

**EMPOWERING WOMEN IN CONFLICT
SITUATION: A CASE STUDY OF SRI LANKAN
TAMIL WOMEN**

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PREFACE

Across the globe the gender relation is imbalanced and favors men. This gendered imbalance is even more prominent in the South-Asian region. Owing to the traditional patriarchal society, women of this region enjoy a subordinate status. The honour of women is often considered as the honour of the group, community or even nation. This construction poses a real threat to the lives and dignity of women as their subordinated position gets further circumscribed in the event of conflict. The enemy forces invariably target women in order to dishonour the opposition groups or communities.

The Sri Lankan Tamil women have been the worst sufferers of such construction for more than two decade since the ethnic violence broke out in 1983. Much has been documented about the plights of Tamil women or women in conflict or the deprivation they suffer during conflict situation. But the literature on their ability to cope with such situation and make contribution to the society is rather scarce. More so with the Sri Lankan Tamil women who, despite prolonged violence and state oppression, have been able to rebuild their lives and regroup their families and more importantly, claim their rightful place in the society.

The dissertation, with a constraint on literature, has focused on the position of women in the Tamil society, their sufferings during conflict

situation, ability to cope with a changing environment and how they become successful in creating a space beside their male counterpart. The first chapter deals with the theoretical aspects of empowerment of women in general and empowerment of women in conflict situation and the problems they face during conflict situation. The second chapter makes an overview of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and its impact on Tamil women, in terms of their disempowerment. The third chapter makes a portrayal of various agencies such as the government, international donor agencies/organisation, women organisations and non-governmental organisations which are involved in assisting Tamil women. The fourth chapter highlights various programmes undertaken by these agencies and how they have helped them women in the conflict situation. In the conclusion, the hypotheses have been seen, tested and recommendations are made with a view to empower Tamil women in conflict situation.

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CHAPTER - I

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN CONFLICT SITUATION: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Empowerment in general is about social transformation. It refers to a range of activities from individual self-assertion to collective resistance, protest and mobilisation that challenge basic power relations. For individuals and groups where class, caste, ethnicity and gender determine their access to resources and power, their empowerment begins when they not only recognise the systemic forces that oppress them, but also act to change the existing power relationships. Caroline Moser¹ places self-reliance and internal strength at the centre of empowerment. For her, empowerment is the ability to gain control over crucial material and non-material resources. Empowerment is, therefore, a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systemic forces, which marginalise disadvantaged sections in a given context. It is the process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power.

The concept of empowerment can be used in different spheres of society in different contexts: about human rights, basic needs, economic

¹ Caroline Moser quoted in Jane L Parpart, Shirin Rai and Kathleen M. Staudt, eds., *Rethinking Empowerment: Gender and Development in Global/Local World* (London, 2002), p.12

security, capacity building, skill formation or the conditions of dignified social existence. Empowerment is seen as a way of addressing the problem of rights that remain unenforced. It makes an emphasis on building economic and social capabilities among individuals, classes, gender and communities.

Women's empowerment involves a process of shifting the gender power imbalance in the society. It includes personal strengthening and enhancement of life chances, equality of opportunity and equity between different genders, ethnic groups, social classes and age groups. It enhances human potential at individual and social levels of expressions. Empowerment is an essential starting point and a continuing process for realising the ideals of human liberation and freedom for all.

Ashine Roy in her book mentions that the definition given by the United Nations Development Fund for Women of women empowerment includes² the following factors:

- acquiring knowledge and understanding of gender relations and the ways in which these relations may be changed;
- developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one's life;

² Ashine Roy, *Women in Power and Decision Making* (New Delhi, 2003), p.40

- gaining the ability to generate choices and exercise bargaining power; and
- developing the ability to organise and influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.

Empowerment is an active process aimed at changing the nature and direction of forces that marginalises women. Sara Longwe's³ hierarchical need offers a classic framework that can be applied to different situations. According to her framework there are five levels, each one leading to the other. Reading the hierarchy from below, the first one i.e. welfare, addresses the basic needs of an individual, without recognizing or attempting to solve the underlying structural causes. At the second level, access to resources indicates that there is a need for women to have access to opportunities and without this, their growth is hindered. Conscientization comes next. It indicates that the women realises that there are discriminations and that it should be done away with in order to achieve the goal of empowerment. After conscientization, participation plays an important role as it provides scopes for the women to take decision alongside the male counterpart. All these levels leads to the ultimate level of equality. At this stage women have

³ Sara Longwe quoted in S.L.Sharma, "Empowerment without Antagonism: A Case for Reformulation of Women's Empowerment Approach", *Sociological Bulletin*, vol.49, no.1, March 2000, p.22-24.

control over their lives and play a significant role in the development process.

Empowerment has been seen as a struggle to achieve gender equality. Naila Kabeer⁴ insists on a pure feminist approach to power, shifting from the liberal and Marxists' view on power over resources, institutions and decision making of classes and groups in general. She defines empowerment as “the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them.”⁵

Jo Rowlands⁶ argues that empowerment is more than participation in decision-making. It must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions. For her, empowerment is a process rather than an end product, neither easily defined nor measured. On the process of empowerment, Rowlands underlines some core issues such as increase in self-confidence and self-esteem, a sense of agency and of “self” and sense of dignified being.

In recent times empowerment has been viewed as a multi-dimensional process which enables individuals or a group of individuals to realise their

⁴ Parpart, et.al., n.1, p.26

⁵ Naila Kabeer quoted in Anju Malhotra, “Conceptualising and Measuring Women’s Empowerment As a variable in International Development”, <http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/empowerment/events>.

⁶ Parpart, et. al., n.1, p.27

full identity and potentials in all spheres of life. It consists of greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making to enable them to have greater ability to plan their lives, or have greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives, and free them from the traditional shackles of belief, custom and practice.⁷

Empowerment of women has become a subject of intense discussion in recent times at all forums. It has posed a serious challenge to the policy makers, social thinkers and development planners in their effort to build a modern democratic and egalitarian society. In order to provide a greater share to women in the power structure of the society, empowerment of women is necessary.

The idea of empowerment purports a change from a hierarchical to an egalitarian type of society.⁸ A hierarchical society is based on the privileges and disabilities of groups, whose unequal placement in society is ideally acknowledged by its members. On the other hand, a democratic society is based on the recognition of the equal rights of all the individual members of it. In a modern democratic world, the gender issue has assumed prominence

⁷ Ibid, p.28

⁸ Andre Beteille, "Empowerment", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 34 , no.10-11, March 6-13, 1999 p.589.

along with other contemporary issues. The gender issue encompasses all sectors of society regardless of political, economic or social context. The issue of gender primarily reflects the relationship between men and women in a society, the power and privilege they enjoy, the position they occupy in terms of their participation in different spheres, etc. The gendered relationship varies from society to society, depending on the situation prevailing therein. The issue becomes much more critical in a conflict situation because the status and position of women tends to decline in comparison to a peaceful situation.

Defining Conflict

Conflict is broadly understood as a pursuit of incompatible goals by different people or groups⁹. It involves a divergence of goals, objectives or expectations between individuals or groups. Conflict occurs when two or more people compete over limited resources and/or perceive to have incompatible goals¹⁰. A conflict emerges whenever two or more persons (or groups) seek to possess the same object, occupy the same space or the same exclusive position, play incompatible roles, maintain incompatible goals, or undertake mutually incompatible means for achieving their purposes¹¹.

⁹ Caroline O. N Moser and Fiona C. Clark , eds., *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors?* (New Delhi. 2001), p.6

¹⁰ <http://www.saskjustice.gov.sk.ca/DisputeResolution/glossary.shtml>

¹¹ David L. Sills (ed), *International Encyclopedia vol. 3* (New York, 1968), p.226.

When peaceful resolution of the conflict fails or is not attempted, struggle gives way to violence and when this includes the use of weapons, armed conflict is said to have taken place. Johan Galtung maintains that violence exists whenever the potential development of an individual or group is held back by the conditions of a relationship, and in particular by the uneven distribution of power and resources¹². According to Rodolfo Stavenhagen, a conflict is considered ethnic when it involves organized political movement, mass unrest, separatist action, and civil wars with opposing lines drawn along ethnic boundaries. As a rule, that is a conflict between a minority and a dominant majority, where the majority controls access to the power and resources of the state and the minorities, often without going into an open confrontation with the dominant group, question the state structure as a whole and act violently when the society and the state are unable to suggest any mechanisms for regulating and resolving these contradictions¹³.

Almost all the countries of the South Asian region has experienced armed conflict though its nature varies from one another. When the level of conflict or any political and secessionist movement increases, its effect does

¹² Johan Galtung quoted in Cynthia Cockburn "The Gendered Dynamics of Armed Conflict and Political Violence" in Caroline O.N Moser and Fiona C. Clark (eds), *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors?* (New Delhi. 2001), p.17.

¹³ Rodolfo Stavenhagen quoted in Valery A. Tishkov "Ethnic conflicts in the context of social science theories" in Kumar Rupesinghe and Valery A. Tishkov, *Ethnicity and Power in the Contemporary World* (Paris, 1996) p37.

not confine to a particular country or region rather it transcends national boundaries. It has become evident in various forms in the South Asian region.

