Documentation Centre
IPKF	Indian Peace Keeping Force
JVP	Janatha Vimuthi Peramuna
LSSP	Lanka Sama Samaja Party
LTTE	The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
Menik Farm	The longest running and largest refugee camp for IDPs
Movement, The	LTTE (colloquial reference)
NGO	Nongovernmental Organisation
O-Levels	GCE Ordinary Level Examinations
OMP	The Office of Missing Persons
PLOTE	People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam
PTA	Prevention of Terrorism Act
Samurdhi	Government welfare scheme
SLFP	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
STF	Special Task Force
TELO	Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation
Tigers	LTTE (colloquial reference)
TMVP	Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal
TULF	The Tamil United Liberation Front
UN	United Nations
UNGGG	United National Government for Good Governance
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UNP	United National Party
WAC	Women's Action Committee
WDF	Women Development Foundation

Endnotes

Foreword | Memory | Radhika Coomaraswamy

¹ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London, England, Verso Books, 1983.

² G. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271-313.

³ Transitional justice refers to the ways countries emerging from periods of conflict and repression address large-scale or systematic human rights violations so numerous and serious that the existing justice system will not be able to provide an adequate response. In 2015, the Sri Lankan government adopted the four pillars of a transitional justice mechanism to address Sri Lanka's violent past: to pursue truth, justice, and accountability; to provide redress to victims; to ensure non-recurrence of violent conflict through reformation of structures and systems that address the impact of war and root causes of conflict. The measures include: a mechanism to search for the disappeared, an office for reparations, a truth commission, and a judicial mechanism. The government's promises were affirmed in the 'United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution 30/1', 2015, but Sri Lanka formally withdrew from it in February 2020. See 'Commitments to Transitional Justice', International Centre for Transitional Justice, <https://www.ictj.org/our-work/regions-and-countries/sri-lanka>, (accessed 1 January 2022).

⁴ V. Daniel, *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence*, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History, Princeton University Press, 1996.

We Are Present: Conflict, memory, and women's histories in Sri Lanka | Radhika Hettiarachchi

¹ Any errors or omissions in this essay are my own. I am grateful to Dr. Harshana Rambukwella, Dr. Shermal Wijewardene and Dr. Lia Kent for their time and invaluable feedback.

² While the Transitional Justice Framework is a highly technical process, for the purposes of this essay, it is suffice to think of Transitional Justice (TJ) as the process that addresses how post-conflict or post-authoritarian societies deal with legacies of conflict, violence, historical discrimination, and human rights violations that are almost inevitable in most conflict contexts. For more details, see 'What is Transitional Justice?', International Centre for Transitional Justice [website], <https://www.ictj.org/what-transitional-justice>, (accessed November 15, 2020). In Sri Lanka, tangible TJ outcomes have been limited. See Amnesty International, *Flickering Hope: Truth, Justice, Reparations and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence in Sri Lanka*, Amnesty International, London, 2019, p. 10-22, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa37/9715/2019/en>, (accessed 20 November 2021).

³ Some conflicts were due to the structural discrimination of minority communities, some examples of which are the inability to access services or information in the Tamil language consistently across the country or the standardisation of the secondary school examinations that disadvantaged Tamil students who needed to get higher cut-off marks to enter university. See Perumal, C. A. and Thandavan, R., 'Ethnic violence in Sri Lanka: causes and consequences', *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 50, no. 1, 1989, p. 1-17, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41855403>, (accessed 19 November 2021). The slow-erosion of feelings of belonging that accompanied the opportunities restricted as a result of such institutionalised discrimination of minority communities, contributed to the long-term conflict rooted in ethno-politics and identity. Other conflicts were due to the systemic socio-economic barriers to social mobility, where the further away from the capital Colombo one was, the harder it was to access employment and other opportunities that were the basis of two violent insurrections by southern youth. See Ayub, M.S.M., 'The 1971 Insurrection in Retrospect', *Daily Mirror*, 8 April 2016, <https://www.dailymirror.lk/108026/The-insurrection-in-retrospect>, (accessed 20 November 2021). All of these were compounded by poor representational political systems, at one level restricting self-autonomy and governance based on ethnic politics and at another, limiting the opportunities for political engagement based on caste or socio-economic status. See Silva, K.T., 'Caste, Ethnicity and Problems of National Identity in Sri Lanka', *Sociological Bulletin*, vol. 48, no. ½, 1999, p. 201, 202-06, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23619936>, (accessed 20 November 2021).

⁴ See Harrison, F., 'Twenty Years On—Riots that Led to War', *BBC*, 23 July 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3090111.stm, (accessed 1 December 2021).

