

Cogs in the Wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

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This article examines women's involvement as combatants in the Sri Lankan Tamil guerrilla organisation the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). It addresses women's motivations for choosing to join the organisation, then examines the debate over the LTTE's brand of nationalist feminism before looking at how women's experiences in the movement have affected their views on gender in society. The article hopes to shed some light on the feminist debate about these women, and through this on the broader global feminist debate about women's roles in nationalism and war. The article argues for an analysis of women's involvement in the movement that accords the women agency and is open to certain positive results stemming from their participation, yet recognises the problematic nature of nationalist feminism.

Qadri Ismail has noted that members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the hegemonic Sri Lankan Tamil guerrilla organisation, have frequently been referred to as 'the boys' or 'our boys' by many Sri Lankan Tamils.¹ This gendered description is interesting when reflected upon in light of the prominent role of women in the LTTE, particularly since the 1990s, and the lively debates on women's involvement that have been conducted both in academic circles and within the Tamil communities in the northeast of Sri Lanka. This article challenges the label 'the boys' and the gendered assumptions underpinning it by looking at 'the girls' in the movement. It draws on fieldwork conducted in the north and east of Sri Lanka in 2002, including in-depth qualitative interviews with 14 female LTTE combatants and ex-combatants. The article first outlines a brief background to the conflict and history of women's involvement in the LTTE, then addresses the reasons some women have chosen to join the organisation. It then examines the debate over the LTTE's brand of nationalist feminism before looking at how women's experiences in the movement have affected their views on gender in society. The article hopes to shed some light on the feminist debate about these

women, and through this on the broader global feminist debate about women's roles in nationalism and war.

BACKGROUND TO THE CONFLICT AND WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT

Sri Lanka currently has an ethnically diverse population of about 17.5 million. There has been no census since 1983 so exact current figures are hard to come by but it is estimated that around 74.6 per cent of the population are Sinhalese, 12.6 per cent are Sri Lankan Tamil, 7.4 per cent are Muslim, and 5.5 per cent are Indian Tamil. There are also very small minorities of Burghers (Eurasians, mostly descended from Portuguese and Dutch colonisers), Malays and descendants of other trading peoples from East Asia and the Middle East, and a tiny indigenous population of Veddas.² The Sinhalese are predominantly Buddhist, with a Christian minority, while Tamils are mostly Hindu, also with a Christian minority. Christians make up about seven per cent of the population overall.

The foundations for the late twentieth century war were laid during the colonial period, which is beyond the scope of this article to discuss. Various ethnically Tamil groups (of mixed religion) have been fighting against the predominantly Sinhala-Buddhist state, and Sinhalese and Muslim civilians, for an independent state in the north and east of Sri Lanka. The conflict has been increasingly violent since the 1970s, leading to war from 1983. There have been at least five main militant Tamil separatist groups, which generally have not agreed with each other on their demands or on appropriate strategies and have frequently fought amongst themselves. The most powerful group, the LTTE, attained hegemony in the mid-1980s by destroying their competitors. In 2002 it was estimated that around 70,000 people have died as a result of the conflict. Up to 500,000 people may have left Sri Lanka and 600,000 have been displaced, with about 75,000 living in camps for internally-displaced people.

Women have been active in all the Tamil nationalist groups but research on their military participation has focused on the LTTE because their presence as combatants in substantial numbers has primarily been a phenomenon of the 1990s, by which point the LTTE had achieved hegemony among the organisations. Women's participation as combatants was not at all widespread in the 1970s but in the 1980s appeals were made by the different groups for them to join the struggle. From the mid-1980s the LTTE has aggressively recruited women into their fighting cadres. Initially these women were involved in propaganda work, medical care, information collection, fund-raising and recruitment, but were soon given military training and participated in combat. In 1983 the LTTE founded a special section for women called

the *Vituthalai Pulikal Munani* (Women's Front of the Liberation Tigers) but they did not begin battle training for another two years. The first group of women were trained for combat in Tamil Nadu (India) in 1985 and their first battle was against the Sri Lankan military in July 1986. In October 1987 the LTTE's leader Velupillai Prabhakaran³ set up the first all-women training camp in Jaffna, for the second and subsequent groups. By 1989 this unit had its own leadership structure.⁴

Until June 1990 the proportion of female fighters in the LTTE was small but it then increased rapidly. The women's military wing is a well-organised and highly disciplined force. Apparently the LTTE's naval force, the Sea Tigers, is primarily female and the suicide squad, known as the Black Tigers, has a large number of women in it. The number of female combatants is naturally a military secret but estimates vary between about 15–20 per cent to one third of their core combat strength, with some less realistically claiming 50 per cent.

MOTIVATIONS OF FEMALE COMBATANTS

It is well known that the LTTE asks each Tamil family to contribute one member to the organisation. Notwithstanding this and the persistent allegations of forcible conscription, most recruits do seem to be voluntary. The initial 'pull factor' of the LTTE's active recruitment of women seems likely to be, as many have suggested, primarily a pragmatic response to the need for more fighters created by the loss of men through death, as refugees and as emigrants, rather than stemming from an ideological commitment to equality and women's rights.⁵ However, this does not account for the 'push factors' of the female combatants. There are a variety of different and intersecting reasons why women have chosen to join the militants; some of these are common to both female and male combatants, while others are gender-specific to women.