With the increase of armed conflict, the involvement of many people becomes a natural corollary. A large number of people irrespective of their political and economic affiliation get entangled in the process. In recent times, armed conflict has significantly affected the civilian population. The civilian population is not merely a part of the collateral damage or chance victims. On many occasions, the civilians become the prime target of the attacking groups or parties in order to create panic and fear in the society as a whole as well as challenging the authority and defying the dictates of the state or its administrative machinery. Various studies have shown that the civilians are making up a larger proportion of the casualties of war or violent conflict. According to the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, the percentage of civilian casualties has risen from 5 percent at the beginning of the 20th century to an estimated 90 percent at its close¹⁴. Civilians predominantly constitute women and children.

¹⁴ Carnegie Commission quoted in Ancil Adrian-Paul, "Women Building Peace", <http://www.id21.org/insights/insights39...>

Conflict and Disempowerment of Women:

During conflict women suffer more than their male counterpart. The asymmetrical status of women in the society further put them in a position of disadvantage while dealing with such hostile atmosphere. Conflict disempowers women and their asymmetrical status gets further deteriorated. Disempowerment refers to the reverse process of empowerment. According to Eylon and Bamberger¹⁵, while empowerment is associated with feelings of high self-efficacy and higher levels of performance, disempowerment is associated with reduced feelings of self-efficacy and levels of performance. Disempowerment manifests itself in a number of forms, such as psychological withdrawal, fear, feelings of incompetence and lack of self-efficacy, a perceived loss of credibility, personal control or power, and feelings of displeasure and personal offence. A disempowering act, whether intentional or unintentional, verbal or non-verbal behaviour, essentially impedes productivity¹⁶. These are characterised as intimidating, hostile, or

¹⁵ Eylon and Bamberger quoted in Angela M Young, Charles M Vans, Ellen A Ensher, "Individual differences in Sensitivity to Disempowering Acts: A Comparison of gender and Identity based Explanations for perceived offensiveness", *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, August 2003, http://www.articles/mi_m294/is_3-4_49/ai_106862383

¹⁶ Ibid

demeaning. In common parlance disempowerment refers to the reduction of an individual's power and authority to do something¹⁷.

As conflict unfolds, women get disempowered in all the spheres - social, political, economic and psychological. Although entire community suffers the consequences of conflict, women and girls are particularly affected because of their status in society and their sex¹⁸. They experience heightened levels of violence and trauma, both physical and psychological, within their home and outside of it. They undergo the most traumatic experience in terms of intimidation, rape and sexual abuse and psychological stress. Their suffering does not end there, rather the victims are further harassed and rejected by their husbands, families, community and the society. Tension and strife are often used to curtail women's human rights in the name of culture and tradition, nationalism and patriotism¹⁹. During conflict women and children generally constitute a majority of refugees and internally displaced populations. The displacement of people in refugee camps or settlements and living in inhospitable environments, profoundly affect the gender relations. Often the traditional roles of men and

¹⁷ <http://www.ossrea.net/girr/no0/no10-06htm>

¹⁸ Report of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women,
<http://www.eldis.org/static/doc8951.htm>

¹⁹ Ammu Joseph and Kalpana Sharma, *Terror, Counter-Terror: Women Speak Out* (New Delhi, 2003), p.184.

women are redefined, and the family institution comes under severe stress, resulting in divorce and desertion. Conflicts also shatter local friendship networks in the community that had previously provided women emotional and social security. In addition, in times of conflict, they bear additional social and economic burdens as they often find themselves solely responsible for maintaining their families where even food and shelter are not always available. Widowed women face a complex problem as their status changes with a change in their social and economic roles in the households, community and the structure of their family. It affects their physical safety, identity and mobility²⁰. It also affects their access to basic goods and services necessary for survival and their rights to inheritance, land and property. Women who are separated, divorced or widowed usually remain single, whereas men who are separated, divorced or widowed tend to remarry.

The need for women empowerment:

In a conflict situation the need for empowering women assumes more importance. Women and men experience violence differently. The position and status which men and women hold in a patriarchal society determines

²⁰ The Impact of Armed Conflict on Women, International Committee of the Red Cross, <http://www.eldis.org/static/doc8951.htm>

their role in a conflict situation. The social construction of gender is carried forward through the conflict situation as well. War magnifies the already existing inequality of peacetime. Women are particularly susceptible to marginalisation, poverty and the suffering engendered by the armed conflict, especially when they are already victims of discrimination in peacetime. The threshold of war is lower for women than for men as they are held up as “symbolic” bearers of cultural and ethnic identity and the producers of future generation of the community²¹. In extreme forms of patriarchy, men’s honour is seen as depending on women’s ‘purity’ to the degree that women who seek to escape this strict code, or who inadvertently fall or are dragged from it, may be killed by their menfolk with impunity²². Since they make up a disproportionate share of the economically disadvantaged they are likely to be more sensitive to the cost of a armed conflict or high military expenditure which is a drain on resources available for domestic social programmes. Empowering women is the key to social and economic justice, political liberty and egalitarian democratisation without which there can be no security. If empowerment is ever to have a meaning it must enable those

²¹ Rita Manchanda, “Redefining and Feminising Security”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.36 , no.43, 27 Oct – 2 Nov 2001, p.4103.

²² Ibid.

women who are most affected by violence to find ways of articulating the pain and accommodate the slow processes of healing. The empowerment of women is an important issue in post-war societies, for if women are prevented from formulating and implementing their own agenda, their specific needs and demands will continue to be marginalised.

Spaces for Empowering Women during Conflict:

Although conflict brings about deprivation, misery and hardships, it, at the same time, also opens up opportunities for gender equality and provides space for socio-economic and political empowerment of women. When violent conflict persists for a long time, it results in huge exodus of men from the society to the combat ground leaving the responsibility of the household in the hands of women. Women accept the new responsibility thrust upon them and plunge into newer arenas. As women take up the new role of heading the household, the traditional division of labour between men and women tends to be ended. Women's new role in building and repairing houses, dealing with governmental officials and community leaders alongwith fulfilling religion and social obligation puts them at par with their male counterparts.

Owing to the mass absence of men due to conflict, women do participate in agriculture, industries and attend to other occupations

previously attended by the men. It provides them with experience and confidence to excel in those fields even during the post-conflict situation. The absence of men further creates opportunities for women to actively participate in public roles at the community level. Women also take charge of local political institutions and therefore this participation enhances their social and political position. Women activists organise formal and informal local groups to provide relief to vulnerable sections of the society and represents a new vision of gender equality.

However, whatever control women have on their lives during the conflict situation is ceased to exist in the post conflict situation. There are several reasons for which women are unable to hold onto their acquired status. Importantly, the psychological stress of war, war fatigue and the reassertion of the male authority over women push them into the traditional threshold of power and authority.

Strategies of empowerment of women in conflict:

While, on the one hand, armed conflict exacerbates the existing gender power imbalance, on the other, it provides chances to empower women by way of their newly acquired status. With a view to bringing about substantial changes to enable women to lead a fulfilling life and to build on the progress made by them during conflict, the national government,

international agencies/governments, civil society institutions including women's organisation, etc., come forward. During the early phase of the conflict some of these agencies focus on providing relief to camp dwellers but later, their priorities include rehabilitation and development activities in resettlement and relocation villages.²³ Focus has been on changing social attitudes of the people on gender related issues, providing them equal access to resources, specially productive assets, enhancing their physical security, promoting greater representation of women in political institutions and decision-making, educating and making them aware of their rights, establishment of peace committees to prevent the eruption of violence, and special intervention for vulnerable sections, etc.

It has been seen that specific strategies are implemented in order to promote socio-economic status of women through income generation opportunities viz. provision of credit facilities, training on entrepreneur skills and also promoting necessary marketing facilities. Mobilising women at the grassroots level is also considered as a strategy to empower women with leadership and organising skills. Further, these women are encouraged to form societies among themselves and to undertake various activities

²³ The case of Sri Lanka- Executive Summary,
http://www.alnap.org/pubs/html/gs_srilanka_monograph.htm

related to their development. Social mobilisation programme is the foremost for the purpose of empowering women²⁴. Priority has been given to identify and support female-headed households in conflict areas.

It has been observed that support for victims of violence, particularly women, is of utmost importance. Realising the need of the violence victims, the agencies have assisted women in resettlement, provided them opportunities to earn and personal freedom. Assistance in guidance and counseling, legal support, easy access to law enforcement agencies and protective shelter have also been extended to them. Awareness programmes and gender sensitization programmes have also been implemented to sensitise community leaders, police officials, teachers, and non-governmental organisations. These programmes have created a better atmosphere and necessary awareness of gender concerns among various agents of the society. This apart, the involvement of women in peace building and conflict resolution has also found to be a major strategy. Community organisations, NGOs and civil society have played an equally important role in sensitising poor women, victims of violence for creating awareness, overturning prejudice, addressing special problems such as

²⁴ Selvadharshini Thevanesan Croos, " Ethnic Violence in Srilanka and the Impact on Women", <http://www..action.web.ca/home/sap/attach/croos.rtf>

alcoholism, domestic violence and changing attitudes and, above all, bringing about a positive change in the society.

