



## **IAWN SOUTH ASIA REGIONAL CONSULTATION - OCTOBER 2015**

### **THE IMPACT THE CONFLICT HAS HAD ON WOMEN AND GIRLS IN SRI LANKA AND THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE**

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To talk about the impact the armed conflict in Sri Lanka has had on women and girls and the church's response in 15 minutes is a daunting task. The issues are numerous and complex due to the very nature that the war spanned over a thirty year period.

I want to start by talking about Vasantha - not her real name.....

In February 2009 as defeat loomed for the Tamil Tigers, Vasantha was forcibly recruited against her will to help the war effort, along with several other young women. Four months later the war was over and Vasantha surrendered to the Sri Lanka security forces. She spent four years in various rehabilitation camps.

The first time the soldiers raped her in the rehabilitation camp, she staggered to the toilet to wash the blood off, before returning to her tent in silence. She didn't breathe a word for shame – and fear that one of the other former Tamil Tiger rebels in the tent might be an informer. “I did not tell the other women I'd been raped as it is not something we would discuss in our culture. I suspected the other women in my tent were also being raped but I did not ask them about it.

Over the entire period I was in this rehabilitation camp none of us ever spoke about the rapes.” It's hard to imagine the loneliness and mistrust in that tent. Vasantha noticed scratch marks from fingernails on other women's face and the bruises on their legs. Sometimes she heard screaming from the main building where they were taken for interrogation. She watched other women being taken away at night and always returning via the toilet and she knew why.

Some months later, she was taken for interrogation again. While a soldier tried to rape her she resisted but was knocked down to the ground and he raped her, digging his nails into her back so hard that the scratches bled. Before Vasantha could put her skirt back on again, another man came into the room “He pushed me to the floor. I tried to put up a resistance but he raped me. I could smell the alcohol on his breath. I was exhausted and fainted. I cannot recall clearly what was happening but I heard doors being opened and closed and I think other people came into the room.” In pain and bleeding heavily, Vasantha eventually returned to her tent, via the toilet once again. The next time she was called for interrogation, the soldier used his cigarette butt to burn her several times on the arms and thigh, while saying something in Sinhala that she

couldn't understand. Once he'd finished raping her, a second man raped her. A third man came, slapped her hard when she tried to resist, and raped her." I think there was a fourth and fifth man as well," she says, "I was in and out of consciousness by then."

Vasantha's story is one of hundreds. Her uncle paid a bribe to the security forces for her release from the rehabilitation camp. She didn't go home to see her mother, but immediately escaped to India. It was only after arriving in the UK that she eventually had to tell someone that she'd been raped. " She thinks the sexual abuse happened to everyone in the camp." I spoke to you about this openly so a lot of people will come to know that this is still going on in Sri Lanka. I don't know whether I personally will get justice but I am safe now so I should ensure it doesn't happen to anyone else."<sup>1</sup>

Rape was used as a weapon of war and continues to be used after the war concluded. Yasmin Sooka in her recent report on Torture and Sexual Violence in Sri Lanka 2009-2014, has documented post war sexual violence against women by the armed forces.<sup>2</sup> The international community has begun to recognize rape as violence. However it remains the least condemned war crime. It is thought of as unfortunate but unavoidable part of war.

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Sri Lanka's protracted civil war between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Thamil Ealam saw women and children suffer disproportionately. They were subjected to shelling, aerial bombardment, starvation, lack of food and medicine, loss of home and loss of the bread winner. The result has been tens of thousands of female headed households in the North and East because of death or disappearances. The government has estimated that there are some 89,000 plus war widows in the north and East.<sup>3</sup> Families throughout those areas experienced many waves of conflict, displacement and militarization. In the last year of the war in the Vanni, people endured series of displacement some up to 19 times, and months of being shelled by Government troops and held hostage by the LTTE after which about 300,000 mostly women and children were herded into closed government camps.