Nationalist Sentiment

Sumantra Bose argues that LTTE women, like LTTE men, are primarily motivated by 'nationalist fervour.' He suggests that by the time of the mid-1980s drive for women to join the LTTE, 'Tamil nationalism, in its radical form, had been transformed into a mass phenomenon...and women of the younger generation of Tamils were as alienated from the state, and as inspired by the vision of a liberated Eelam, as their male counterparts'.⁶ This was borne out in my own research as the majority of LTTE women I interviewed referred to ideas of freedom for the Tamil nation, self-determination, land and rights for Tamils as part of or as the main reason for them joining

the movement. Krishna,⁷ now the Women's Political Wing Leader for Trincomalee District, maintained that in Sri Lanka 'there are three communities: Tamils, Sinhalese, Muslims. Either you must be parallel to the Sinhalese and live together in harmony with the same status; if not, the Tamils must be separated and live happily with their own self-determination'. Barathy, currently a soldier, asserted that 'the Sri Lankan Government did not respect our rights, they did not respect us, the Tamil people. We have to have a homeland for us, a separate homeland. We have rights like Sinhalese and Western countries.'

Suffering and Oppression

Notwithstanding the above, I view nationalist sentiment as a sort of meta-reason for enlisting; beneath this ideological motivation there are also more specific, more personal factors operating. One such factor, intertwined with nationalist ideology, is the communal perception of suffering, oppression and injustice. Sometimes this is related to a personal experience; in other cases it has been received as part of the Tamil narrative of oppression and suffering, made tangible by witnessing the experiences of friends and neighbours. Adele Ann⁸ argues that '[g]rowing national oppression...brought about a situation where Tamil women took to arms'.⁹ Thus, '[c]onstant exposure to oppression has had a profound effect on the life and thinking of young Tamil women'.¹⁰ Ann claims that the female combatants are often from families particularly affected by the war and in some cases are motivated by personal experience.¹¹

Other research has found evidence to back this up. In an interview with Margaret Trawick, Sita made it clear that she and many of the other combatants were motivated to join the LTTE because of their anger over the deaths of loved ones at the hands of the Sri Lankan military and police. Her older brother was killed by the Special Task Force of the Police in 1985 and another brother was killed at Vantarmullar University in 1990. After the so-called 'troubles' of 1990 she and her sister joined the LTTE. Sita clearly emphasised that it was the death of her brothers that prompted her decision: 'my brothers were killed, and out of rage, I joined the movement'; 'I wanted to die as my brothers died.'¹²

This notion of personal suffering as a motivation to join the movement was also substantiated in my own research. Four of the 14 LTTE women I interviewed mentioned the death of a family member as a motivating factor. Banuka's father was killed by the Sri Lankan army in 1990, which she gave as a primary reason for enlisting. She joined in 1993 at the age of 16 and is now the Women's Political Wing Leader for Batticaloa-Amparai District. Malarville's father was killed by the army in 1987, which affected her deeply; she was about 11 at the time. In 1990 she enlisted in the LTTE and she

stated to me that the death of her father was one of the main reasons for this. She is currently in charge of the video section in Batticaloa-Amparai District. Thamnilni's father was killed in a boat massacre in Jaffna in 1985, allegedly perpetrated by the Sri Lankan navy in plainclothes. When I asked why she joined the LTTE, the first thing she said was 'one thing that affected me was I was deprived of a parent, of my father, and that was causing me agitation.' However she did not enlist until 1998, at the age of 22. She is a photographer for the LTTE and has been to the battlefield documenting the war. Finally, Thamilachi's brother died as an LTTE 'martyr' in 1990. Her family was already supporting the organisation by sheltering and assisting cadres but her brother's death hastened her personal decision to enlist, which she did in 1991 at the age of 21. She is currently a Public Relations Officer.

Six of the women mentioned that their families had been displaced and/or their areas attacked in the war and this was clearly a contributory factor for many in their decision to join. Thamilvily's family was displaced in 1995 after her village in Jaffna was bombed and she enlisted later that year, at the age of 17. She is now the Women's Political Wing Leader for Jaffna District. Like Thamilvily, Barathy's family was displaced in 1995 when the army retook much of the Jaffna peninsula. When asked why she joined the LTTE she mentioned this displacement and the occupation of Jaffna, the subsequent food deprivation and the deaths of fellow students through aerial bombing. She joined the movement in 1996 at the age of 16. Sudarvili's family, also from the Jaffna peninsula, was displaced more than once. While on the move during one displacement she witnessed a horrific massacre, which also contributed to her desire to stop the insecurity and suffering her community was experiencing by joining the LTTE. She maintained that 'we feel this is the only way to keep fighting against the military and safeguard the people'. She joined in 1998 at the age of 19 and currently is a soldier.