One of the important aspects of the strategies of empowering women has been to encourage governments, international institutions and policy-makers to promote dialogue between them. Specific policies and programmes of the international community and donor agencies to explicitly deal with conflict prevention and peace building have helped the most vulnerable - women, children and the elderly²⁵.

Several women's organisations have reoriented their efforts and programs to educate displaced women about their rights. They focus on women residing in rural and remote regions of a country. Psycho-social counseling and medical care for rape victims are also the immediate needs addressed by women's organisations.²⁶ These organisations have been working to increase women's self-reliance and internal strength. They have tried to devise programmes/strategies to increase women's skills, capacities, rights and opportunities.

This chapter has focused on the empowerment of women from the conflict point of view, throwing light on the deprivations and disabilities

²⁵ Adrian-Paul, n. 14.

²⁶ Martha Walsh, "Women's Organisations in Post-Conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina" in Krishna Kumar, *Women and Civil War*, (Colorado, 2001), p.166

women face during conflict. It illustrated the new role thrust upon them and the need and strategies adopted by various agencies to empower them. The analysis however is not country-specific in nature. The subsequent chapters deal with these concepts with reference to Sri Lankan ethnic conflict and the specific problems of Sri Lankan Tamil women

CHAPTER – II

ETHNIC VIOLENCE AND DISEMPOWERMENT OF SRI LANKAN TAMIL WOMEN

Historical Background of the Sri Lankan Ethnic Conflict

Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) attained its independence in 1948. Though a functioning democracy over the past five decades, civil disorder/ethnic turbulence has been a dominant feature of its political process. The Sinhala-Tamil conflict which ravaged the country intermittently until 1983 has since then become an integral part of the country's socio-political process. Ethnic violence that has ripped apart the fabric of Sri Lankan society has resulted in widespread killings, displacements and human rights abuses of innocent civilians. The civil war has militarized both the state and civil society.

The Sinhala – Tamil ethnic conflict can be attributed to a variety of causes dating from the colonial period to the post independence period. Heterogeneity is an important attribute of the Sri Lankan culture with the Sinhalese accounting for 74 percent of the country's total population of around 19 million (2000 estimate)¹. The Sri Lankan Tamils constitute about 12.6 percent, the bilingual (Tamil and Sinhalese speaking) Muslims constitute 7.4 percent and the Indian Tamils 5.5 percent². The mutual

¹ Annual Report 2000, Central Bank of Sri Lanka

² P. Sahadevan, "Lost Opportunities and Changing Demands: Explaining the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka", <http://www.nakkeeran1.tripod.com/SLethnicconflict.htm>

suspicion between Sinhalese and Tamils is largely due to the misrepresentation of the popular history of Sri Lanka based on myths and legends.³ Based on the Mahavamsa, which is one of the most important chronicle of early Sri Lankan history, the Sinhalese believe their community to be the original inhabitants of the island and the Tamils as the invading community. The victory and forty four year rule of the Sinhalese Buddhist King Elara in Anuradhapura⁴, the conquest and seventy year rule⁵ in Sri Lanka by the Cholas of Tamil Nadu in the tenth century, the gradual movement of the Sinhalese towards the South and the West consequent to several invasions by the South Indian kings, the formation of a Tamil Kingdom in the Jaffna peninsula in the north- all portray the Tamils as invaders. The migration of the Indian Tamils from India to Sri Lanka during colonial period further created the minority psyche of the majority Sinhalese community.

The Tamils, on the other hand, also claim to have a history as old as the Sinhalese community and consider themselves as co-indigenous community of the island. The treatment meted out to them during the colonial period and the discriminatory policies of successive Sinhalese governments against Tamil population in Sri Lanka has reinforced the

³ Daya Somasundaram, *Scarred Minds* (New Delhi, 1998),p.23

⁴ *Ibid*, p.34.

⁵ *Ibid*, p.36.

minority status of the Tamil community.

The country was under the British colonial rule from 1796 to 1948. In 1833 the Sinhalese and the Tamil nations were brought together by the British for administrative convenience and when they left the island in 1948, the two nations remained together in a unitary state structure under a Westminster model constitution⁶.

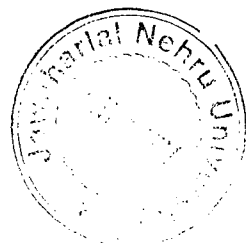
During the colonial rule the Sinhalese demanded the abolition of communal representation in legislature and introduction of popular election system. This was resented by the Tamils as they were apprehensive that the political power of the ethnic minorities would be adversely affected without constitutional and representational safeguards. The Tamils felt vulnerable because of their numerical weakness in the politics of universal franchise. Despite such resentment universal adult franchise was introduced under the Donoughmore Constitution in 1931 and communal representation was replaced by the territorial principle⁷. During the colonial period the Sinhalese – Tamil relationship changed from cooperative to competitive. However, their relationship became conflictual in the post-independence period.

⁶ Satchi Ponnambalam, *Sri Lanka – The National Question and the Tamil Liberation Struggle* (London, 1983), p.3

⁷ Sahadevan, n.2

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Post Independence Scenario

Immediately after independence the million Tamil plantation workers of Indian origin, long settled in the island, were denied citizenship and franchise⁸. Among the earliest Acts passed by the House of Representatives were the Citizenship Act (1948), the Indian and Pakistani Residents (Citizenship) Act (1949) and the Parliamentary Elections Amendment Act (1949)⁹. The first two Acts denied citizenship to the majority of the Indian Tamils, and the third one disenfranchised them. The political motive behind these Acts was the fear of the Sinhalese leaders of the electoral strength that could be exercised by the Tamil plantation workers, especially in the Central Province, where they outnumbered the Sinhala in several districts¹⁰. The Sinhalese then set half a million of them on a course of compulsory repatriation to India, a country most of them had never seen.

In 1956 Sinhala was made the only official language of the state by the Government of S.W.R.D. Bandarnaike¹¹. The fact that the Tamils were a sizeable linguistic group in Sri Lanka was comfortably pushed into oblivion. It was completely forgotten that equality between two nations of co-ordinate

⁸ Anuradha Chenoy, *Militarism and Women in South Asia* (New Delhi, 2002), p.102

⁹ Bettina E.Schmidt and Ingo W. Schroder, eds., *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict* (London, 2001), p.176.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Laskiri Fernando, "Ethnic Conflict and the State in Sri Lanka: A Possible Solution," 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, 2000), p.8

status in a unitary state emerges from linguistic and cultural rights and equality. The Tamils' access to government employment, on which the Tamils principally relied, was blocked. The Tamil government employees were forced to study in Sinhala or leave employment.¹² Tamil officers were given three years to learn Sinhala or face dismissal. This discrimination was extended to the security services, public corporative and other services, and to the private sector. This accentuated the Tamils' feeling of alienation from the national mainstream. There were large-scale violence between the two communities and subsequent to negotiations between leaders of the two groups an agreement (Bandarnaike – Chelvanayakam Pact) was reached in 1957. However, its implementation was not possible owing to the opposition by militant Sinhalese Buddhists which led to its abrogation in 1958. The Tamil community became frustrated, unreconciled and psychologically uprooted. This was followed by brutal Sinhalese – Tamil riots in 1958.

The gulf between the Sinhalese and the Tamil community widened when Buddhism gradually gained the status of de-facto State religion. Under the 1972 Republican constitution, the state was supposed to give 'foremost place' to Buddhism and 'to protect and foster it'. The 1978 constitution of

¹² Poonambalam, n.6, p.4

the Democratic Socialist Republic further directed the state 'to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana'¹³. Hindus, Christians and Muslims had only private rights of worship. Sri Lanka thus became a semi-theocratic state with its secular character undergoing a change and discrimination against minority religions.

The Sinhalese elite was of the opinion that the containment of fissiparous tendencies among the Tamils is possible only under a strong Centre. The Tamils, on the other hand, believed that only a federal government would ensure protection of minorities against Sinhalese majoritarianism. Thus, the Tamil demand in the 1950s for a federal set up was outrightly rejected by the Sinhalese¹⁴. With the increase in Tamils' grievances their demand for autonomy became stronger.

The colonization scheme or land settlement policies of various regimes in Colombo was aimed at ending exclusive domination of the northern and eastern provinces by Tamils. Under this programme, which was accelerated after 1948, over 200,000 Sinhalese families were resettled in colonized enclaves, organized in clustered villages in over 3,000 square miles of the Tamil homelands¹⁵. The proportion of Sinhalese in the Tamil speaking Eastern province increased, for instance, from 7.8 percent to 11.6

¹³ Ponnambalam, p.6, p.5

¹⁴ P. Sahadevan, n.2

¹⁵ Ponnambalam, n.6, p.3

percent while number of Sri Lankan Tamils declined from 46.5 percent to 40 percent¹⁶. The Tamils considered such a scheme as an instrument of changing the demographic character of the Eastern and Northern provinces in order to dilute the concept of traditional Tamil homeland. This was staunchly opposed by the Tamils, as such a move would not only undermine their electoral interests but could ultimately lead to the annihilation of Tamil geographical entity on the island. Further, the Centre then redrew the district boundaries and created new electoral constituencies to benefit the Sinhalese parties. The colonization issue gave fillip to the birth of Eelam movement.

