Gender and Peacebuilding: A Sri Lankan Case Study

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Abstract

It is the aim of this paper¹ to provide a critique of the theory and practice of gender and peacebuilding, using the specific case of female combatants of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka. This will be done through an analysis of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, as well as the practice of Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) as aspects of gender and peacebuilding. The history of the LTTE as well as their inclusion of women will then be examined to highlight some of the inadequacies of gender and peacebuilding tools and practices, as well as some of the underlying assumptions which inform these. Gender analysis has become the default critical perspective. Without serious attention paid to analyses of class, culture and historical trajectories however, gender becomes easily appropriated, without posing any challenge to what may be an oppressive neoliberal state and peace building agenda.

¹ The research for this paper was carried out during periods of 2003. Literature reviews of both the grey and academic literature were done first, and then supplemented by interviews with members of the Tamil diaspora in Ottawa and Toronto as well as interviews in Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, members of both the Sinhala and Tamil communities were consulted from different occupations, ages, classes and geographical regions of the country. Due to possible political sensitivities, no names have been used or listed. I am of course deeply indebted to all those in Canada, Sri Lanka and elsewhere who shared of their time and experiences with me during interviews and more informal exchanges.


**Introduction**

International development as an enterprise is premised on various silent assumptions about the rectitude of its theory and practice. Development, as the name suggests, is about progress and growth - generally positive things. What is less clear is progress and growth for whom and at what cost. Peacebuilding as a newer member of the development family has embraced these silent assumptions and, in fact, may have had an easier time of it, given the construction of conflict as the enemy, as *bad* and as the spoiler of development. Certainly violent conflicts the world over have wreaked havoc and resulted in great loss of life, however, simplistic and hasty peacebuilding responses are often ineffectual or even harmful in a given context. In fact, many peacebuilding efforts have not resulted in sustained peace, progress or growth as is evidenced by protracted tensions and civil wars around the world.

In part, this is due to the general prescription nature of peacebuilding work. Scholars have made more transparent the nexus between the dominant model of peacebuilding and its attendant policies on politico-economic reform that attempt to fashion southern nations in the image of the western neoliberal state (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2003; Paris 1997).

That the state and market building enterprise has been an integral part of the development field in general, also cannot be forgotten. While it would be too simplistic to draw direct and linear ties between colonialism, the origins of development and the neoliberal state, certain relational and historical continuities must not be immediately discarded either. As Wickramasinghe states,
The entry of the world development agencies, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations into global economics and politics, consolidated the priorities and perspectives of various development measures adopted by...countries under a common model. The basic goal of this development model is the ‘transition from traditional Third World to modern societies’. This produced a fuelling of fresh methods and diversity in development approaches. However, at the basis of virtually all macro development plans that gained prominence over the decades, is the rudimentary premise of the so-called ‘western model’ of progress, that is cemented on the quartet of economic growth, modernization, consumerism and trade...[and]...this basic development prototype remains the same (Wickramasinghe 2000: 16).

Peacebuilding today, continues to be premised on this state building enterprise, which has been couched in terms of democracy, human rights and good governance. Indeed these are important conditions for peace and perfectly acceptable to people of a range of political dispositions. However, what is problematic is that these universal prescriptions usually take the form of the ‘free markets equal free people’ formula (Ignatieff 2004) with associated changes towards liberalization.

The pleas for gender equity are quite easily incorporated within this neoliberal state building framework, especially when gender equity largely implies the inclusion of women in formal political and economic processes. Many women around the world are, however, located and rooted in non-formal economic and political spheres, where their voices and inputs although very valuable for society, are not captured in the public imagination as being significant.
Peacebuilding work that pushes the market oriented model of the state, risks prolonging conflict, as this model rarely allows for a just peace dividend to reach all sections of society.² “[M]acroeconomic policies prescribed by international donors, in particular the privatisation of land education and even water…exacerbate…inequalities, especially for women who have less access to resources, properties, loans and employment” (Nakaya 2003: 471-472). In this context, if gender analysis involves an understanding of class, culture and history, it can create spaces for alternative discourses and models of politico-economic structures and in so doing, become a truly powerful critique of the dominant peacebuilding paradigm.

The general approach to gender within the development and peacebuilding fields, however, tends to be part of a positivistic model that formulates tools and instruments to assess, measure and evaluate, not leaving much room for local contexts and nuances to enter the analysis. Allowances are certainly made for cultural variations and report after report warns us to be cognizant of differences, but only in theory. In practice, concepts and ideologies such as feminism and nationalism are taken for granted and subsumed under a broader state building enterprise that seeks to homogenize. In the Sri Lankan context, and within Tamil society, traditional patriarchy has been challenged from within and gender equity is certainly granted some importance. It is therefore condescending to talk of gender equity here in the same way one might have done for the Taliban-led Afghanistan. Tools and methods of gender and peacebuilding therefore have to be adjusted to suit this local reality. What follows is a brief explanation of some of these tools.