Children were separated from their families and tracing mechanisms were not in place during their long incarceration in camps where freedom of movement was curtailed. This broke down their coping mechanisms as they lost their unit of family and community. Children were psychologically scarred and the government did not allow counseling in camps. Their education was severely disrupted for years and many are only slowly returning to school. Women were

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<sup>1</sup> Sooka, Yasmin (2014), *An Unfinished war: Torture and Sexual Violence in Sri Lanka 2009-2014*. The Bar Human Rights Committee of England and Wales (BHRC) and the International Truth and Justice Project, Sri Lanka.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> *Sri Lanka- Women's Insecurity in the North and East*. (2011) International Crisis Group, Asia Report No. 217.

not allowed to grieve the death of their loved ones and were not allowed to commemorate or memorialize the dead. Women are still looking for their missing husbands and children taken away by the government armed forces. Six years after the war these women continue to search the missing.

These events have left women and girls vulnerable at multiple levels. Inadequate housing, limited means of transport and employment opportunities. Insufficient funds to feed their families let alone taking care of the maimed or disabled in the war. Alarming incidents of Gender Based Violence including domestic violence within the Tamil community in part fuelled by rising alcohol use by men. Many women are forced into prostitution or coercive sexual relationships. In the north the ratio of military personnel and people is 1:6. Poor women are forced to take menial jobs in military camps in desperation to feed their children. Some have been trafficked within the country and abroad. Pregnancies among teenagers have increased.<sup>4</sup>

In this backdrop there is a disturbing dynamic, in which efforts to protect women from sexual violence end up undermining their political and economic agency making them even more vulnerable to victimization. The threat of violence by the military has led women to lead tightly circumscribed lives, limiting their daily activities in order to minimize the risk of sexual assault.<sup>5</sup>

There have been incidences of suicide and attempted suicide especially among female ex-combatants. They face social stigma around their involvement in the movement. The stigma is both cultural, a conservative backlash against the involvement of women in politics and public life and strategic in community members fear the wrath of military forces or come under increased surveillance themselves interacting with ex-combatants. Most ex-combatants live in constant fear of the military. The trauma they have been through many by forced recruitment during the final weeks of the war is hidden deep inside themselves- something they do not wish to talk about. Former child soldiers face similar discrimination.

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In spite of the negative impact the conflict has had on women, from the ashes rose women of great courage. The ability to have endured so much suffering has made them resilient, strong, articulate and sharp. They became the bread winner, the provider, the protector of their families. They pushed boundaries and one cannot underestimate this enormous strength that

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<sup>4</sup> *Sri Lanka- Women's Insecurity in the North and East*. (2011) International Crisis Group, Asia Report No. 217.

<sup>5</sup> Gowrinathan, N. and Cronin-Furman, K. (2014), *The Forever Victims? Tamil women in Post War Sri Lanka*. Colin Powell School for Civic Global Leadership, The City College of New York

was unleashed - a reminder of the spirituality of the women at the Crucifixion? **“Of patient hope, and quiet brave endurance ... that fears nor pain nor death”<sup>6</sup>**

Women who have taken leadership empower other women by solidarity and listening. Christian women conducted prayer groups in the midst of war and their Hindu friends joined them. Women established lobby groups to search for the missing and disappeared, they had their voices heard by the international community and rights groups. According to the United Nations after Iraq, Sri Lanka has the highest number of enforced disappearances in the world.<sup>7</sup>

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So how did our Anglican church respond?

The church responded in numerous ways and I will talk briefly on a few and in detail of one particular response that may interest you.