The Standardization principle was introduced in 1971 whereby the government introduced lower qualifying marks for Sinhalese students in the competitive examination for entrance to the university. This replaced merit and eliminated competition. The Tamils' access to higher education was negatively affected by this policy. Despite stiff Tamil opposition the government also introduced a district quota system in 1974 under which backward districts were given a quota of seats to benefit rural Sinhalese students. As a result of this policy, the Tamil representation in science based courses declined from 39.8 percent of seats in 1969-70 to 19 per cent in

¹⁶ Joke Schrijvers, "Constructing 'Womanhood', 'Tamilness' and 'The Refugee'" in Selvy Thiruchandran, ed, *Women, Narration and Nation* (New Delhi, 1999), p.172

1975 and 23.6 per cent in 1977 while Sinhalese representation increased from 57.7 per cent in 1969-70 to 73.3 per cent in 1977¹⁷.

Moreover the 'Sinhala Only' policy, standardization scheme and other recruitment policies of various Sinhalese governments brought about a declining trend in the representation of Sri Lankan Ceylon Tamils in government services and increased Sinhalese representation far beyond their proportion in the population. Tamil recruitment in Sri Lankan Administrative Service declined from 11.1 per cent during 1970-77 to 5.7 per cent during 1977-81. Less than 5 per cent of a group of police recruits were Tamils and only 6.1 per cent of the teachers recruited in 1977-79 were Tamils. To compound all this was the discriminating allocation of funds to Tamil districts.

Emergence of Separatist Movement

These policies strained the Tamil – Sinhalese relationship bringing about ethnic tension. The Tamil community became increasingly alienated from the mainstream. This was the genesis of the demand for regional autonomy of the Tamils turning into a demand for Eelam- a separate state.

Accordingly, the Tamil United Front (TUF) which, in 1975, stood for equality and regional autonomy, and later rechristened itself to become

¹⁷ Sahadevan, n.2

Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) in 1976 and thus changed its demand for the establishment of a secular, socialist, sovereign state of Tamil Eelam. The continuous oppression of the Tamils led to the emergence of a number of militant organizations.

The growth of a number of paramilitary organizations emerged as a militant response to state sponsored Sinhala chauvinism and discrimination. The harassment by the Sri Lankan police and the army since the outbreak of anti-Tamil riots in 1956, 1958 and the decades that followed added fuel to the simmering ethnic conflict.

The formation of Tamil New Tigers (TNT) in 1972, marked a concerted armed struggle. This trend was followed till the TNT became LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) in 1976, which symbolised Tamil patriotic resurgence. During that time a number of other militant organizations such as PLOTE (People's Liberation of Tamil Eelam) in 1980, TELO (Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation) in the 1970s, EROS (Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students) in 1975 and EPRLF (Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front)¹⁸ also came into reckoning. The first significant action of political violence that led to success was of the assassination of Alfred Duraiyappa, the Mayor of Jaffna city on 27th August

¹⁸ Ibid, p.296

1975.¹⁹ A second wave of anti-Tamil riots were set in motion by the Sri Lankan state and its apparatuses in 1977, 1978, 1981 and 1983 which strengthened separatist convictions among different Tamil militant organizations. These riots were conducted during the regime of J.R. Jayawardena. The ruthlessness in the actions of state forces and an active suppression of the agencies of democracy has found mention by the human rights groups. Human Rights Watch mentioned

The politicization of the police and the military along ethnic lines, the active involvement of government forces in ethnic attacks and its failure to prosecute offenders from human rights violations against Tamil civilians led to a rise in Tamil militancy and to attacks on Sinhalese and Muslim civilians. Government forces engaged in similar attacks on Tamils. Ethnic hatred escalated into civil war, a political conflict defined along ethnic lines.²⁰

However, the common goal among all the militant groups was the achievement of Tamil Eelam and achievement of such a goal through armed struggle. The confrontation of the LTTE, with the army during all these years has resulted in widespread killings, assaults, rapes and damages in the Tamil dominated areas. The long drawn violent conflict has left thousands of Tamils dead and many more displaced from their original habitation to survive in shanty relief camps.

¹⁹ Purnakal.D.Silva," The Growth of Tamil Paramilitary Nationalisms: Sinhala Chauvinism and Tamil Responses" in Sri Gamage and I.D.Watson, ed., *Conflict and Community in Contemporary Sri Lanka* (New Delhi, 1999), p.98.

²⁰ Ibid, p.100.

Impact of Ethnic Conflict and Disempowerment of Women:

The Sri Lankan Society has been torn apart by the long drawn ethnic conflict where violence has assumed endemic proportions. According to official reports over 60,000 persons have lost their lives due to civil war and an estimated 800,000 persons displaced in the north and east of the country²¹.

Women have always become the worst sufferers of armed conflict. Fatima Choudhury contends, "War has always been about a nation's politics, economy, power and men. It never focuses on the consequences and suffering war imposes on those left behind, specially women."²² They are subjected to various forms of discrimination, socio-cultural restrictions, maltreatment, physical intimidation, etc. even during normal times. They play second fiddle to their male counterpart owing to their unequal status in the society. The vulnerability and secondary status of women further deteriorates during the conflict situation. The impact of conflict disempowers women in a number of ways. It brings about a decline in their levels of performance, reduces their self-esteem, creates a sense of isolation and impedes their productivity.

²¹ Sepali Kottegoda, "Women's Lives and Livelihoods in a Ceasefire Situation in Sri Lanka", *Asian Women Workers Newsletter*, vol.22, no.3, July 2003, p.19

²² Fatima Chowdhury, "How Women suffer more than men in war", tribuneindia.com/2003/20030305/edit.htm#4

Alka Srivastava²³ says that they become victims of armed conflict primarily as members of civilian population and, as such, face death and injury by indiscriminate military attacks, poor health facilities, disappearances, hostage taking, torture, imprisonment, forced recruitments into armed forces, displacements and last but not the least sexual and gender based violence. According to Radhika Coomaraswamy,²⁴ women become victims of armed conflict in four different ways. Firstly, they are direct victims of violence, killed or sexually assaulted in the conflict. Secondly, the impact of armed conflict makes the women refugees or internally displaced people. Thirdly, they are affected when they lose their male relatives. Fourthly, they become combatants and perpetrators of violence in some cases.

In Sri Lanka there have been a number of cases where women have been direct victims of war. Security forces as well the militant groups have killed a large number of women. They have often been subjected to sexual violence in wartime. Sexual violence particularly involve rape which always becomes a means of warfare during conflict. Women are supposed to be the cultural bearers of a society and so sexual aggression against them is a

²³ Alka Srivastava, "Armed Conflicts and its Implications on Women", *Women's Link*, vol.9, no.2, pp.33-34

²⁴ Radhika Coomaraswamy, "Violence, Armed conflict and The Community" in Swarna Jayaweera, ed., *Women in Post Independence Sri Lanka* (New Delhi, 2002), p.92.

symbol of their nation's defeat. Many Sri Lankan Tamil women have been raped by the Sri Lankan army personnel as well as the IPKF. However, the incidence of rape among Jaffna women was highest during the IPKF operation in northern province between 1987 and 1989²⁵. Apart from the physical and mental torture a woman is subjected to during rape, if she survives the incident, she is socially ostracized, disowned and rejected by her husband and family members²⁶. Sexual harassment is always present in society but the dangers are intensified during conflict situations and may be used as a weapon against women.²⁷ The social stigma attached to being raped or abused and lack of avenues of getting justice results in women's psychological withdrawal and decline in their self-esteem, thereby rendering them psychologically disempowered.

Besides rape, women are harassed at checkpoints and police stations. They are subjected to body searches at checkpoints. They are often brought to police stations during night and photographed as part of search and detain operations. According to El-Bushra and Piza Lopez, gender related violence affects women's mental health 'by sapping their self esteem and self confidence, limiting their capacity to solve their own problems, as well as

²⁵ Vidyamali Samarasinghe, "Soldiers, Housewives and Peacemakers: Ethnic conflict and gender in Sri Lanka", *Ethnic Studies Report*, vol XIV, no.2, p.210.

²⁶ Indai Sajor, "Our Common Grounds Women in War and Armed Conflict", *Nivedini*, vol.10, p.153.

²⁷ Kate de Rivero, "War and its Impact on Women in Sri Lanka", *Refugee Watch*, June 2000, http://www.safhr.org/pdf/sri_lanka.pdf

their capacity to develop relationships with others'²⁸. Thus gender related violence inflicted against women results in some level of disempowerment for many. Gender related violence acts to disempower them by terrorizing them into submission and by instilling in them the impossibility of struggling for social change²⁹.

The mobility of women is often curtailed. They are confined to home or refugee camp due to fear of sexual violence and this subsequently limits their livelihood. Young girls are particularly vulnerable. Sometimes homeless and displaced women engage in prostitution as in the Anuradhapura area of Sri Lanka.