² While econometric studies have not shown a direct relationship between violent conflict and economic inequality, anecdotal evidence points to the fact that policies of economic liberalization and structural adjustment have not been conducive for sustainable peace (Paris 1997; Humphreys 2003).
Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding is a relatively new field as defined by the United Nations Secretary General’s 1992 document, *An Agenda for Peace* (Ghali, 1992). While the document calls for a three-pronged approach in terms of preventive diplomacy, peacemaking and peacekeeping, peacebuilding has tended to focus on post-conflict activities, although more recently, strides have been made in preemptive work and peacekeeping missions. Definitions of peacebuilding being murky, it is often difficult to distinguish between work that falls into development and that which is specifically related to peacebuilding.

The Canadian Peacebuilding Initiative Strategic Framework defines peacebuilding as,

…the effort to strengthen the prospects for internal peace and decrease the likelihood of violent conflict. The overarching goal of peacebuilding is to enhance the indigenous capacity of a society to manage conflict without violence. Ultimately, peacebuilding aims at building human security, a concept which includes democratic governance, human rights, rule of law, sustainable development, equitable access to resources, and environmental security…Peacebuilding may involve conflict prevention, conflict resolution, as well as various kinds of post-conflict activities. It focuses on the political and socio-economic context of conflict, rather than on the military or humanitarian aspects. It seeks to…institutionalize the peaceful resolution of conflicts (CIDA 2002: 2).
In practice, programs (of large donors) within peacebuilding have tended to focus on short and medium term measures dealing with DDR, “…refugee repatriation, security force training, elections monitoring and institutional reform” (Strickland and Duvvury 2003: 6). Even when projects may be intended for a longer term, various local institutional and external pressures often force donor agencies to withdraw, destroying sustainability of the process. Measures of successful transformations are elusive and require long-term engagement, something rarely done by donors. It is argued that peace requires stable institutions and good governance. This stability and sustained peace is then expected to flow quickly from open markets, with little regard to locally embedded hierarchies of class or ethnicity for instance. Gender however, has been considered, as I highlight below.

**Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR)**

DDR is an aspect of peacebuilding that generally requires the most immediate attention in a post-conflict situation. Disarmament is the first stage and it involves the collection of weapons of all types and the development of an effective management program with eventual dispersal or destruction of the arms. Demobilization is about lessening the numbers of armed combatants, whether in the government or rebel forces and providing some alternative means of rehabilitation or compensation for the loss of arms and work. Finally, reintegration is the process of bringing people back within the fold of society and the family, with economic and social reinsertion programs. This includes initiatives such as, “…re-training… job placement, healthcare, [and] cash payments…” (WomenWarPeace.org).
Reintegration is, however, a long and complex process, which may not play out exactly according to planned timelines. Female and male combatants also need different kinds of DDR programs. In the recent past efforts have been made to engender peacebuilding work and especially DDR, taking into account the needs of women and girls in fighting forces. Fieldwork in specific conflict contexts has also served to nuance checklist or prescriptive approaches to DDR work. However, deeper analysis is still required to embed peacebuilding work in the local context.

For many Tamils, reintegration as a term is problematic, as it implies that people have been dislocated and need to be put back into society. For those who have fought in what they consider a struggle for self-determination, reintegration is a meaningless term as their struggle is an integral part of the community. Attitudes governing DDR work on the part of large donors need to be well informed, to ensure sensitivity to the history of particular struggles. It is also important to remember that agency has been constructed by and for female combatants in complex ways within their movements. These local negotiations with gender and feminism may not lend themselves to easy categorization within DDR programs. Universalities on gender still tend to dominate the field though, and Resolution 1325 provides an important example of this.

**United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325**

On October 31st 2000, Resolution 1325 was unanimously passed by the Security Council, on Women, Peace and Security. It calls on “…all those involved in the planning for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration to consider the different needs of female and male ex-

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3 See for instance Dyan Mazurana in the bibliography.
combatants and to take into account the needs of their dependents” (UN SC Resolution 1325). While it may be just another resolution on the surface, there are some reasons why it is actually quite important. This was the first time that the most powerful body of the UN – the Security Council – publicly endorsed the importance of gender as an aspect of peacebuilding.

For the fact that it has brought gender into public and policy discussions as an issue of increasing import, Resolution 1325 is an invaluable document. It is an easy reference tool with which groups can rally, and lobby those in power to implement the recommendations contained therein and thereby facilitate quantification and measurement of the (messy and likely unquantifiable) task of promoting gender equity in and through peace processes. This easy reference tool also allows various groups, fighting for gender justice, to persuade those in power to ensure that women’s voices are heard and incorporated at peace negotiations and that women’s security is protected.

However 1325 is limited as it captures this movement towards gender sensitive inclusions during peace processes, quite apolitically, ahistorically, and acontextually. It must not be forgotten that 1325 is a tool, which must be deployed with nuance and understanding of particular realities. A tool is only as effective as its user, and users of 1325 do not all share the same interpretations of gender and gender equity. That is, 1325 does not in and of itself provide the potential for deep social transformation, without a grounding in political, economic, social and historical contexts. Being mainly a quantification tool, Resolution 1325 cannot account for qualitative changes that result for women during war and which are not easily measurable. These changes may be in behaviours or attitudes towards gender relations. The document also contains some problematic silent assumptions: women are treated as homogeneous, without regard to socio-cultural hierarchies and women are generally treated as independent agents, without regard to the
importance accorded to their position vis-à-vis kin, family and community in many cultural contexts.