Many combatants I spoke to enlisted because of their anger over the suffering of others in their communities; eight of the women gave this as a partial or their main reason for joining. Sudarvili stated that 'our people have been suffering. The common places and the churches and the *kovils* [Hindu temples] were bombed by the government, without any reason. We don't have anybody to save us and what we feel is if we have someone to safeguard us then there won't be any problem.' Prasanthi stressed that at the time she enlisted at the age of 14 in 1990, Trincomalee was constantly under attack by the military. The family of one of her classmates was killed, she saw people being cut and thrown into fires and others being dragged off buses and killed. Thamilachi explained that 'the time I joined, about 1990, was perhaps the worst in this ongoing war. We had seen with our own eyes children who had been orphaned, parents who had lost their children. And there was no

question of these children getting minimum education. So what we saw, at that juncture, only convinced us that something must be done.'

Educational Disruption and Restrictions

Given the importance accorded in the literature on Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism to the government scheme known as 'standardisation', which has effectively discriminated against Tamils in university entrance, I was expecting this to be given by some of my interviewees as part of their reasons for joining the LTTE. However, what was revealed in my own research was that perhaps even more significant than the standardisation system has been the general disruption to secondary school education caused by the war, particularly linked to experiences of displacement. If one is prevented from even completing high school it is impossible to get access to tertiary education for this reason, without even factoring in the impact of standardisation. Five of the interviewees discussed disruption to their education as a result of displacement, three of them including this as part of the reason they enlisted in the LTTE. Sudarvili was taking A Levels but was unable to sit her exams because of displacement. 'I wanted to continue my studies but I was unable to [because of] the army operations. Again and again we were displaced. When I was studying AL I was unable to take the exams, so I decided to join our movement.' She does not want this disruption to education to happen to future generations and wanted to do something to help end this. Thamilini, now the overall Women's Political Wing Leader for Tamil Eelam, was also studying for A Levels when she joined the movement at the age of 18, and wanted to go on to university. Unfortunately this was in 1990 and the war situation was so bad that it was extremely difficult to study.

Sexual Violence Against Women

It seems clear that as well as motivational factors common to both women and men there are some reasons for taking up arms that are gender-specific to women. Adele Ann claims in regard to women's recruitment that the presence of the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) 'was a water shed. The Indian army was brutal and male chauvinist. The rapes, and molesting made a bitter impact.'¹³ Bose also suggests this, noting that the IPKF presence in the northeast in 1987-90 'was marked by hundreds of rapes and assaults on women by Indian soldiers, yet another instance of the violence of the state abetting oppositional strategies of social mobilisation'.¹⁴ When I raised the issue of sexual violence against women by the IPKF and the Sri Lankan military, seven of the interviewees discussed this as a reason for women in general to join the LTTE and fear of or anger about this was part of their

own reasoning for four of them. Thamilachi and Shanthi (no longer an LTTE member) both reported that although this was not part of their own reasons for joining, they have met many female combatants who have suffered rape, were extremely angry and enlisted for that reason. Thamilachi also mentioned the infamous case of the rape and murder of schoolgirl Krishanthi, claiming that 'had she been in the movement she would have been safe.'

Barathy volunteered the information that 'particularly in the Jaffna peninsula, Tamil girls are raped by the Sri Lankan army. I am a female; I have to liberate the Tamil women from the occupation. So I, we are, also fighting for the women's liberation.' When I then asked if fear of rape was part of her reason to join the LTTE, she answered 'yes, it was part of the reason for joining. Everyone has to protect themselves. And also I have to protect the Tamil people'. Similarly, Thamilini answered that the fear of sexual violence was part of her motivation. She felt that there was nobody who could protect her, so she had to be able to safeguard herself. She also reported that in normal Tamil society women are usually blamed for their own rape. She claimed that the LTTE does not do this and instead views sexual violence as an 'accident', meaning that it was not the victim's fault.

Women's Emancipation

As well as the fear of or anger about rape, it has been suggested that perhaps some women have joined the LTTE for a variety of reasons surrounding ideas of women's emancipation and increasing their life opportunities. Bose suggests that it is possible 'that many women have joined the movement at least partly because they see their participation as a means of breaking taboos, and, in particular, destroying the stultifying straitjacket of conformity and subservience traditionally imposed upon them by a rigidly and self-righteously patriarchal society'.¹⁵ Peter Schalk asserts that '[t]he main belief of the Tamil women fighters is that their participation in armed struggle will bring them advantages in future, in a society at peace. This is one of their principal motives for taking up arms.'

Obviously another of their fundamental objectives is the independence of Tamil Eelam, thus, '[i]n their minds, these two objectives are connected: there will be no equality for women without an independent state'.¹⁶ I disagree with what I believe to be Schalk's over-emphasis on future advantages for women as a 'principal motive' for joining the movement, but certainly he is right that according to the ideology of the LTTE the only way for women to gain equality is through the nationalist movement.