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has rendered a large number of people homeless and forced them to migrate either within the island or overseas (some of the latter have sought asylum). According to the UNHCR, 500,000 are estimated to be living as refugees in India, Europe, Canada, Australia and the US, while another 800,000 people are displaced internally.³⁰ Estimate suggests that 78 per cent of the internally displaced are ethnically Tamils, 13 per cent are Muslims and 8 per cent are

²⁸ El-Bushra and Piza Lopez quoted in Helen Leslie, "Healing the psychological wounds of gender-related violence in Latin America: a model for gender-sensitive work in post-conflict contexts", *Gender and Development*, vol.9, no.3, November 200, p.52.

²⁹ Ibid, p.51.

³⁰ Aurora Vincent, "Displaced Women Rebuild Their Lives", wfsnews.org/citylife/inside6.html

Sinhalese³¹. The internally displaced is a UN term for refugees who haven't left their countries. They do not come under the UN definition of refugee despite the fact that they account for the majority of people who are forced to migrate and are thereby not entitled to legal protection³².

Women comprise the highest number of people who are internally displaced. According to Forbes³³ a full 80 percent of the estimated 20 million refugees in the world are women and children. An UNHCR report³⁴ also states that women and young girls comprise at least 80 percent of world refugee population. According to UNHCR and NGOs working with displaced people, women and children comprise around 75 percent of the displaced population in Sri Lanka.³⁵ Men are either killed, become part of militant organization or are emigrants overseas. They leave behind them women, children and the elderly to keep life going in their homeland. When such a large number of women lose their home and get displaced, it leads to overall loss of freedom thereby disempowering them from even their pre-conflict status.

³¹ Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, "Ambivalent Empowerment" in Rita Manchanda, ed., *Women, War and Peace in South Asia* (New Delhi, 2001), p.116.

³² Joke Schryvers, "Internal Refugees of Sri Lanka- The Interplay of Ethnicity and Gender", *Nivedini*, vol 6, no.1&2, p.31

³³ Samarasinghe, n.19, p.211.

³⁴ Amena Moshin, "Conceptualising International Security - Where are the Women", *Nivedini*, vol.10, p.85

³⁵ Vincent, n.30.

Majority of the internally displaced live in refugee camps within the island. According to Joke Schrijvers³⁶ life in refugee camps turns them into an institutionalized, undifferentiated mass of people...an anonymous, poverty stricken mass packed together. He further states that they become 'an underclass' not only in society at large but also among the category of refugees themselves. Despite being forced to cope in extremely vulnerable situations, most women are determined to struggle on in order to live a more secure and dignified life, if not for themselves, then at least for their children.

With the absence of their menfolk, women become solely responsible for maintaining their family. They are forced to work for earning a livelihood. People of northern and eastern provinces depend mainly on traditional occupation like farming, fishing, collecting fuelwood and other natural resources from the forest. All these activities and means of livelihood are restricted due to the ongoing conflict. However, there has been an increase in the number of women who have taken to fishing as a livelihood in the eastern province, which is traditionally a male occupation. The marketing of produce is also their responsibility now. They still prefer working on daily payment basis as agriculture labour as informal sector workers. A number of women in the northeast have also migrated to the

³⁶ Schrijvers, n.32, p.33.

West Asia to work as housemaids³⁷. Separated from the male members of their families they are often subjected to sexual harassment by guards and by other refugees. People in refugee camps have to deal with the terror regime of the army, the LTTE and other armed groups. Their freedom of mobility is curtailed as they require passes to leave their camps, which might or might not be granted by these groups³⁸. Refugee women are particularly subjected to extortion either for sexual favours or for money.

Life in refugee camps is horrific. Even minimum requirement for a normal life, i.e. basic food, medical attention and manageable sanitation are not provided. The quality of food is awful in terms of their nutritiousness. Medical needs too are rarely attended to properly with dearth of doctors. Medical assistance for treatment of women in gynaecological, reproductive and psychological matters are inadequate. Women are mostly not provided with sanitary napkins. Brawls over scarce resources such as food, living space and personal belongings is common sight³⁹. Apart from this, it has also been found that since they have been displaced and living in the camps there are more cultural restrictions on their clothing and their freedom of

³⁷ Kottegoda, n.21, p.20.

³⁸ Darini Rajasingham, Senanayake, "Post Victimization" in Selvy Thiruchandran, ed., *Women, Narration and Nation* (New Delhi, 1999), pp.141-142.

³⁹ Schrijvers, n.32, p.45.

movement as compared to the pre-conflict situation. Such restriction tends to reduce their personal control and restrict the freedom of choice.

Women have suffered tremendously during the ethnic conflict owing to the loss of their male relatives. In Jaffna district alone, there are more than 25,000 widows. There has been a dramatic increase of female-headed households in recent years. There are approximately 30,000 female-headed households in the north and eastern region of Sri Lanka⁴⁰. In Vavuniya district, a NGO indicated that 60 per cent of internally displaced families were female-headed household⁴¹.

With the disappearance of the husband, the economic dependence on the husband and the source of material organization of the household has also disappeared. Family and community structures tend to break down in the wake of violence, sudden widowhood and economic dependence, thereby rendering women helpless. They are forced to venture outside their home to earn a livelihood and are exploited for their labour. Finding employment is extremely tough for these women as they are mostly unskilled. While many women take up ad hoc jobs, they have no skills and no experience and are often not employed in state jobs with reasonable

⁴⁰ http://www.womenwarpeace.org/sri_lanka.html

⁴¹ <http://www.idpproject.org>

remuneration. Most end up being daily wage manual labourers in the area.⁴² Consequently, their standard of living declines. This makes them economically disempowered as it creates feelings of incompetence and lack of self-efficacy.

Further, women suffer due to psychological trauma they undergo as part of witnessing the killing of close relatives or family members and physical destruction of their homes. Psychiatric treatment or counseling, which is most essential in such cases is not available.

The situation is abysmal when the whereabouts of the relatives is not known. According to the Amnesty International Report 2000, there were around 540 'disappearances' in Jaffna district alone in 1996⁴³. Those who have not seen the dead bodies or have not performed the last rites of their dead relatives especially feel miserable. Without tangible evidence they find it difficult to believe that their husbands are dead. They are mentally confused as to whether to behave as widows or "auspicious housewives"⁴⁴. When a woman loses her husband she is perceived to be unlucky and inauspicious and is kept away from all auspicious ceremonies of the community. Such socio-cultural restrictions force women to stay away from attending events like a house warming, wedding, age attending ceremonies

⁴² Vincent, n.30.

⁴³ Amnesty International Report , 2000, <http://www.ahrchk.net/ua/mainfile.php/2000/372/>

⁴⁴ Thiruchandran, n.38, p.43.

and birthday parties. It is in this context Thiruchandran mentions that “ at a time when social interaction is minimal due to the double and triple burden that these women take upon themselves, the experience of seclusion led to further deprivations causing psychological problems”⁴⁵. This social seclusion further worsens by the loss of immediate family support which acts as traditional support system for the communities. At another level, when the resettlement of displaced people takes place, extended families are separated. All these traditional support systems which provide community-based psycho-social rehabilitation for women, get badly affected by the conflict leading to psycho-social disempowerment.

Many women whose husbands have disappeared or have been killed by the Sri Lankan soldiers, the IPKF, militants or unidentified persons, have lost their faith in God. Many have turned atheists. Moreover, due to absence of the dead body, compensation was denied to women as death could not be proved and, until recently, young wives of the disappeared were not considered widows which would have legally entitled them to widow benefits and possibilities of remarriage⁴⁶.

Women are undoubtedly a disempowered category whether it is war or peacetime. However, they are relatively better off in peacetime. War

⁴⁵ Vincent, n.30

⁴⁶ Neloufer De Mel, “Fractured Narratives: Notes on women in conflict in Sri Lanka and Pakistan”, *Development: Journal of the Society for International Development*, vol.45, no.1, March 2002, p.101.

exacerbates their miseries and makes them socially and politically disempowered. Sri Lankan Tamil women too have encountered a plethora of war related physical, psychological and mental problems that have made them the worst victims of the protracted ethnic conflict.

CHAPTER – III

AGENCIES OF EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Conflict Induced Empowerment:

Although the ongoing ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has had a debilitating effect on women and their status in society, it has also opened up spaces for their empowerment. The movement of populations, the scattering of families and the expansion of families headed by women have created situations where women are either to participate in decision making or to make decisions themselves. Absence of men leaves women to fend not only for themselves but also the whole family. In the process women come to the public domain to meet the basic requirement in terms of food, health, employment besides negotiating with the government agents, the military and the humanitarian aid agencies. As a result of their involvement in the public domain, women experience personal autonomy as the principal decision maker and have greater control over their identity. Thus, on the one hand, conflict disempowers women, and, on the other, opens up new spaces for women to take leadership within changing family and community structure.

As in the realm of politics, women have stepped out of their traditional roles to meet the economic demands of war. This movement between the sex roles helped some women in sectors previously dominated by men and contributed to mitigating the prejudices preventing their advancement in economic and social spheres.¹

Another sphere where women get spaces for empowerment is the caste hierarchy.² Armed conflict or war often forces the family or the community to shift to new places such as refugee camps and rehabilitation centers, a place which is totally different from the normal society. Though these camps and settlements never provide the kind of security and social establishment the community or group used to enjoy at their native place of residence it does provide them some sort of independence in terms of their participation and communication with heterogeneous groups. Lack of space and basic amenities in the rehabilitation camps leave different communities with no option but to cooperate, share and help each other irrespective of their existing caste status.