More women in state processes and spheres doesn’t necessarily imply gender equality. In fact, the evidence has pointed to quite the opposite. Measures that look to promote women’s participation in peace processes often end up promoting women, as opposed to gender equality (Nakaya 2003: 461). Nakaya states, “…the “standpoint” approach categorizing women as concrete actors or a category excluded from the governing apparatus and thereby emphasizing the commonality of women and their “experiences,” fails to take into account the diverse identities, needs, and responses of war-affected women and men” (Nakaya 2003: 461-462).

Resolution 1325, while an important tool, is only a beginning. It should by no means allow feminist scholars and development practitioners to sit back and rest on these laurels. Instead, 1325 can be further nuanced and nurtured into a powerful international instrument. This can be done in part by developing analytical critiques of 1325 in particular contexts. I will deal next with the Sri Lankan case.

**The Sri Lankan Post-Colonial State**

Understanding the emergence and growth of the LTTE is not possible without knowledge of modern Sri Lankan history. While this may appear to be a rather obvious statement, its value is often forgotten in the analyses done by security experts. Rather, in keeping with peacebuilding’s
increasingly close ties with issues of security and the war against terrorism, explanations for
groups such as the LTTE remain limited to the recounting of violent acts, without context, history
or political nuance. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed description of
the events of Sri Lanka’s post-colonial history, and the factors that led to the rise of the LTTE, a
brief summary will be given to set the context.

Many theorists point to the post-colonial Sri Lankan state and its unitary nature as the root cause
of the civil war in the country. However the origins of the unitary state are located in the colonial
period in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka was colonized by three different European powers, although the
geographical and social extent of these colonizations has varied (Wilson 1988). Three kingdoms
had existed in Sri Lanka when the first Europeans arrived there, but it was with the arrival of the
British that Sri Lanka was forced into an Island wide nation, bringing together a disharmonious
notion of a country.

Not only did the British unify the Island under their administrative wing, centralized in Colombo,
but they also encouraged and patronized the revival of Buddhism. At the same time, American
missionary activity in predominantly Tamil areas of the north of the Island led to an English
educated Tamil population that was well positioned to occupy colonial civil service positions.
This inevitably created tensions between the Tamil and Sinhala populations, the latter which had
supposedly benefited from British patronage of Buddhism, but not from English education
(McGowan 1993).

The British had also brought Tamil labourers from southern India to work on coffee, tea and
cocoanut plantations in the country. What resulted was divisions along class, caste, religious,
ethnic and linguistic lines. These divisions confronted the independent Sri Lankan state in 1948. It was an important moment at which the government could have attempted to facilitate more equality through legislation. Instead, a Sinhala Buddhist unitary state was set up at the centre, with evident disdain for the large Tamil minority. To correct the imbalance (of a disproportionately high number) of Tamils in the civil administrative, medical and engineering fields, the Sinhala centre went about introducing a series of punitive legislative measures which targeted Tamils by attempting to take away what were perceived to be their privileged positions in society. This approach not only alienated and angered Sri Lankan Tamils but also did nothing to improve the position of poor Sinhalese. Thus what followed in the next five decades was the escalation of hostilities not only between northeastern Tamil communities and the southern Sinhalese, but also between unemployed Sinhalese youth and their elite counterparts in urban areas. The appropriation of a Marxist group in the south, by the Sinhala Buddhist clergy and the emergence of a militant Tamil nationalism in the north and east primarily under the auspices of the LTTE facilitated a brutal civil war that has only recently abated to some extent (In interviews 2003).

Attempts have been made towards legislative redress, but critics have shown that these measures have been cosmetic at best and when they have had some potential power, they have been stopped by vested interests.⁴

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⁴ Various measures to decentralize authority have been implemented in name only, or have been disbanded after protestations from the Buddhist clergy.
The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)\textsuperscript{5}

The LTTE came into existence in 1976, having appeared in an earlier avatar as the Tamil New Tigers in 1972. The LTTE were formed by a group of disaffected Tamil youth who felt that given the failed attempts at peaceful change, there was no option left but to take up arms. In 1977 the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) contested elections in the northeast of the country on a platform of separation and won an overwhelming majority, also becoming the opposition party at the centre. The LTTE took this victory to be the community’s endorsement for a separate state and devoted themselves to the task of achieving this, through combative means.

This must also be understood in light of the growth of Tamil nationalism, which, Nesiah contends was not at first predominantly separatist in nature. Separatism must be understood in part as a reaction to various attempts by the Sinhalese Buddhist government to disenfranchise and weaken the Tamil community. Even the TULF victory at the polls in 1977 is explained by Nesiah with the following:

\begin{quote}
The alienation of the Tamil leaders (and, in consequence, the Tamil people) arising from the lack of any attempt to accommodate or even consider their views in the framing of the constitution was a major contributory factor to the emergence of the Vaddukoddai resolution of 1976 [on which the TULF platform of separation was based]. Even at that stage it appears that many who voted for that resolution or refrained from publicly opposing it saw it as a token of protest against
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{5} Eelam is the name given to the territory claimed by the LTTE in the Tamil nationalist struggle.
oppression or a strategic bargaining position rather than an expression of their aspiration (Nesiah 2001: 17).