1. Through prophetic pastoral ministry especially in the last months of the war. The Anglican Church was often the lone voice making appeals for the safety and protection of women and children and challenged the continuing intimidation and violence. They spoke for dignity and against the atrocities that were being committed. Appealed for the safety of civilians, medical attention to the injured, food and medicines for the civilians and protested against the deliberate aerial bombardment targeted on hospitals and civilian targets and the entrapment by the LTTE. The church spoke truth to power to the government, the LTTE and the Diplomatic Corp.
2. There was also the silent pastoral ministry by clergy and laity in accompanying people to the police stations, army camps looking for the missing and disappeared. There are a thousand stories that will not get published. The clergy risking their own lives stayed with the women and children and never left. And this ministry was not only for Anglican men and women but for all the people who needed this support. The Vanni Task Force and the Board of Social responsibility two community based organizations rooted in the diocese of Colombo were present with the people through the war and after.
3. The church also responded with immediate humanitarian relief.
4. Outside the theatre of war solidarity and prayer vigils were held regularly. Our very first ordained woman priest Canon Malini Devananda who sadly is no longer with us, led this mission in drawing women and men to participate and to also make them aware of the

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<sup>6</sup> Hymn *O Perfect Love*

<sup>7</sup> Nowak M. (2014) *Enforced Disappearances in the OSCE Region*. [www.osce.org/odihr/](http://www.osce.org/odihr/)

suffering our sisters and brothers faced trapped in a cruel war because often the majority of the south was so removed from the reality on the battlefield.

After the war the Colombo Diocesan Council declared the year 2010 as the year for “National Healing and Reconciliation”.

The Board of Women’s Work (BOWW) in collaboration with the Reconciliation and Peace Desk (RAP) of the diocese organized a 4 day residential conference for 40 women from the two ethnic groups from around the country to attempt to equip these women in the vital work of peace building and conflict transformation. We aptly called the conference “From a tear drop to a Pearl”. Sri Lanka has been known as the Pearl of the Indian Ocean but as we faced a protracted war and saw death and destruction we came to be known as the tear drop.

With a generous donation from the Anglican Church of Canada as our partner in this mission we were able to run a very successful conference.

Apart from daily worship and Bible study we addressed different aspects of the conflict such as

- i. Identifying and understanding conflict,
- ii. Christ’s approach to conflict,
- iii. Using the Bible as a Tool for Conflict transformation and
- iv. Mediation and Spirituality for conflict transformation.

We had external resource persons with the relevant expertise. We also used video clips and had conversations around them. Some of the participants from the North and East were able to share their traumatic experiences and in some ways it was a space for them to share their pain which they had not been able to do before. Many were in tears as they told their story. For those who were not from the war zones it was an awakening. A great bonding took place and both ethnic groups were able share and learn from each other. So, we who are many are one body in Christ. When one person suffers we all suffer.

In addition to these sessions we also had creative craft workshops learning simple skills such as Needlecraft, making jewelry, greeting cards and book marks. This was popular as women were seen enjoying each others’ company and learning new skills. New friendships were made and laughter and fellowship amidst the pain and sorrow. The process was one of healing and was I would say a very significant part of the conference. The final plenary conclude identifying follow-up mechanisms.

Firstly at a personal level participants would attempt to put to practice what they learned in their homes, work places, community and church. At a broader level they would return to their parishes to work with the clergy on setting up peace committees in their respective parishes

working through the Mother's Union, work ecumenically with neighbouring parishes, organize workshops in their own parishes and joining civil society peace groups in the area.

The sessions ended with a moving Eucharist and teary farewells. Bringing these women together to share life experiences and to consider what Christian women can offer in the task of conflict transformation was a powerful and enriching experience.

In conclusion.....

Through decades of brutal violence, women have borne the greatest burdens of the conflict. After suffering tragedy and loss of children, husbands, fathers and brothers throughout the conflict, it is women now who have been most left behind. Worst affected by the conflict, women are also heavily committed to seek avenues to prevent the recurrence of violence. Not every woman is a rape victim, and not every woman wants a sewing machine. But all women will benefit from expanded space for economic and political agency. That Sri Lanka's vibrant civil society includes women activists of stature, who are leading on key issues of reconciliation, provides great hope for restoring peace in the post-war phase of our history. Hence, empowering women to take the lead in a national reconciliation drive, in peace-building efforts and political transformation, could prove the key to achieving Sri Lanka's elusive peace.

The empowerment of women transforms societies, as it unlocks the potential of half the world's population.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Partnership for Change*. Christian Aid, 2012, p16