The majority of the women I interviewed said that they had not been aware of issues surrounding women's social conditions, women's rights or

equality before they joined the movement. However, all of them have had this awareness raised since being with the movement and many of them now seem to have a clear commitment to wanting to improve life for Tamil women (discussed in the next section). Interestingly, five of the interviewees did report that they had had some ideas about the social problems facing Tamil women before they enlisted in the LTTE; however, only two of them reported that this was part of their reason to join the movement. Sumathi, who writes for the LTTE's women's journal, *Birds of Freedom*, was 14 when she joined the LTTE in 1990. When asked why she joined, alongside seeing many people killed by shooting and shelling and wanting to help achieve 'Tamil rights', she also said that when she was growing up at home there were some 'superstitions' surrounding female behaviour - that girls should not climb trees, go out alone or ride bicycles, for example. She rebelliously 'wanted to break everything', so she joined the movement. She stated that even at a young age she had had a desire to help 'deliver' women from their problems. She heard about the female cadres in the LTTE and felt 'they are doing everything, so why can't I?' When she finally met some LTTE women with their weapons, she knew she wanted to join the movement. Sudarvili said of herself and other female combatants that despite societal expectations, 'we are able to see that the boys have joined the LTTE so we thought, if they can, why can't we do these things?' She asserted that 'through our struggle for liberation we are fighting for the women's liberation also. Not only within the movement, outside also.' When I asked if she had had these ideas before joining the movement, she answered 'I had these ideas before, but most of the women cadres did not. I had a question why these girls were oppressed by these men'. She hoped to assist the struggle for women's liberation as well as Tamil national liberation but was unsure whether or not she could; once she enlisted she became convinced that she could do this within the movement.

COGS IN THE WHEEL? THE DEBATE OVER 'WOMEN'S LIBERATION' AND THE LTTE

All the Tamil militant groups, particularly the LTTE, have expressed some form of commitment to women's liberation within their commitment to national liberation. For the LTTE it is their female combatants who are the supreme symbol of women's liberation and the utilisation of feminist ideas and terminology seems in some (though my research suggests perhaps only a minority of) cases to have been a factor attracting women to the organisation. The Women's Front of the LTTE has tried to publicise

the unequal position of Tamil women in their society. The aims of the Front, formulated in 1991, were:

- to secure the right to self-determination of the Tamil Eelam people and establish an independent democratic state of Tamil Eelam;
- to abolish oppressive caste discrimination and divisions, and semi-feudal customs like dowry;
- to eliminate all discrimination against Tamil women and all other discrimination, and to secure social, political and economic equality;
- to ensure that Tamil women control their own lives; and
- to secure legal protection for women against sexual harassment, rape and domestic violence.

Thus, it is the independence struggle that frames the struggle for women's rights. This is clear in all speeches by LTTE leader Prabhakaran on the matter and in the views of the Women's Front – the Tamil struggle is prioritised and women's emancipation is seen as dependent on the struggle.

According to Prabhakaran himself, '[t]he ideology of women liberation [sic] is a child born out of the womb of our liberation struggle',¹⁷ it 'is the fervent child that had its genesis in the matrix of our national liberation movement. Its rise and progress is an incomparably unique chapter in history.' The women's liberation movement is, he claims, an integral part of the greater Tamil struggle.¹⁸ He states that 'Tamil women are subjected to intolerable suffering as a consequence of male chauvinistic oppression, violence and from the social evils of casteism and dowry' and suggests that some of these problems 'can be resolved if men and women recognize each other's liberty, equality and dignity and enter into a cordial relationship based [on] mutual understanding and share the responsibilities of family life and also contribute to the development of society'.

Prabhakaran is careful to state, however, that '[t]he struggle against male chauvinistic oppression is not a struggle against men. It is an ideological struggle against the ignorance of men.' Significantly, he implies that only women who are involved with the Tamil nationalist struggle can achieve liberation for women, asserting that '[i]t is only the women with a revolutionary consciousness who could become a revolutionary force. Only such a revolutionary force can destroy the shackles of oppression.'¹⁹ Therefore, '[t]he Tamil Eelam revolutionary woman has transformed herself as a Tiger for the Liberation of our land and liberation of women. She, like a fire that burns injustices, has taken up arms.'²⁰

Schalk, however, notes that although Prabhakaran's speeches on women's liberation are very radical in many ways, they are missing 'some statement to

the effect that the common struggle of men and women is a training in and model for co-operation in a future society at peace.’²¹

Feminist Critiques of Tamil Nationalist Feminism and Female Combatants

Much has been written about the question over the possibilities for women’s emancipation and empowerment within the LTTE. Kumudini Samuel views female armed Tamil militants as one group of women who have rejected traditional notions of femininity, but in common with others she notes that the national liberation struggle is the primary issue for them and alleges that women’s subordination within the national struggle is not a question they have addressed.²²

Slightly more optimistically, Sitralega Maunaguru maintains that even though the major Tamil nationalist groups have addressed women’s equality largely from within a conventional Leftist ideology that does not recognise the specific oppression or problems of women within the nationalist movement, ‘the acceptance of the concept of women’s liberation, even in this very limited form, provided an important space for issues relating to gender, power and oppression to be debated by feminists.’²³

Many feminists (and others) have questioned the ideology of ‘women’s liberation’ expounded by the LTTE, challenging its militant and militarist nature as inherently anti-feminist and being sceptical of the idea that participation in the LTTE or the other militant groups can or has brought improvements for Tamil women as a whole. Radhika Coomaraswamy asserts that ‘[u]nless feminism is linked to humanism, to non-violence, to hybridity and a celebration of life over death, it will not provide society with the alternatives that we so desperately seek’.²⁴ As Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake has poignantly suggested in regard to the varying ways that women’s agency has changed and expanded as a result of the war, ‘[t]he argument that 18 years of armed conflict might have resulted in the unintended empowerment of women... is dangerous and disturbing for those of us who believe in and advocate the peaceful resolution of conflicts arising from social injustice... We have been wary of analysing the unintended transformations brought by war, of seeing positives in violence, lest we be branded “war-mongers”’.²⁵ For many feminists committed to peace, this notion has been particularly painful in regard to women who become combatants.