Nationalism involves inter alia the strategic deployment of myth, history, religion, culture, ethnicity and language in some combination thereof. For Tamil nationalism, the political aspiration of separation coincided with ethnic, linguistic and religious divisions as well, resulting in a powerful invocation of separatist nationalist ideology. This wide reaching nationalistic mobilization was facilitated predominantly by the LTTE.

The LTTE are a secretive group, and it is therefore difficult to obtain credible information on the organization. It is not possible to procure an organizational chart or to get exact confirmation on numbers of combatants and members, and this leads to speculation about the nature of the organization. The LTTE are now also proscribed in many countries around the world, designated as a terrorist group and one of the most brutal and efficient of their kind. While many accounts of the LTTE by security experts choose to leave out analysis on the context of the conflict, they provide some information on the organization.

According to one security expert the LTTE have a two-tier structure, with a military and subordinate political wing. They have a Central Governing Committee that oversees both of these, with Velupillai Pirabakaran as the supreme leader (Chalk 1999: 2). They have amphibious and airborne groups, and an elite fighting wing (said to have initially been trained by India’s RAW – Research and Analysis Wing) a suicide unit, a highly secretive intelligence group and a political office headed by SP Thamilchelvan (Chalk 1999).
It is said that the LTTE also have a three-pronged approach: propaganda and publicity, arms procurement and fundraising (Davis 2003: 2). They have a well-structured, widespread transnational network (working with front organizations) through which they procure arms and, it is rumoured, traffic in drugs.

The Tamil diaspora lives primarily in Asia, North America, Europe and Australia. There are approximately 140,000 Tamils estimated to be living in Canada of which some 85% live in Toronto (Davis 2003: 7). The LTTE are said to extort taxes from these members of the diaspora. Based on information gleaned in Sri Lanka and Canada, Tamil links with the LTTE are anywhere between 30 – 90% (of the population). These links could be in the form of having an immediate or extended family member involved in the movement, as a combatant or in an administrative position. The number rises towards the 90% mark if we consider support for the LTTE which could be in the form of money, propaganda or other logistical assistance, based on viewing the LTTE as the (sometimes sole) legitimate representative of the Tamil people. It is not surprising therefore to see the importance of the diaspora in having sustained the movement.

A report published by the Mackenzie Institute in Toronto, states that, “[c]urrent estimates of the size of the LTTE and the extent of its popular support are difficult to gauge” (Mackenzie Institute No date: 3). It must be remembered though, that support is not a homogeneous concept. Support for the LTTE is multi-faceted, positive and negative and deeply layered. It may be the result of propaganda, of coercion, of agreement and/or of admiration. While there is fear of the LTTE,

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6 Many Tamils that I spoke to, especially members of the diaspora here in Canada, stated that while the LTTE may not be perfect they are the sole representative of the Tamil people. It is believed that various other Tamil parties have sold out to powers in Colombo for populist politics, while other Tamil groups have at different times collaborated against the LTTE and assisted in the killing of Tamil civilians.
there is also a sense of the LTTE being ‘our boys’, within Tamil communities. Thus there appears to be a general belief that while the LTTE are far from perfect, they have originated from, and are a part of, the people.

At the same time, it is said that the LTTE deal severely with deserters from the movement. While this is no doubt true, the origin of this must be examined. Being an illegitimate group fighting for self-determination, requires discipline and severe reprimands for transgression of group rules, as is the case with any army in the world, whether state or rebel based. Claims that the LTTE are a repressive group must certainly be true, but other claims about suppression of support for the LTTE, must also be true. The full extent to which people in all parts of the country have been silenced by guns and fear, will only become clearer after many years have healed the pain and fear.

In light of this, debating whether or not the LTTE are a terrorist organization is rather meaningless. Defining what it means to be a terrorist is based on notions of legitimacy that have been conferred in conjunction with politico-economic and historical processes. The label of terrorist does nothing to get at the deeper politico-economic issues underlying the causes of violence and of groups arming themselves for a struggle. The answers to these questions can only be found in deeper analyses of the history of the conflict.

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7 While the common belief (outside Tamil circles) is that the LTTE brutally repress any form of opposition to themselves, anthropologist Margaret Trawick provides an ethnographic account that points to quite the contrary. (Please see Trawick in the bibliography).
8 A pogrom in 1983 involved the massacre of large numbers of Tamils (and some Sinhalese and others) mainly in Colombo but also in other parts of the country. Following this event it became increasingly difficult for people (Tamils) in Colombo to express any kind of support for the LTTE.
No one who understands the history of Sri Lanka with some nuance, will deny the very valid grievances of the Tamil community in the country’s modern period. Many however, denounce the violent methods used by militant Tamil groups (especially the LTTE) as being counterproductive and illegitimate in achieving the ends sought. While it is difficult to justify violence, it must not be forgotten that the Sri Lankan state has also committed brutal acts of violence against its own citizens. The old adage of two wrongs not making a right sounds wise, but the reality is usually steeped in retaliation.