In normal situation women's mobility would have been restricted particularly among the high castes because the seclusion of women is

¹ Sheila Meintjes, Anu Pillay and Meredith Turshen, eds., *The Aftermath* (London, 2001), p.25

² Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, "Post Victimisation - Cultural Transformation and Women's Empowerment in War and Displacement" in Selvy Thiruchandran, ed., *Women, Narration and Nation* (New Delhi, 1999), p.144.

considered a sign of high status in the Tamil society but in camps keeping women secluded becomes difficult owing to acute shortage of spaces. They therefore come out and interact with different communities without adhering to the prevailing norms. In camps it is difficult to keep girls and boys separate particularly when they are living within a very close proximity. The proximity and free mingling of youth may lead to more inter-caste marriages thereby the younger generation would be in a position to defy the caste based restrictions. This means that girls have greater choice over selecting their partners. Enhancement of their freedom of choice leads to their social empowerment.

The painful abuse, suffering and assaults force women to unite and bring a collective solution to their problems. They learn how to ask for assistance and to protect their rights by appealing to different agencies. To highlight their problems and miseries and bring it to the notice of government and international agencies they resort to different methods of resistance.

As far as the empowerment of Sri Lankan Tamil women is concerned there has been a debate pertaining to the inclusion of women cadres into the militant group. The question arises as to whether women have emerged as an

equal partner to their male counterparts or just as an adjunct. According to an estimate, there are about 3,000 women in the ranks of the LTTE.³

Some are of the opinion that women's role as combatant in the LTTE can be equated with their empowerment as they get some space beside men by repudiating patriarchal norms of womanhood. For the LTTE, its female cadres are the ultimate symbol of women's liberation. In fact, in a society that continues to be fiercely male-dominated, the use of feminist ideas and terminology sends a powerful message that attracts women to the organisation. On the International Women's Day in 1992, the LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran said: "Today young women have taken up arms to liberate our land...women can succeed in their struggle for emancipation only by mobilising themselves behind a liberation organisation. This will give them confidence, courage, determination and transform them as revolutionaries....".⁴

According to Adele Ann, the decision by Tamil women to join the LTTE "tells society that they are not satisfied with the social status quo; it means they are young women capable of defying authority; it means they are women with independent thoughts..."⁵. On the other hand, mere participation

³ Sarita Subramaniam, "Sri Lanka : Women Lead Rebel Attacks, But Tiger Leaders Are Men", www.oneworld.org/ips2/aug/srilanka.html

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

in the public sphere as combatant do not really signify the empowerment of women as the boundaries of the space provided to them are still determined by their male counterparts. Moreover, the strictures issued by the LTTE⁶ regarding the behaviour of women show how the LTTE upholds the gendered dimension of sexuality, which is a fundamental basis of patriarchy. For the critics of the LTTE, the sudden prominence of its women cadres is evidence of the shortage of male fighters and of the difficulties being faced by the leadership in recruiting new cadres. According to Radhika Coomaramawsamy, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women the induction of women in the LTTE's fighting force was a result not of an ideological shift in the way Tamil men see women, but out of practical necessity. "Despite the celebration of armed women cadre by LTTE ideologues, there is still no evidence that women are part of the elite decision making process. They are not initiators of ideas, they are only implementers of policy made by men".⁷

According to Rajan Hoole, the University Teachers (of Jaffna) Human Rights (UTHR), the large scale migration of men from amongst the Tamil population to the West, has also been an important factor why women, feeling "helpless" and looking for some kind of fulfillment, enlist with the

⁶ Anuradha Chenoy, *Militarism and Women in South Asia* (New Delhi, 2002), p.107.

⁷ Subramaniam, n.3

LTTE. "They join because of the general fatalism that prevails in Tamil society today"⁸. He added that the need to recruit women necessitated the finding of the appropriate ideology and jargon to convince them that they were on a grand errand.

With its powerful double-liberation ideology - of the Tamil nation and of Tamil womanhood - the LTTE has been more successful than any other armed group in setting up a wing that seeks to demonstrate equality between the sexes quite differently from generally accepted feminist theory. Peter Schalk, in an essay on the women fighters of the LTTE, said that the LTTE projected the equal possibility of death for men and women in its organisation as "the teacher of equality in life". However, feminists and others question the LTTE's liberation ideology and point to the various instances of the Tigers using their women cadre to oppress Tamil women outside the organisation. In one of its reports, the UTHR documented how the LTTE had in its prisons till 1990 some 200 Tamil women, held because they were believed to be anti-LTTE and who received brutal treatment at the hands of women Tigers.

Agencies of empowerment:

The conflict induced empowerment is significant but its impact is

⁸ Ibid.

restricted only to a small section of women. To bring empowerment to a larger section the role of government, civil society and international organisations assumes prominence. It is necessary to focus on the role different agencies play in the empowerment process of the Sri Lankan Tamil women.

Over the years, the Government of Sri Lanka has taken several steps to enhance the status and position of women in the society. Article 12(1) and 12(2), 1978 of the Constitution of Sri Lanka provides gender equality as a fundamental right and non-discriminatory new legislation. Adhering to the International Commitments, Sri Lanka ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1981 and the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1989⁹. One of the most important achievement has been the formulation of a Women's Charter for Sri Lanka by representatives of the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MWA) and other key ministries, as well as women's organisation. The Charter was formulated using CEDAW as a model. It was formulated keeping an eye on the local needs and has seven sections such as (i) Civil and Political Rights, (ii) Rights within the family, (iii) Right to health, (iv) Right to education and training, (v) Economic Rights, (vi) Social Discrimination, and (vii) Gender-

⁹ Women in Sri Lanka Development Context , Country Briefing Paper, Asian Development Bank 1999, http://www.adb.org/Documents/Books/Country_Briefing_Papers/Women_in_SriLanka/women_in_srilanka.pdf

Based Violence. The charter was accepted as state policy by the Government of Sri Lanka in March 1993. A National Committee was appointed in 1994 consisting of 15 women and men from state agencies and NGOs, representing diverse areas of interest to oversee the implementation of the Charter. To some extent women's non-government organisations were successful in placing it on the political agenda at the 1994 elections in the manifestoes of two major parties.

Ironically, the provision of the UN Convention and Charter however lack legal validity as steps have not yet been taken to incorporate these rights in the national legal system. An important aspect of the legal system that tend to conflict with the constitution and international convention is the personal law that governs family relations and women's right within the family in all the community in the Sri Lankan society - that is Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims. Uniformity in personal laws appears to be unattainable in the context of strong ethnic and religious identity.

The Ministry of Plan Implementation (1983) and the Women's Bureau (1978 to 1997) have worked as a compartmentalized entity in the public sector but not able to mainstream gender issues in the national plans. The century old penal code that treated sexual crimes such as rape as minor offences was amended by Act No. 22 of 1995 after strong lobbying by

women's organisations. Stringent punishment is now being imposed and new sections have been introduced in the penal code making for the first time incest, grave sexual abuse, and sexual harassment and trafficking in women criminal offenses. However, legislation pertaining to domestic violence has yet to be formulated.

Women's organisations and Non-governmental organisations:

Non-governmental organisations and women organisations particularly play an important role in the upliftment of the Tamil women during conflict situation and empower them in a significant way. They work and focus on a variety of subjects ranging from rural development, social mobilization for collective action, credit, entrepreneurship, legal reform, research, advocacy, training and activism, domestic violence, family health and rehabilitation, environment and media, etc. In recent times, NGOs in general and women's organisations in particular have been working in the field of gender sensitisation at all levels, from policymakers to large communities.

Survivors Associated, an NGO provides community based, psycho-social rehabilitation for women affected by the conflict. Similarly, in the early 1980s, *Mother's Front* initiated campaign for peace and demanded the return of their sons who had disappeared in the North. The *Women's Action*

Committee, formed in 1982 also took up the issues such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act (1979), the release of women political prisoners, and the rape of women in the north and east. These initiatives are indicative of women's activism in conflict-ridden society.