Hoole *et al.* assert that ‘it would be a positive result if a few of those [female combatants] who come out, with a richness of experience and self-criticism, become a catalyst for the further advancement of the position of women in this land.’ They suggest that ‘after a decade-long history of the freedom struggle, and with major liberation movements even boasting of armed women’s sections, one would have expected tangible cracks

in the ideology of Tamil society and some liberating experience for the women'.²⁶ They themselves are pessimistic about what has actually been the reality but it is worth bearing in mind that their book was published in 1990, only five years after women first began joining the LTTE as combatants.

One reason for the pessimism of many is the presumed lack of women in highly placed decision-making positions within the LTTE. Chandra de Silva maintains that although there is a women's military wing and they are well known as suicide bombers, there is no evidence of their participation in policy-making, decision-making or planning at the highest levels.²⁷ Samuel also asserts that despite their strong military involvement, 'no woman was allowed into the patriarchal male echelons of political decisionmaking of the LTTE'.²⁸ Finally, Radhika Coomaraswamy has said of LTTE women that '[t]hey are not initiators of ideas, they are only implementers of policy made by someone else, by men. . . . They become cogs in the wheel of someone else's designs and plans. . . . They are the consumers, not the producers of the grand political project'.²⁹

However, Bose claimed in 1994 that three of the LTTE's Central Committee, its top decision-making body, were women.³⁰ In 2002, Thamilini told me that there were currently 12 members on the Central Committee, five of whom were women. There is also a separate women-only committee on women's development, with members drawn from various sections of the organisation. When I asked her about the allegation that women are much more represented in the military activities than in political activities, Thamilini agreed that in the past women were not so involved in the Political Wing but argued that this is changing. She explained that since men have been involved in the LTTE and in the military activities for longer than women, they have had many more opportunities than women to rise to high political positions.

Women are not obstructed from political activities, so according to the LTTE once they have developed the necessary capabilities they are able to participate in such roles in greater numbers. Cynthia Cockburn has maintained that in her opinion, the political culture of the organisation is more important than mere numbers of women.³¹ While I accept this is highly significant I think that exactly what that political culture is, and whether or not it will ultimately produce positive or negative results for Tamil women, is still an open question and that numbers *are* important.

Bose argues that 'given the extreme conservatism that has historically been the hallmark of Sri Lankan Tamil society. . . it is difficult to disagree with the LTTE's assessment that the mass participation, in a variety of roles, of women constitutes "the most remarkable feature of our national struggle"'. In addition, he suggests that 'the high-profile participation of women has served to impart to the Tiger Movement a general, popular character that might otherwise have been absent from it'.³² This mirrors Nira Yuval-Davis's suggestion that

incorporating women into militaries within nationalist movements conveys the notion that *all* members of the collectivity are symbolically incorporated into the military.³³ Bose maintains, therefore, that the 'liberating impact' of the Tiger movement on the lives of young Tamil women should not be underestimated and comments that '[t]he confidence and poise of leading Tiger women is impressive indeed.'³⁴

This was something I also noticed during my fieldwork. Tiger women have an air of quiet assurance and confidence that is not necessarily obvious in other women; even the way they carry themselves is different. In light of historical experience, however, Bose nonetheless suggests that we should be cautious in pursuing this argument. He asserts that the changes within the Tamil social formation in regard to women (and in other social areas) may not have been consciously *intended* by LTTE leaders but have been a concrete result of their strategies of mass mobilisation. He believes that overall the changes to the pre-existing Tamil social order are seen by the LTTE leadership as being simply incidental to the ultimate goal of an independent state of Eelam which, he claims, is all the LTTE truly cares about. Social changes within the Tamil nation are welcomed and encouraged only 'so long as that process flows parallel to the national cause.'³⁵ In regard to the changing status and roles of women this suggests, as in so many other cases of nationalist mobilisation, the uneasy and constantly contested relationship between nationalism and feminism.