⁵ M. Tran, 'Prabhakaran's Death and Fall of LTTE Lead to Street Celebrations in Sri Lanka', *The Guardian*, 18 May 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/may/18/tamil-tigers-ltte-prabhakaran-death-srilanka>, (accessed 1 December 2021).

⁶ See Seoighe, R., *War, denial and Nation-building in Sri Lanka*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 94-5.

⁷ See 'Sri Lanka: The largest hostage rescue mission in the world launched', *Reliefweb*, 10 April 2009, <https://reliefweb.int/report/sri-lanka/sri-lanka-largest-hostage-rescue-mission-world-launched>, (accessed 1 December 2021).

⁸ See 'Selective Memory: Erasure & Memorialisation in Sri Lanka's North', Centre for Policy Alternatives, 23 November 2017, <https://www.cpalanka.org/selective-memory-erasure-memorialisation-in-sri-lankas-north>, (accessed 1 December 2021), see Seoighe, R., *War, denial and Nation-building in Sri Lanka*, p. 157, 66. The Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission is one example of the Government's limited attempts at fomenting reconciliation. See, 'Sri Lanka: When Will They Get Justice? Failures of Sri Lanka's Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission', Amnesty International, 7 September 2011, p. 6, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa37/008/2011/en>, (accessed 25 November 2021).

⁹ The terms used in this essay such as memory, counter-memory, memorialisation, people's history, and public history are overlapping and interconnected but are also distinct. Memory and counter-memory in this essay refer to how and what people remember, distinct from the subject area of "memory studies" which is an academic field studying the use of memory as a tool for remembering the past. For the purpose of this essay, the term "memorialisation" means deliberate processes and acts of memorialisation. Memory initiatives or projects refer to non-state memorialisation processes that are often situated within civil society designed to facilitate public opportunities for truth-telling to preserve and engage peoples' memories in the post-war context. In this essay, people's history refers to historical narratives that may be organic or deliberately documented but as distinct from official versions of history promoted as "the single narrative" in text-books or nation-building processes. Public History is a broad spectrum of histories as experienced and interpreted by and for the people, outside of the realm of academia, such as in museums, in community remembrance or memorials. In this essay, narratives refers to each version of the "story".

¹⁰ D. McCargo and D. Senaratne, 'Victor's Memory: Sri Lanka's post-war memoryscape in comparative perspective', *Conflict, Security and Development*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2020, p. 97-113, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14678802.2019.1705070?journalCode=ccsd20>, (accessed 25 November 2021).

¹¹ In 2015, an unexpected change of government brought a renewed interest in establishing transitional justice mechanisms, backed by the international community, to deal with Sri Lanka's difficult past and the possibility of a just peace in the future. See Dibbert, T., 'Sri Lanka's Surprising Election Victor', *Foreign Policy*, 21 January 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/21/sri-lankas-surprising-election-victor>, (accessed 26 November 2021). However, there was slow progress. Even though there were some systemic and institutional transitional justice achievements, the cumulative effect was inadequate. See Amnesty International, *Flickering Hope*, p. 10-22. With majoritarian, populist rule overwhelming the careful consideration of justice, equitable socio-economic development, and systemic change required in a country transitioning from war, the years after the change of government in 2018 saw increased tensions between communities, particularly with a heightened sense of islamophobia, see 'Sri Lanka elections: Rajapaksa brothers win super-majority', *BBC*, 7 August 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53688584>, (accessed 26 November 2021) and 'Sri Lanka: A return to threats, fear', *Human Rights Watch*, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/13/sri-lanka-return-threats-fear>, (accessed 26 November 2021). A mismanaged economy amid the Covid-19 crisis and significant impunity and intimidation of dissenting views, have effectively stalled the process of addressing the root causes of conflict in Sri Lanka and reckoning with its difficult and uncomfortable truths. See World Bank, 'Sri Lanka Development Update 2021: Economic and Poverty Impact of COVID-19', World Bank, Washington, DC., 2021, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/35833>, (accessed 26 November 2021) and Amnesty International, 'Sri Lanka: Joint oral statement: 48th Session of the Human Rights Council, Item 3: Interactive dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence', Amnesty International, 16 September 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ASA3747382021ENGLISH.pdf>, (accessed 26 November 2021).

¹² This essay focuses on cisgender women's experiences and the impact of conflict on broader categories of those who identify as women will not be discussed here.