While the LTTE have made attempts to put forward a common front, homogeneity has not marked the entire movement, and class and caste have been both cohesive and divisive factors in the LTTE and within the broader Tamil struggle. It is often said that the LTTE’s struggle is a ‘poor man’s’ war’. While it is true that many armies, rebel groups and militias around the world come from the less privileged classes, this was not necessarily true of the Tamil struggle at the initial stages. During the later period of the movement, many from the middle or upper classes, as well as many intellectuals either moved to Colombo (or were already there), or they moved out of the country entirely during the war. Some support the LTTE, while others are publicly and passionately opposed to the group.

Many members of the LTTE also hail from the lower Karaiyar caste, of which Pirabakaran himself is a part. Caste being a factor that is considered oppressive within the LTTE, it was not possible to obtain a deeper understanding of the caste composition of the LTTE. Socio-economic and traditional hierarchies and geographical differentiations have of course been significant factors in the arena of support. However, there does not seem to be any definitive pattern of support along class and caste lines that has been sustained over time. There has been tension
within the movement as many of the lower ranking members have tended to be recruited from the east (especially Batticaloa), while the higher in command have come from the north (especially Jaffna). Jaffna has also traditionally been considered the centre of Tamil Eelam, both symbolically and culturally. While the LTTE continue to struggle with caste and class, they are neither religious nor Marxist, but are secular in their approach, though not necessarily in their practice, as Hinduism forms the symbolic centre of most members’ religious affiliation.\(^9\)

The LTTE have previously enjoyed the support of various organizations, and reports detailing human rights abuses against the Tamil people, have put pressure on successive Sri Lankan governments. Instead of responding with conciliatory measures, the Sinhalese governments have often taken recourse to increasing the repression. Both the LTTE and the Government of Sri Lanka have made efforts in their propaganda campaigns as well. The Government and various other Sinhalese groups have outlined the atrocities of the LTTE, and the latter have highlighted the violence of the State. The Sinhalese government has also made great attempts to have the LTTE banned in various countries around the world, (In interviews 2003; EelamWeb) making it harder for funds and (probably) arms to flow into the northeast of Sri Lanka. Following post 9/11 anti-terrorism legislation around the world, the LTTE’s legitimacy seems to have plummeted.

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\(^9\) For examples of religion and Hindu symbolism in the LTTE, please see Peter Schalk in the bibliography.
Feminist Interventions and Women in the LTTE

LTTE women have been the subject of much debate both within and outside of Sri Lanka. In a largely patriarchal community, their transgression of various social mores and norms, albeit facilitated by a male leader, have taken on an important and contested symbolism in the minds of not only other Tamil, but also Sinhalese women. Fundamental contradictions and tensions entailed in these new roles for women and men in times of war have evolved within the Tamil nationalist struggle.

In many conflict contexts, when confronted by threats, groups coalesce around particular markers of identity to mobilize their defence. This all-encompassing identity is often manifest as a type of nationalism. The LTTE are no exception to this rule. Faced with the reality of oppression in Sri Lanka, the organization successfully used a construction of Tamil nationalism to mobilize a large segment of the local Tamil population for a separatist movement. Gender has come to occupy a very specific role in this context.

As Sornarajah argues, gender and women’s political agency must be understood in the context of Tamil nationalism (Sornarajah 2004: 1). Malathi de Alwis reiterates that, women have always been appropriated into nationalist discourses, albeit with subtle changes during different historical periods. “Sri Lankan women, be they Sinhala, Tamil or Muslim, continue to be constructed as the reproducers, nurturers and disseminators of ‘tradition’, ‘culture’, ‘community’ and ‘nation’” (de Alwis 2002: 1-2).
While Tamil women are further ahead than their South Asian counterparts in terms of education and social and familial positions, their inclusion into the LTTE does not necessarily spell their emancipation (Sornarajah 2004). Tamil nationalism as conceptualized within the Sri Lankan context is not necessarily a process of liberation for women, but has been gendered from the earliest phases. During the 50s and 60s and following the Sinhala only legislation passed in Colombo, Tamil nationalism became symbolized in the struggle to maintain and encourage the Tamil language (Sornarajah 2004). Tamil as a language, along with literature, poetry and by broader extension the Tamil culture became feminized, likened to the mother, the pure and ideal woman (Sornarajah 2004: 9). In time and through the colonization schemes of the Sinhala government, land and culture also became linked, as is often the case, in nationalist discourse.

As nationalism took on the character of armed struggle as well, the relationship between the valiant mother and the brave son also became crucial to the whole construct. Women became bearers of sons who would fight to uphold Tamil culture and nationalism at the hands of colonizing Sinhalese. Daughters, however, did not immediately enter this equation (Sornarajah 2004: 11). Aside from being reproducers of progeny and thereby culture and nationalism, little agency was provided for women in this particular trope.