Intellectual Changes in Female Combatants of the LTTE

Vidyamali Samarasinghe argues that through women's participation in armed struggle in civil war, they also become actors in the public sphere. The question is whether this public sphere activity is temporary and transitory, ending with the war, or whether wartime gains can be consolidated in peacetime. She reminds us that 'women's participation in the public arena of the armed struggle is certainly no guarantee that women have finally penetrated into the public sphere of activities on a basis of gender equality'.³⁶ Even Adele Ann herself notes that '[t]he overall impact made by the fighting girls on Tamil society is yet to be assessed. It is also too early to predict the future in relation to the position in Tamil society after the war is over'.³⁷

The question of the impact of the female cadres on other Tamil women and on Tamil society generally, and whether or not their current gains will or can be consolidated in peacetime, is extremely important but cannot be addressed here. I do agree, however, with those who argue that in post-revolutionary states 'the priorities of governance and statehood change, and with that the agenda for women may also change. Evidence from other liberation movements illustrates that often times women are politely told to go back into the reproductive sphere and to the kitchen'.³⁸ I focus here on changes

in the thinking of female combatants as a result of their experiences in the LTTE. Such participation has brought about significant changes in the roles and actions of these women and does seem to have radicalised many of them and altered their thinking about 'women's liberation'.

The majority of the female combatants I interviewed stated that they had been unaware of the social problems facing Tamil women before they joined the LTTE, and as discussed earlier only two of the five who said they had had some awareness had actually joined in part with ideas of achieving liberation or empowerment for women. However, all but one reported being taught in political classes in the LTTE about women's social oppression and nine of them appeared to now possess a strong commitment to changing this aspect of society. The depth of their intellectual conceptualisation of and ability to articulate on such issues varied from woman to woman but the depth of their commitment to women in their communities was unquestionable.

In terms of their own personal experiences in the LTTE, four of the interviewees discussed social restrictions on women such as not riding bicycles, not going out alone, not going in the sea or on boats; they were all happy that within the LTTE they have had the opportunity to do these things that they were raised to believe were inappropriate or dangerous for women. Krishna and Banuka both mentioned that far from their childhood of being prevented from even riding bicycles, they can now ride motorbikes and drive armoured vehicles. Krishna described being told not to go into the sea, as it would 'take' her; now she can swim for long distances. She was also told that women should not go on boats as they will make the seas rough; now female cadres make up a large percentage of the Sea Tigers. Thamilini reflected the frequently implied problem of the social construction of gender (though none of the women used those terms) when she stated that:

I wanted to join but at that time I was not sure whether I can. ... A girl, she is a very soft person – we were treated like that. I knew that we have to go to the jungles and we have to fight and we must go alone in the night. I knew that I can do that, I wanted to do that, but a small suspicion was in my mind, whether I am capable of doing these things, because of the way I was brought up in my house. But I was able to see the other military cadres, the girls, who were doing all sorts of things. So then I thought, if *they* can do that, why can't I do these things?

She went on to say that:

In our society, they have separated the work for the men and the women, so from childhood the girl is brought up by a – that you can't do certain things. The girl feels that she can't take some decision on behalf of

herself, so she needs others to do that on behalf of her. Because she doesn't know herself. You know, we have been brought up in this LTTE movement that we have to take decisions for ourselves.

She added that 'now I have the self-confidence, now I don't need anybody. Now I won't allow any others to take decisions for my life.' She feels that women and their abilities should be respected by others and to get that respect women 'must develop themselves and they must make others respect them.'

In regard to the social problems facing Tamil women, many combatants emphasised the need to help women become independent, particularly economically independent. Sailajah,³⁹ who enlisted in 1990 at 21 and is the Cultural Affairs Leader for Batticaloa-Amparai District, told me 'the ladies are always depending on others, that is the main problem.' Barathy also said that women should not depend on others, they need to 'live freely and independently' and earn money for their families. Sudarvili maintained that 'we want to free the girls in this country, not only within the movement, outside also. They must come to positions in which they can do the things which have been done by males in the country.' Krishna told me that women must be free. When I asked her what 'freedom' meant to her in this context, she replied that 'here women do not come forward for anything, they have been asked to keep quiet and do the housework. So the future generation should not be like that, women must be free, socially and economically and they must have a place, equal rights with men.' Sudarvili mentioned that young widows in particular need to be able to be independent and live alone.

The problems of widows, particularly young widows, were recurring themes. Prasanthi claimed that the LTTE wants 'the women in society also to come forward and do everything – especially the widows and unmarried women, old maids who are still inside the house without working. So the aim is to bring them out and let them get self-confidence and look after themselves'. She works forming women's societies in the Trincomalee area. Through these societies they organise sports events for women, put on cultural shows, and encourage women to engage in self-employment. Banuka mentioned people speaking ill of women who attempt to go into self-employment as a severe social problem. Thamilvily told me that in the Vanni (an LTTE-controlled area in the north) there are 'various projects we have for the women, especially women who have been affected [by the war]. There is an organisation, a project, where women are given training in auto-mechanics, which has been a domain of men. And we have encouraged them to start an auto-repair shop of their own and they are doing it well.'