¹³ The tangible manifestations of memorialisation, as well as the imagery used in official memorialisation, have been overwhelmingly masculine and paternalistic. For images of memorials – civilian and military – that are grounded in masculine imagery and overtones, see Keenan, A., 'Picturing Sri Lanka's Undead War', International Crisis Group, 17 May 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/picturing-sri-lankas-undead-war>, (accessed 26 November 2021). Also see Gamage, A., 'Don't cry mother, they didn't die in vain' [picture], *The Sunday Times*, May 2015, <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/150524/news/dont-cry-mother-they-didnt-die-in-vain-150612.html>, (accessed 26 November 2021).

¹⁴ See de Alwis, M., 'Moral Mothers and Stalwart Sons: Reading Binaries in a Time of War', in Lorentzen, L. and Turpin, J. (eds.), *The Women and War Reader*, New York University Press, 1998, p. 254-71.

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Participation in Post-War Sri Lanka', *Journal of Public Administration and Governance*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2018, p. 236, <http://www.cpalanka.org/top-line-survey-results-democracy-in-post-war-sri-lanka-2014>, (accessed 19 December 2021).

⁹ E. M. McIntosh, 'Transitional Local Governance and Minority Political Participation in Post-War Sri Lanka', 2018, p. 236.

¹⁰ See Jayawardena, K., *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, Zed Books, 1986, p. 2.

¹¹ The first general election under universal suffrage was held in the island in 1931. It was just two years after the successes of the suffragette movement in Britain and ahead of France where women voted for the first time in 1945.

¹² T. Metthananda, 'Votes for Women 1923-1931', in K.M. De Silva, (ed.), *Universal franchise, 1931-1981: the Sri Lankan experience*, Dept. of Information, Ministry of State, Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 1981, p. 52; M. de Alwis and K. Jayawardena, *Casting Pearls: The Women's Franchise Movement in Sri Lanka*, Social Scientists' Association, Colombo, 2001.

¹³ F. Haniffa, *Ayesha Rauf, A Pioneer of Muslim Women's Emancipation In Sri Lanka*, Social Scientists' Association, 2014, p. 28; C. Kodikara, *The Struggle for Equal Political Representation of Women in Sri Lanka*, UNDP, 2009, p. 17.

It is perhaps interesting to note this information against K.M. De Silva's chapter titled 'The Minorities and Universal Suffrage' in De Silva, K.M., (ed.), *Universal franchise, 1931-1981*, p.81.

De Silva notes Colombo Central and Batticaloa South were the only seats a Muslim candidate had a solid chance of securing from the 1931 general election.

¹⁴ J. Russell, *Communal Politics under the Donoughmore Constitution: 1931-1947*, Tisara Prakashakayo, Sri Lanka, 1982; K. Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, 1986, pp. 109,128-29; T. Metthananda, in K.M. De Silva, (ed.), *Universal franchise*, 1981, p. 69.

The Women's Franchise Union was formed by a group of affluent and influential Colombo-based women that presented their demands to the Donoughmore Commission in 1928. They demanded that women who possessed a qualification equivalent to a School Leaving Certificate and a property qualification in her own name could be entitled to franchise. They argued that social welfare legislation had been neglected due to the lack of a sympathetic and practical approach in governance and decision-making, that women could provide. The first president of the Union was Daisy Acelin Obeysekera, daughter of the eminent lawyer Sir Solomon Christopher Obeysekera and the wife of Maha Mudaliyar Sir Solomon Dias Bandaranaike and mother of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. The movement was represented by the wives of Ceylon National Congress politicians. Agnes De Silva, the secretary of the Women's Franchise Union famously responded to Lord Donoughmore's question of whether the upper-class Women's Franchise Movement wanted Indian Tamil labourers on the estates to have the vote saying, 'Certainly they are women too? We want all women to have the vote.'

¹⁵ K. Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, 1986, p.19.

¹⁶ L. Ratwatte, 'Sri Lanka's Problem with Women in Power', *The Diplomat*, 26 May 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/sri-lankas-problem-with-women-in-power>, (accessed 19 December 2021).

¹⁷ For President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga's own views on the success and failures of the War for Peace strategy see 'Interview with Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga: Governance and politics today, future plans and prospects', *Groundviews* [audio file and transcript], 25 July 2012, <https://groundviews.org/2012/07/26/interview-with-chandrika-bandaranaike-kumaratunga-governance-and-politics-today-future-plans-and-prospects>, (accessed 20 December 2021).

¹⁸ L. Rajakarunayake, 'National Unity', *Business Today*, May 2012, <https://businesstoday.lk/article.php?article=6655>, (accessed 21 November 2021).

¹⁹ 'R. Pulendran: Obituary', *Omlanka* [website], 31 December 2014, <http://www.omlanka.net/obituaries/453-mrs-rasamanohari-pulendran-obituary.html>, (accessed 19 December 2021).