Sri Lanka Women's NGO Forum (SLWNGOF), an umbrella organization, consisting of over fifty women's organizations has been working on gender issues. The primary objective of the forum is to function as a lobbying and advocacy body on women's concerns at national and international level.¹⁰ *The Centre for Women and Development (CWD)*, one of the many organizations working under the banner of SLWNGOF works to promote equality of the sexes in all spheres of life. Working in the northern part of Sri Lanka, the CWD emphasizes on disseminating information regarding the important role women play in a society. Besides, the CWD focuses on creating awareness, providing training and credit facilities, counselling and motivating the conflict affected women to adapt to the changing atmosphere in the wake of conflict.¹¹

EMACE, is another organisation working to protect the basic human rights of Sri Lanka's most vulnerable people by helping women, children and displaced people. It provides facilities such as income generation, health

¹⁰ <http://www.cenwor.lk/slwomenngoforum.html>

¹¹ <http://www.cenwor.lk/womendevlop.html>

care, education, security and environmental sustainability. It also influences government policies to empower the vulnerable sections of the society, particularly women. Through its broad range of activities it addresses the holistic nature of social and environmental problems. It has been one of the vocal organizations for the protection of basic social, economic and cultural rights of the conflict affected people. Other projects include providing basic education, training and disseminating information about the vulnerability and making adequate intervention of government and international organizations¹². *Rajarata Apada Sahana Sevawa*¹³ (RASS) works for the reahabilitation of refugees and widows of war with no ethnic difference. It has particularly focussing on the fields of education, employment, income generating activites for women. *Weerya Seva Sanghadaya* (WSS) assist women to free themselves from the shackles poverty by upgrading their skills, knowledge and change in attitude. Besides emphasizing on health, education and awareness aspects, WSS specially stresses on implementation of nutrition programmes for both children and pregnant mothers and assist in the uplifting of women and girls those affected by the conflict¹⁴. *Women's Education and Training Institute*¹⁵ (WETI) and *Community Education*

¹² <http://www.ict-uk.org/emace/personal%20web%20page.htm>

¹³ <http://www.cenwor.lk/rajarata.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.cenwor.lk/weeryseva.html>

¹⁵ <http://www.cenwor.lk/womeneducat.html>

*Centre Women's Programme*¹⁶ (CECWP), are striving for providing education and skill training to women and, at the same time, it also disseminate information about the rights of women to strengthen women's organization.

The *North East Forum for Women*¹⁷ have also been engaged in peace building at the community level, especially in the areas of north and east. Similarly, *Sewa Lanka* has been working in conflict areas to help displaced people to rebuild their lives. It has been actively engaged in relief, rehabilitation and long term development activities mainly in northern, eastern and north central districts that are severely affected by the ethnic conflict.¹⁸ Three prominent non governmental organisations such as Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO) and Centre for Women's Development and Rehabilitation (CWDR) and The Economic Consultancy House (TECH) work for the welfare of the Tamil people affected by the conflict. While the TRO concentrates its activities on rehabilitation, resettlement and reconstruction, CWDR emphasises on welfare of women and children and TECH focuses on development. All these are involved in humanitarian

¹⁶ <http://www.cenwor.lk/communityedu.html>

¹⁷ Sumila Abeysekera, "Women and Peace in Sri Lanka",
<http://www.isiswomen.org/wia/wia399/pea00002.html>

¹⁸ Sewa Lanka Foundation: Annual Report 1999-2000 (Nugegoda, 1999-2000), p.5

activities, village development, empowerment of women, welfare of children, the underprivileged and the disadvantaged.

Social Welfare Organisation Ampara District (SWOAD) was founded in 1995 to work for the betterment of the people of Ampara District. Initially this organisation focused particularly on war-affected women in 16 villages but now it is also working with the Tamil, Muslim and Sinhales communities. SWOAD encourages Credit and Savings and also provides the basic needs of the community such as water and sanitation, educational facilities, etc.¹⁹ *The Batticaloa Women's Development Forum (WDF)* is a registered NGO which, in Batticaloa, focuses on working with approximately 875 conflict affected women of all ethnicities through 15 village level societies in the Batticaloa District.²⁰

Other organisations such as the Lanka Mahila Samithi, the Sri Lanka Federation of University Women, and the Sri Lanka Women's Conference which are affiliates of international organisations have been active in charting out different developmental plans for quite a long time.

International NGOs and donor agencies such as Swiss Contact, CARE, Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (HIVOS), Oxford Famine Relief (OXFAM), Netherlands Organisation for

¹⁹ UNDP in Sri Lanka, <http://www.undp.lk/transition/battiamparapartners.html>

²⁰ Ibid.

International Development Cooperation (NOVIB), Plan International, Intermediate development Technology Group and the International Council on Research on Women, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and many other organisations have been working for the overall development of the women. Besides these organisations/funding agencies also support the local NGOs to carry out different development projects at the grassroots level.

Local Initiatives For Tomorrow (LIFT), working in the conflict affected areas of the northern Sri Lanka, has been receiving financial support from CARE. The primary emphasis of LIFT is to strengthen the local services and to build an infrastructure of institutions to promote local economic activities and create employment opportunities. Capacity Development Fund (CDF) is a project undertaken by the CIDA²¹ designed to support through short term activities and training. The project assists the government organisations, local NGOs and other institutions involved in the implementation of government policies mainly in the areas of economic reforms, devolution and provision of basic social services. The OXFAM continues to focus on the poverty and miseries of the refugees of the conflict affected areas. Among different programmes OXFAM intensifies its effort

²¹ <http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/CIDAWEB/webcountry.nsf/VLUDocEn/SriLanka-Projects>

to end violence against women in the North and East. It is helping the government organisations to develop mechanisms to meet emergency situations when immediate help can be extended to the most marginalised people.²² The HIVOS also lends its helping hand to strengthen the rehabilitation efforts of other agencies. It funds the Project for Rehabilitation through Education and Training (PRET)²³ to increase human resource development and employment among the most disadvantaged women and youth from the conflict affected districts.

Apart from funding agencies, research and advocacy institutions also play an important role in compiling, analysing and disseminating useful information on the genesis of the conflict and its impact various groups, and communities of the concerned areas. Documentating experiences and impact of conflict, devising methods to deal with different situations also helps national governments and international organisations to reorient their policies in order to make it most beneficial. The International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES), founded in Colombo in the year 1982 has been implementing projects inter alia on women's capacity building in conflict areas in Sri Lanka, the women's constitutional convention, violence against women in Sri Lanka, gendering peace movements in the context of armed

²² Sri Lanka Programme Information,
http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what_we_do/where_we_work/sri_lanka/index.htm

²³ http://www.hivos.nl/nederlands/partners/zpeken/partner/index.php?org_nummer=LK027

conflict and displacement in South Asia. The *Association of War-Affected Women*, is another organisation working to end the civil war that has engulfed the Sri Lankan society for more than two decades. The association educates soldiers, youth, and community leaders about international standards of conduct in war and promotes the economic and social development of women across conflict lines. Kantha Handa²⁴, (Voice of women) campaigns for the economic, social and legal rights of women in Sri Lanka.

International Community:

The issue of women's suffering in armed conflicts has also been recognised by the international community. In 1969 the Commission on the Status of women in the UN system began to consider whether special protection should be accorded to particularly vulnerable groups, namely women and children, during armed conflict and emergency situations. Following this, the General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Protection of women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict in 1974. The Declaration recognizes the particular suffering of women and children during armed conflict. It also urges States to comply with their obligations under international instruments, including the 1949 Geneva

²⁴ http://www.womenwarpeace.org/sri_lanka/sri_lanka.htm+NGO%2Bsri+lanka+1.

Conventions.²⁵ The *Platform of Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing*, in 1995 acknowledged the role of women as peace builders in conflict situation. In this context, strategic objectives with regard to women's participation in conflict resolution, recognising and promoting their role in fostering peace, providing protection and assistance to women especially displaced women as adopted in the Platform of Action are a landmark initiative by the international community. The *International Criminal Court* made an effort in working out a gender sensitive Statute to sensibly deal with women victims of armed conflict.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), a United Nations body actively dealing with refugees across the globe has significantly contributed in mitigating the plights of the displaced Tamil people in general and women and children in particular. It assists refugees and focuses on emergency assistance to them.

The International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR), another international organization gives voice to those women who have experienced violence and deprivation as a result of the war or armed conflict. In cooperation with the local NGOs the IMADR has been documenting the experiences of women, the cruelties they are subjected due

²⁵ Division for the Advancement of Women Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Sexual violence and armed conflict: United Nations Response", *Nivedini*, vol.6, no.1-2, June- Dec 1998, pp.80-118

to armed conflict and those communities searching for peace so as to develop an alternative model sensitive to the need of women and carry it through at peacetime.

The International Federation of Red Cross (ICRC) and its sister concerns have made significant contributions in terms of raising awareness of the specific needs of women in armed conflict. In Sri Lanka the operational role of the ICRC has been growing in recent times. It focuses on the urgent needs of all people affected by conflict- not only persons forced to abandon their homes, but also local populations in whose communities internally displaced people have sought sanctuary.²⁶ In particular it provides humanitarian assistance wherever needed. It assists public health facilities and helps the families learn the fate or whereabouts of missing relatives, and to visit people still detained in connection with the conflict. It also supports the efforts of the Sri Lanka Red Cross Society to strengthen its capacity.²⁷ Besides its action on ground the ICRC also prepares reports and organises seminars to address the specific issues of women relating to conflict. In order to address health and other needs of girls and women affected by armed conflict the ICRC has appealed to all parties- national governments, international organisations and civil society groups to respect women and

²⁶ Ian Peter, "Too Many Cooks", *Refugees*, vol.3.n.132, p.19.