However, in time, militant nationalism created new spaces for women’s political agency (Sornarajah 2004: 12-13). The decision to recruit women within the ranks of the LTTE did not come without controversy though. While women had been involved with the LTTE in other capacities, their inclusion into armed combat came in the 1980s. However, the men within the

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10 In 1956 the Government in Colombo passed the Sinhala Only Act, which was essentially intended to decrease the high number of Tamils in the civil services. This effectively rendered Tamils illiterate overnight as they were required to be fluent in Sinhala as well, in order to retain their positions within the civil services.
movement had built a reputation around discipline, abstinence and purity. Women it was felt would prove to be a dangerous sexual distraction (Sornarajah 2004: 14). Sornarajah states that when women first joined, they tended to be from rural backgrounds – areas which had felt the brunt of the devastation of war. Middle class women tended to join the student wing of the movement (Sornarajah 2004: 16). Then a combination of three factors allowed for their inclusion within the armed ranks of the LTTE. First, women were eager to fulfill their patriotic duties in the face of atrocities by the Sinhalese, second other Tamil groups such as the Eelam People’s Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) and People’s Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) were recruiting women and finally the LTTE were witnessing a decline in the number of men joining their movement (Sornarajah 2004: 16).

In the case of the LTTE\textsuperscript{11}, the rhetoric used when women were first included in armed combat, was one of liberation and empowerment. LTTE theoreticians and the leader Pirabakaran himself, in speech after speech, highlighted the importance of women in the movement (Schalk 1994: 169). However, in his rhetoric/ideology, Pirabakaran made an appeal for ‘humanism,’ going beyond all gendered constructs of masculinity and femininity (Pirabakaran). It is true that this particular construct of ‘humanism’ needs to be unpacked, and should not be taken at face value.\textsuperscript{12} At the same time one cannot entirely dismiss the words either, relegating them to the realm of mere manipulations. Concepts of liberation, empowerment, development and modernization all become incorporated into nationalist struggles. Often these concepts collide with, confront and sometimes sit in disharmonious stalemates with other ideas of tradition, religion and patriarchy.

\textsuperscript{11} The Sri Lanka Army (SLA) and the \textit{Janata Vimukthi Peramuna} (JVP – a Marxist Sinhala group) have also recruited women, but this discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

\textsuperscript{12} Neloufer de Mel has unpacked some of the rhetoric of empowerment. Please see de Mel in the bibliography.
Every nationalist project must struggle to fit these disparate elements together, while at the same time mobilizing as large a group as possible.

As per LTTE websites, women’s position in the struggle for Tamil Eelam is well elaborated. Adele-Ann Balasingham, wife of LTTE political theoretician Anton Balasingham, has become the international spokesperson of the female Tigers.\footnote{I had wanted to understand if there was any notion of Ms. Balasingham being an outsider, with little right to speak for female Tamil Tigers. I did not receive any indication that people felt this way. Most, in fact, seemed to admire her role especially given that she did not have to join this fight.} Having come from a small town Australian family, with a background in nursing, Ms. Balasingham joined the struggle for Tamil Eelam, when she met and later married Anton Balasingham. Since 1975 she has been engaged in the movement (Schalk 1994: 164; Balasingham 2001), living alongside the combatants and in mortal danger time and time again. She has written quite extensively about women in the struggle and their role as fighters.

While Ms. Balasingham has not provided deeply theoretical/academic analyses of issues of feminism and nationalism, she has given us her own perspective as an insider/outsider within the Tamil struggle. Moreover, she has been able to communicate some of the feelings, emotions and ideas of female Tigers involved in the struggle, during a time in history when neither others outside, nor women within the struggle themselves had the resources or access to disseminate information widely. As such, it would appear that she has done an invaluable service to documenting the history of this struggle.

In her work, there is ready acknowledgement of the multiple oppressions that women have had to bear in Tamil society. Balasingham states,
On the one hand, women comprising a little more than fifty percent of the Tamil people have borne the brunt of the national oppression stemming from chauvinist Sinhala policies. On the other hand, women have been subject to an internal form of social oppression rising out of male chauvinism. This form of oppression is reinforced by the conservative traditions and some of the cultural norms inherent in the Tamil community (Balasingham 1990: 1).

She goes on to state that women initially performed jobs that did not stray too far from their prescribed roles in society. Later they joined the Tamil struggle for different reasons, either because they were swept up in the nationalist spirit and/or because they had seen much cruelty towards their family members or others. By the mid-80s, women began to receive military training and eventually the various militant cells were grouped into the women’s wing of the LTTE, known as the Birds of Freedom (Vituthalai Pulikal Makalir Munani). The women not only fought but also worked in creating alliances between the LTTE and Tamil civil society (Balasingham 1990). Many would argue that Adele Balasingham has been instrumental in shaping not just the ideology around women’s inclusion in the LTTE, but has also coached them on how to think and articulate their views on feminism. In believing this, though, one would also have to believe that women in the LTTE had no minds of their own. This couldn’t be further from the truth.

In conversations with a few women combatants and others of the Tamil community, most were acutely aware of the fact that Tamil traditional society is deeply patriarchal. They also knew that the present position of female combatants would not be so readily accepted after the war. Many were pleased with the changes that have taken place through the war, in terms of the status of
women in Tamil society. However, it was reiterated to me many times, that their struggle was not a feminist one but a nationalist one, first.