Three combatants also mentioned dowry practices as a problem. This was a smaller number than I had expected, given LTTE declarations on

the evils of the dowry system, but may reflect their discussions with Tamil women outside the organisation who complained that the LTTE prohibition on dowries had negative effects on women in terms of property inheritance. Interestingly, only Thamilini mentioned alcoholism and domestic violence as problems facing women. Although this is problematic I also found it intriguing since I know from what many non-LTTE women told me that the organisation opposes domestic violence and punishes offenders. In the LTTE-controlled areas victims of domestic violence report this to LTTE cadres, who deal with it through their *de facto* judicial system. Rajasingham-Senanayake was told by a young woman in one such area that at the first complaint of domestic violence the abuser is given a warning, at the second he is fined, and at the third he may be put in an LTTE prison.⁴⁰ This policy is supported by all the Tamil women who told me about it, including by women who in all other ways are opposed to the LTTE.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Kamala Liyanage argues that the pattern of women's participation in the LTTE is similar to that of women's participation in liberation struggles in Algeria, China, Eritrea, Namibia, Nicaragua, Mozambique, Palestine and Zimbabwe. As in these movements, the LTTE 'recognised the importance of mobilising women and formed the women's front. ... [However,] [s]imilar to most of these liberation movements, the LTTE has considered women's issues as secondary and their assumption has been that the emancipation of women will automatically be achieved by the victory of the struggle.' In reality, the experience of these other struggles has shown that after war ceased, usually women were expected to resume their traditional roles or were restricted to supportive political and public positions. Liyanage asserts, therefore, that 'one is justified in concluding that the LTTE movement has been projected and defined by men particularly by Prabhakaran, executed by men and that women fight to fulfil men's nationalistic aspirations'.⁴¹

Although I would agree that so far the main thrust of the LTTE project has been defined by men, I would not go as far as Liyanage does. It is worth clearly emphasising that women have 'nationalistic aspirations' as well and women in the LTTE generally view these as being of primary importance. It is equally true, however, that their specific nationalist aspirations may sometimes vary from those of men, as may their vision of an independent state. Joke Schrijvers asserts that '[t]he feminist discourse is the only one in which women are defined in their own right, without being linked to the interests of nationalist and ethnic struggles'.⁴²

I would contend, however, that this is equally problematic. Which feminist discourse does she mean? The LTTE's female cadres and Women's Political Wing do express a form of feminism but clearly not a form Schrijvers is comfortable with. Further, it seems that she is implying that being a woman in one's 'own right' entails being somehow 'unethnicised', as though concepts of nation and nationalism are unimportant (or should be unimportant?) if one is a woman (sisterhood is global?). Many white western feminists in countries not directly or obviously affected by nationalism or political violence have been particularly guilty of assuming this; my experiences living in Northern Ireland in recent years and researching in Sri Lanka have forced me to challenge this. Women involved in nationalist struggles all over the world have shown that in their position, for many the above assumption is not only untrue and impossible but is also undesirable; commitment to the perceived needs of one's perceived nation or ethnic group is viewed as just as important, or more so, than one's needs 'as a woman'.

Similarly, the debate over whether LTTE women are agents or victims, liberated or subjugated, emancipated or oppressed strikes me as an unnecessary and unsophisticated binary. Ultimately Rajasingham-Senanayake's phrase 'ambivalent empowerment' seems to fit best. She argues that:

[t]he reality of LTTE women is probably somewhere in-between. For while they may have broken out of the confines of their allotted domesticity and taken on new roles as fighters, it is indeed arguable that they are captive both to the patriarchal nationalist project of the LTTE leader Prabhakaran and the history and experience of oppression by the Sri Lankan military. However, to deny these Tamil nationalist women their agency because they are nationalist is to once again position them within the "victim" complex, where the militant woman is denied her agency and perceived to be acting out a patriarchal plot.⁴³

NOTES

A version of this article was published as 'Uncovering the Girls in "the boys": Female Combatants in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam', *Nivedini: A Journal on Gender Studies* (Colombo), 10 (2003) pp. 41–70.

1. Qadri Ismail, 'Boys Will Be Boys: Gender and National Agency in Fanon and the LTTE', *Pravada* 1/7 (1992) p. 6.
2. Kumudini Samuel, 'Gender Difference in Conflict Resolution: The Case of Sri Lanka', in Inger Skjelsbæk and Dan Smith (eds.) *Gender, Peace and Conflict* (London: SAGE Publications 2001) p. 185. 'Sri Lankan Tamils' are sometimes referred to as 'Ceylon Tamils'. 'Indian Tamils' are also known as 'hill country Tamils', 'plantation Tamils', or 'Up-Country Tamils'; they are the descendents of south Indians brought over as indentured labour by the British to work

the British-owned plantations in the central hills in the mid-nineteenth century. 'Muslims' are considered a separate ethnic group in Sri Lanka, sometimes referred to as 'Moors'.