²⁰ K. Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, 1986, p. 129; K. Liyanage, 'Women and Political Parties in Sri Lanka', in A. Shastri and U. Jayadeva (eds.), *Political Parties in Sri Lanka*, Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 327. For an analysis from the Indian case of popular political iconography with deeply-embedded, gendered notions of effective leadership which, in the case of the female leader, often oscillated between the twin poles of deification and monstrosity, see T. N. Banerjee, 'Political Iconography and the Female Leader: The Case of Indira Gandhi', *Centre for Studies in Social Sciences*, 2021.

²¹ K. Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, 1986, p. 132.

²² Some of these women were Susan De Silva, Doreen Wickremesinghe and Selina Perera, the wife of Dr. N.M. Perera.

²³ K. Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, 1986, p. 132.

²⁴ C. Kodikara, *The Struggle for Equal Political Representation of Women in Sri Lanka*, 2009.

²⁵ K. Liyanage, 'Women in Political Parties: The Sri Lankan Experience', in S. Kiribamune (ed.), *Women and Politics in Sri Lanka: A Comparative Perspective*, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 1999, p. 106. For an understanding of the composition of the Federal Party as a representation of "Tamil-speaking people" which included ethnic Muslim and Tamil communities until a breakdown of relations in the 1970s see Jupp, J., 'Sri Lanka: Third World Democracy', 1978, p. 152, in M. Thaheer, 'Sri Lanka Muslim Congress' in A. Shastri and U. Jayadeva (eds.), *Political Parties in Sri Lanka*, Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 256.

²⁶ C. Kodikara and K. Samuel, 'The Significance of the 25% Quota for Women in Local Government', *Groundviews*, 2018, <https://groundviews.org/2018/02/07/the-significance-of-the-25-quota-for-women-in-local-government>, (accessed 20 December).

²⁷ K. Liyanage, 'Women and Political Parties in Sri Lanka', 2019, p. 348;

R. Vijayarasa, N. Vanniasinkam, and V. Gunasekera, 'Non-Elite Pathways To Women's Political Leadership: Preliminary Findings From Sri Lanka-Part 2, The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP)', 13 May 2021, <https://www.dlprog.org/opinions/non-elite-pathways-to-women-s-political-leadership-preliminary-findings-from-sri-lanka-part-2>, (accessed 21 December 2021).

²⁸ 'Advancing the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda in Sri Lanka: Barriers, Opportunities, and a Path Forward', WAGE, Sri Lanka, 2021, p. 23; R. Vijayarasa, N. Vanniasinkam, and V. Gunasekera, 'Non-Elite Pathways to Women's Political Leadership, Preliminary Findings from Sri Lanka-Part 2, 2021.

²⁹ R. Vijayarasa, N. Vanniasinkam, and V. Gunasekera, 'Non-Elite Pathways to Women's Political Leadership: Preliminary Findings from Sri Lanka-Part 1', The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP), 13 May 2021, <https://www.dlprog.org/opinions/non-elite-pathways-to-women-s-political-leadership-preliminary-findings-from-sri-lanka-part-1>, (accessed 21 December 2021).

³⁰ R. Vijayarasa, N. Vanniasinkam, and V. Gunasekera, 'Non-Elite Pathways to Women's Political Leadership', 2021.

³¹ C. Kodikara, *The Struggle for Equal Political Representation of Women in Sri Lanka*, UNDP, 2009.

³² For a list of vocational training courses see Bureau of the Commissioner General of Rehabilitation, Ministry of Justice, 'Programmes conducted for adults', <https://www.bcgr.gov.lk/ex-adult-programmes>, (accessed 22 December 2021);

see Miriyagalla, D., 'Socio-economic reintegration of former LTTE combatants in Sri Lanka: self-employment, sustainable incomes and long-term peace', *Global Change, Peace & Security*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2014, p. 251-62.

³³ 'Remembering Sri Lanka's Black July', *BBC*, 23 July 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-23402727>, (accessed 20 December 2021).

³⁴ 'Women in Peacebuilding: Stories, Kumi Samuel, Sri Lanka', *Community of Democracies* [website], <https://community-democracies.org/women/kumi-samuel>, (accessed 21 December 2021).

³⁵ 'Women in Peacebuilding: Stories, 2021

³⁶ 'Women in Peacebuilding: Stories, 2021

³⁷ 'Advancing the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda in Sri Lanka', 2021.

³⁸ K. Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, 1986.

³⁹ 'Advancing the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda in Sri Lanka', 2021, p. 29.