In an interview with a female Tiger, I asked her what she might say in response to comments made by feminists about female Tigers not really being liberated, but just ‘cogs in the wheel’ of a patriarchal nationalist rebel movement. She replied that liberation is about a country, a nation and not just about women. It is also about breaking barriers and beliefs. Women are considered soft; this is the traditional belief. She continued, that when she first joined the movement, they had to undergo not just military training, but also training for building their confidence. She said that she felt confident and able to do anything for herself. She reiterated that she knew what equality meant.

Another older combatant detailed her life history, from her days at Perediniya University in Kandy where so-called ethnic tensions resulted in the Tamil students being driven out of the University and back to their homes in Jaffna. Having grown up seeing violence, destruction and the death of other Tamils, she decided to eventually join a movement and fight for her independence. She said that after her military training and after living in jungles and graveyards, there was little of which she was now afraid. She had also decided when she joined the movement, that she would devote her life to it and that she would not get married. She has indeed done this. She has also not been in active combat for 12 years and would likely not go to the battlefield if war broke out again, but serves another very important function in her community - running an orphanage for children who have lost their parents to the war. For the approximately 80 children (girls) who reside in the orphanage, she hopes for them to become self confident and well-educated young women, with a ‘passion for their country’.
Those with whom I spoke stated that every foreigner who has come to do research/interviews, is always surprised by the combatants’ normality. The LTTE, they said, have been demonized by the media and scholars, especially on issues of security and terrorism. Many also felt that there is a lack of research in the social science fields, about the Tamil community. Traditionally, Tamil society has encouraged its children to study law, medicine and engineering, neglecting areas such as history, sociology and literature.

One area where there has been prolific academic intervention by Tamils and non-Tamils is that of feminist work. Feminist scholarship has understandably jumped on the myriad opportunities, glaring inconsistencies of thought and ambivalent messages of empowerment entailed in the discourse around women in Tamil separatist nationalism.

There have been different theorizations, both positive and negative, of the female Tigers. One scholar refers to the feminism contained within the LTTE ideology as a ‘marital feminism’ (Schalk 1994: 165). Schalk provides an account of this martial feminism, stating that the female Tigers reject traditional notions and markers of femininity, to take up arms, just like men. However, he also states that there are important notions of (feminine) chastity, purity and restraint (karpu) in Tamil society, and this forms a central tension in this notion of empowerment (Schalk 1994: 178).

Others have vehemently opposed this characterization, arguing that participation in war does not constitute empowerment and that adopting markers of masculinity is problematic for feminism. The discourse has, in the past, tended to be polarized, categorizing women as either victims or agents or as subjugated or liberated (de Alwis 2002: 682). Increasingly however, feminist
scholarship has recognized this as a false dichotomy and emphasis is now placed on understanding the evolution of constructs of Tamil women (as ‘warrior mothers’ at first, to being liberated from patriarchy to the ‘masculinized virgin warrior’) (de Alwis 2002). Others have analyzed the empowerment entailed within these constructs as an ‘ambivalent’ one (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001).

At the same time, some feminist scholars have focused on the recruitment of women within the LTTE as a purely opportunistic inclusion, based on dwindling numbers in the forces, thereby discounting notions of empowerment.14 They make reference to the lack of women in positions of power within the LTTE and the continued gendered views on men, women and marriage etc… However, society does not make sharp ruptures or paradigm shifts of tradition within a few decades. No social transformation takes place without some link to, or containment of a nostalgic remnant of its past.

Traditional categories of motherhood and the chaste, pure woman, while deeply complex and often problematic, have been used by groups, for peace. The Mother’s Front movements for instance, successfully invoked traditional concepts of motherhood to work for peace in the country. Constructions of gender are extremely important to understand, before one can talk of equality. Women combatants indicated through conversation that they are very aware of their de-feminized/masculinized image and reiterate that this is just a functional necessity. At the same time, when they want to be married afterwards, they are criticized for not having been liberated.

14 Feminist scholar Radhika Coomaraswamy has argued in this way (Please see Sarita Subramaniam in the bibliography). No doubt the thinning of the LTTE’s ranks must have been a major factor in the decision to recruit women, but one cannot easily dismiss the potential for greater gender equality, once women did come into the ranks. By 1991 an LTTE released figure claimed that there were 3000 women fighters (Schalk 1994: 166).
Women are not suddenly going to occupy different professions and become equal to men in the post-conflict situation in Sri Lanka. Yes, female combatants have fought alongside men, commanded soldiers in battle, driven trucks, fired guns, repaired machinery and lived in severely difficult conditions. However, no, they will still have a difficult battle ahead of them when peace comes. There will be stigmas attached to women in war, especially for those with visible scars. Ex-combatants will likely marry other ex-combatants and will attempt to perform duties that are related to the LTTE administration. They will also probably go through deeply traumatic moments and not be understood by their loved ones (if their loved ones are alive and accept them). This does not mean that they were not empowered in some ways.