3. Sometimes spelt 'Pirapaharan'.
4. For a history of the women's wing see Adele Ann, *Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers* (Jaffna: LTTE Publication Section 1993).
5. See, for example, Mangalika de Silva, 'Women in the LTTE: Liberation or Subjugation?', *Pravada* 3/7 (1994) p. 28, Vidyamali Samarasinghe, 'Soldiers, Housewives and Peace Makers: Ethnic Conflict and Gender in Sri Lanka', *Ethnic Studies Report* 14/2 (1996) p. 213 and Sitralega Maunaguru, 'Gendering Tamil Nationalism: The Construction of "Woman" in Projects of Protest and Control', in Pradeep Jeganathan and Qadri Ismail (eds.) *Unmaking the Nation: The Politics of Identity and History in Modern Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association 1995) p. 163.
6. Sumantra Bose, *States, Nations, Sovereignty: Sri Lanka, India and the Tamil Eelam Movement* (New Delhi: Sage Publications 1994) pp. 109 and 111.
7. All names given for LTTE members are their movement names.
8. Adele Ann is an Australian woman, married to LTTE ideologue Anton Balasingham, and has been involved in the Tamil struggle since 1975. She has been an armed fighter and has trained Tamil women in guerrilla warfare.
9. Adele Ann, 'Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers: Women & the Struggle for Tamil Eelam' (EelamWeb 1990 [cited 10 May 2002]) available from <http://www.eelamweb.com/women/>.
10. Ann, *Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers* (note 3) p. ii.
11. Ann, 'Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers' (note 8).
12. Margaret Trawick, 'Reasons for Violence: A Preliminary Ethnographic Account of the LTTE', in Siri Gamage and I B Watson (eds.) *Conflict and Community in Contemporary Sri Lanka: 'Pearl of the East' or the 'Island of Tears'?* (New Delhi: Sage Publications 1999) pp. 151–3 and 157.
13. Ann, 'Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers' (note 8).
14. Bose (note 5) p. 109.
15. Bose (note 5) p. 111.
16. Peter Schalk, 'Women Fighters of the Liberation Tigers in Tamil Ilam. The Martial Feminism of Atel Palacinkam', *South Asia Research* 14/2 (1994) p. 163.
17. V Pirapaharan, 'Tamil National Leader Hon. V. Pirapaharan's Women's International Day Message' (EelamWeb 8 March 1993 [cited 21 May 2002]) available from <http://www.eelamweb.com/leader/messages/women/1993/>.
18. V Pirapaharan, 'Tamil National Leader Hon. V. Pirapaharan's Women's International Day Message' (EelamWeb 8 March 1996 [cited 21 May 2002]) available from <http://www.eelamweb.com/leader/messages/women/1996/>.
19. V Pirapaharan, 'Tamil National Leader Hon. V. Pirapaharan's Women's International Day Message' (EelamWeb 8 March 1992 [cited 21 May 2002]) available from <http://www.eelamweb.com/leader/messages/women/1992/>.
20. Pirapaharan, 'Women's International Day Message 1993' (note 16).
21. Schalk (note 15) p. 168.
22. Samuel (note 2) p. 196.
23. Maunaguru (note 4) p. 164.
24. Radhika Coomaraswamy, 'Tiger Women and the Question of Women's Emancipation', *Pravada* 4/9 (1997) p. 10.
25. Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, 'Ambivalent Empowerment: The Tragedy of Tamil Women in Conflict', in Rita Manchanda (ed.) *Women, War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency* (New Delhi: Sage 2001) pp. 106–7.
26. Rajan Hoole, Daya Somasundaram, K Sriharan and Rajani Thiranagama, *The Broken Palmyra: The Tamil Crisis in Sri Lanka – An Inside Account* (Claremont, CA: Harvey Mudd College Press 1990 revised edn.) pp. 330 and 323.
27. Chandra de Silva, 'A Historical Overview of Women in Sri Lankan Politics', in Sirima Kirimabune (ed.) *Women and Politics in Sri Lanka: A Comparative Perspective* (Kandy: International Centre for Ethnic Studies 1999) pp. 61–2.

28. Samuel (note 2) p. 195.
29. Coomaraswamy (note 23) p. 9.
30. Bose (note 5) pp. 108–9.
31. Thanks to Cockburn for her feedback on an earlier conference paper draft of this piece at the *PSA Women and Politics Group Annual Conference*, Birkbeck College, London, 22 February 2003.
32. Bose (note 5) pp. 110–1.
33. Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* (London: Sage 1997) p. 98.
34. Bose (note 5) p. 112.
35. Bose (note 5) pp. 112 and 115–6.
36. Samarasinghe (note 4) pp. 217 and 213.
37. Ann, 'Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers' (note 8).
38. Samarasinghe (note 4) p. 218.
39. Sailajah was the only married cadre I managed to meet but many of the others were quick to tell me that they are allowed to marry while in the movement, providing they are over the accepted age (23 for women and 28 for men) and have permission from the leadership. The LTTE even has a body to arrange marriages for cadres. They refuted the common 'armed virgin' image of themselves (though unsurprisingly pre-marital or extra-marital sex is unacceptable). I was also told about childcare centres in the Vanni, where cadres can leave their children to be cared for while they go to work or to fight.
40. Rajasingham-Senanayake (note 24) p. 114.
41. Kamala Liyanage, 'Women in Political Parties: The Sri Lankan Experience', in Sirima Kirimabune (ed.) *Women and Politics in Sri Lanka: A Comparative Perspective* (Kandy: International Centre for Ethnic Studies 1999) pp. 131–2.
42. Joke Schrijvers, 'Fighters, Victims and Survivors: Constructions of Ethnicity, Gender and Refugeeness among Tamils in Sri Lanka', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 12/3 (1999) p. 328.
43. Rajasingham-Senanayake (note 24) p. 113.