We have to ask if empowerment is measured by contextual choice, or by some universally accepted principles set out by the waves of feminism in the west. Concepts such as empowerment and liberation are not static abstractions. Liberation is not a destination, but a life-long negotiation and struggle, perhaps without an achievable end. A female combatant may have been able to transcend various gendered roles on the battlefield, and may well be expected to regress to her former role in peace times. That, however, forms part of her negotiation with feminism. While the female Tigers may be part of a larger patriarchally constructed nationalism, it does not mean that they are not negotiating their own agency within patriarchy on their own terms. As Balasingham simply states, “[t]he overall impact made by the fighting girls on Tamil society is yet to be addressed. It is also too early to predict the future in relation to the[ir] position in Tamil society after the war is over” (Balasingham 1990).
Final Thoughts

Peacebuilding has been largely premised on the development continuum of state building. With the end of the cold war, neoliberal paradigms of the state have come to dominate both in theory and practice, also becoming the standard prescriptive model for state building within post-conflict countries (Paris 2002). This model has both its protagonists and detractors and evidence about its effects, whether scientific or anecdotal, is still deeply contested.

Gender analysis has provided a space for some critical assessment of this model, but is often simply appropriated within this neoliberal paradigm. Projects around gender and peacebuilding, initiated by large donors tend to perpetuate this appropriation. Thus gender, while essential, should not be the only category of critical analysis. Attempting to disengage consciously or unconsciously from issues of class, culture and history can potentially result in disaster. This is not to say that gender equity should not be emphasized and perpetuated, but that it needs to be done with nuance. As Peteet argues in her work on Palestinian women, “[w]omen’s individual experiences and their meaning are only comprehensible within a class framework. Gender is not an exclusive or totalizing category indicating essence, experience, and a concept of self” (Peteet 1991: 6).

Gender equity is not simply a universally accepted ideal either. It is a deeply political concept that goes to the very heart of culture and nationalism in any country. Culture and nationalism being unique, the understanding of gender in each society will be tied to aspects of culture found in particular contexts. Women are both agents and victims and also form a fundamental part of a national imagining, through their productive and reproductive labour. Women are also often seen
as the symbols of culture, of earth and nationhood and as reproducers of both people and culture, women occupy not just a symbolically but also practically essential position in any nation or state. Any outside attempt to change the gender status quo is therefore seen as political. These social and local realities need to be understood and addressed when attempting peacebuilding work.

At the same time, women are of course not homogeneous in any context. Within a given society there will be differences of class and caste and between different communities, there may be differences of ethnicity, language and religion. In Sri Lanka, Tamil women are by no means homogeneous, and their differences, as much as their similarities will have to be taken into account when reintegration or reconciliation is attempted. Sensitivity must also be maintained towards the very concept of reintegration and its problematic semantics for the illegitimacy it may create for the former combatants and especially for women.

Keeping in mind all these factors, simplistic attempts to include more women as actively involved in peace processes, or to mainstream gender in peacebuilding interventions are inadequate if they do not take into account these nuances of social reality. Further, the gender agenda has not, as previously mentioned, distanced itself from the neoliberal state building policies of many peacebuilding interventions. Given the ways in which deregulation, privatization and liberalization negatively affect women, who in many countries work within non-formal economic and political spheres, gender equity sounds like empty jargon if it is at the same time not critically analytical of politico-economic policies. For instance, DDR programs that seek to train women in new occupations may be undermining some of the power women hold within traditional and/or non-formal spheres.
Important critiques have been made of the peacebuilding field and DDR practices in particular, through a gender lens. However, this gender analysis doesn’t go far enough and by defining equity mainly in terms of gender participation and representation, without questioning the system of participation and representation and the economic and social assumptions entailed therein, the gender agenda as it currently stands, can only make women visible but not bring about any real social transformation.

If donors want to initiate change, then a deep understanding of how women and men in various southern communities negotiate their gender identities within structural and cultural environments has to be understood, beyond standard labels of feminism, empowerment, liberation or gender. It must not be forgotten that these are merely concepts, and not universal prescriptions. It must also be remembered that moorings (particularly women’s) to family, kin and community are fundamentally important for an understanding of gender identities. However, despite nuanced socio-anthropological accounts, development projects still tend to consider the individual as decontextualized from his/her community and family. Women are often treated as needing to be rescued from the evil clutches of men who, by virtue of their sex and gender are genetically and culturally predisposed to violating women. On the other hand, women’s political involvement in war (perhaps as aggressors) is not usually incorporated in an understanding of their so-called needs in post-war times. Women are neither simply victims, nor only aggressors. Their actions and identity need to be viewed in context and in reference to men as well.

Framing peacebuilding interventions in terms of human rights, democracy and gender equity does not constitute an apolitical stance. As shown through the Sri Lankan example, these concepts are deeply tied to local realities of hierarchy (based on class, ethnicity, religion) and historical
processes. What I reiterate here, is that contexts and multiplicities must take precedence over agendas that are disguised as universal supra political concepts. This is not to say that gender equity, human rights and democracy are not worth fighting for, but that the players and the rules must be consistently examined. Allowing class, cultural and historical nuances to enter the gender agenda can only make the latter a more powerful critique.
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Interviews – various interviews were conducted during 2003 in Canada and Sri Lanka.


**Other Works Consulted**