²⁷ ICRC in Sri Lanka , <http://www.icrc.org>

girls affected by conflict and to take necessary action to prohibit all forms of sexual violence against them. Through a study titled “Women facing War”, these issues have been examined by the ICRC and the report was presented in its 27th International Red Cross and Red Crescent Conference (Geneva, October 1999).²⁸ The ICRC strives to ensure that the necessary steps are taken to identify and consider the general and specific protection, health and other needs of women. It is also trying to develop and strengthen its response to the needs of victims of sexual violence to ensure that they receive appropriate reception, advice, protection, medical care and follow up. Through special programmes the ICRC helps the authorities (detention authorities, peace keeping forces and other humanitarian agencies) to sensitize them regarding the plight of women. It supports women in strengthening their existing coping mechanisms through economic programmes for the benefit of women and their households.

The United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) has been working in Sri Lanka to support the war affected women and children. It has been emphasising on the development of education, water and sanitation, and child protection to provide assistance to the conflict affected women and children in North-East region. It has also

²⁸ Charlotte Lindsey, “Women and War”, ICRC Special report, March 2003, <http://www.icrc.org>

been collaborating with other international organisations to support maternal and child health recovery in that region. It supports the government of Sri Lanka's projects that are designed to address the specific needs of the women and children.

The United States Aid for International Development (USAID) supports civil society groups to identify and report human right abuses and assist victims. USAID is also working with women in the agricultural and industrial sector by strengthening women's wings of Trade Unions and establishing a Trade Union Women's Forum. It also funds programme on prevention of sexual harassment and have motivated trade unions and NGOs to develop in house policies on sexual harassment. Besides, it focuses on improve health and safety conditions of female workers.²⁹

The impact of conflict has been vividly reflected in their miseries and sufferings. Though conflict significantly affected the lives of Tamil women it has also made them learn different mechanism to cope with it. It has been further found that conflict induced empowerment touches only a small segment and therefore the role of government, international agencies and non-governmental organizations assumed prominence. This chapter highlighted the initiatives of the Sri Lankan government, women

²⁹ <http://www.usaid.gov/pubs/cvj2002/ane/lk>

organizations, international funding agencies/NGOs in terms of their role and operation in the conflict affected areas. It examined the functions and objectives of various organizations in the context of empowering women in the conflict situation. How far these agencies have been successful in empowering women and the impact they have made on the lives of women have been dealt with in the next chapter.

CHAPTER – IV

PROGRAMMES OF EMPOWERMENT

It is beyond doubt that different agencies of empowerment have played a significant role as far as bringing positive changes in the lives of Tamil women in the conflict ridden Sri Lankan society is concerned. Whatever developments in different spheres - social, economic, political and legal – have taken place, the credit must go to the activities of these agencies. All the key players such as international agencies, non-governmental organizations, donor agencies, and above all the State Government, through their concerted efforts have helped rebuilding the conflict torn society where women can face life without being discriminated.

International agencies/organizations have recognized that empowerment of women is vital to any country's socio-economic development. Initiatives taken by many such agencies have resulted in providing them space in the society and ensuring their effective participation in different spheres.

International Humanitarian agencies such as Amnesty International (AI) and United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) have played an effective role in highlighting the humiliation and brazen violation of rights of women by the state apparatus during the conflict. These agencies were successful in forcing/persuading the government to provide justice to

the victims by bringing the accused to book. For instance, in the year 2001¹, the Amnesty International and UNHRC took up one such case of gross violation of human rights in Sri Lanka. In that case, two women were arrested following a raid and were subjected to gang rape and torture by the security forces while in detention. After the active involvement of the AI and UNHRC, the President of Sri Lanka was compelled to order an inquiry. After the special investigating team submitted its report, a judge directed to conduct identification parade of the accused in which both women identified two police and two naval personnel involved in the barbaric rape and inhuman torture. On the one hand, such exercise tends to work as a deterrent to the perpetrators and, on the other, it instills confidence among the victims to voice their concerns.

Among donor agencies the United States Aid for International Development (USAID) has contributed immensely for the well being of Tamil women. The USAID provides grants to local NGOs that work for the empowerment of women at the grass root level. The Eastern United Women's Organization is one among the many grantee organization. As part of its empowerment project it has organized a Women's Right Awareness

¹ Vijitha Silva, "Protests in Sri Lanka Against the rape and torture of Tamil Women", <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/jul2001/sri-j10.shtml>

Training for Tamil and Minority Muslims in the conflict-ridden town of Trincomalee district². The trainer of the programme, being a policewoman has informed the participants about the proper procedures for reporting abuses. Detailed information about how special units within each police station operates and how these special unit deals with crimes against women and children, have helped the Tamil women to a great extent. The training provided them an opportunity to air their apprehension to approach the police in the event of any exigency. It also provided a space to interact and build a relationship between the police community and the local community as well. Increasing awareness among women towards their rights constitute an important aspect of their empowerment.

The USAID also supported the causes for individual freedom, tolerance for other points of view and the protection of women rights. In its effort to provide increasing access to justice it has been successful in bringing down the backlog cases in the courts of appeal in Sri Lanka by 2660 in 1995³.

Assistance for greater protection and promotion of citizen's rights has been provided by the *Sarvodaya Legal Services Movement* which runs

² USAID/OTI Sri Lanka Field Report, March 2004, http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/cross-cutting_programs/transition_initiatives/country/srilanka/rpt0304.html

³ USAID Congressional Representation, FY1997, <http://www.usaid.gov/pubs/cp97/countries/lk.htm>

district-level legal aid clinics for the public and conducts legal government officials. It also grants funds to support a human rights programme to raise awareness among school children, teachers and local government officials about the general concept of human rights issues and the rule of law.

The USAID also provides grants to NGOs who work for the betterment of women. Many such grantee NGOs have helped to improve the nutrition and income of families through different projects. In this direction they have initiated home garden projects, provided water and sanitary facilities, started income generating activities in domestic dairy and goat farming, vocational training, etc. to improve the physical and psychological well-being of the poor women. The humanitarian assistance has benefited 85,566⁴ people affected by the ethnic conflict in the north and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. These initiatives taken by NGOs and donor agencies have resulted in the economic and social empowerment of women of the region.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the lead agency for the provision of protection, relief items and emergency shelter has played a very important role in protecting the Sri Lankan Tamil people, who have been displaced due to the ongoing ethnic strife. It has also

⁴ Ibid.

played a major role in assisting the refugees by providing them direct assistance and strengthening national capacity. It has established strategic partnerships with other institutions working for the betterment of the displaced people.

In 2002, almost one-third of the internally displaced people returned to their houses in the conflict areas due to the initiatives of the UNHCR. The UNHCR's partnership with the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and Legal Aid Foundation (LAF)⁵ has made the displaced people aware of their rights and provided them access to legal services. The extension of such facilities to women leads to their legal empowerment.

To generate income among displaced people, the UNHCR provided start-up capital to about 2,044 families for setting up small business to engage in livelihood activities, such as farming, fishing and other skilled occupations. Skills training programmes were conducted for 184 women-headed households⁶. To supplement the income of the displaced families, five fishing projects were undertaken from which 163 families have been benefited. Nearly 25,429 internally displaced people mainly women and children have access to a variety of community based projects such as skills

⁵ <http://www.db.idpproject.org/Sites/idpSurvey.nsf/wViewCountries/F4A9743C00299400C..>

⁶ Ibid.

training and income generation opportunities, access to psycho-social services, playgrounds, nursery schools and educational facilities⁷. On the whole the initiatives taken by the UNHCR has empowered women economically and socially.

The United Nations International Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF)⁸'s humanitarian assistance in Sri Lanka has also provided relief to the displaced people of northern and eastern region. The UNICEF addresses the needs of traumatized women through community-based programmes for their psycho-social development. Strategies such as coping mechanism within a community is being imparted among the conflict affected women and children. For female-headed households the organization focuses on income generation activities to reduce their social and economic vulnerability and exploitation.

Among many donor agencies the Asian Development Bank has a pivotal role in ameliorating the plight of the conflict-affected women. The Bank has identified disadvantaged group of women which emerged out of the ethnic conflict. The Bank has been assisting them in acquiring economic resources through its multipronged gender strategy. The gender strategy of

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/01b9301c09570becac1256c000038217e

the bank focuses on the upliftment of those disadvantaged women. Special emphasis has been given on aging women. The Bank has been funding the government of Sri Lanka to enhance and strengthen its capacity to analyze the situation and needs of poor and destitute women⁹. A background study on aging destitute women was undertaken to identify some of the issues involving them and how they can be incorporated into the Bank's other leading programmes. It has also made a systematic documentation of the impact of ethnic conflict on women, its economic impact, the extent of poverty, the identification of the means through which the assistance can be effectively utilised during the ongoing conflict and after its resolution.

The Bank has also been playing an important role in mainstreaming gender issues by adopting several measures. The Bank has ensured that the benefit actually reaches the intended beneficiaries and that such project is designed to seek women's participation in economic sphere. It has also been encouraging the Government of Sri Lanka to establish a special internship programme for women to facilitate their employment in non-traditional areas such as in the higher ranks of the civil service and in vocational, scientific and information technology etc. Above all, the Bank has been providing assistance to the Government to strengthen its institutional mechanism for

⁹ www.adb.org/Documents/News/2004/nr2004064.asp

promoting gender equity, for integrating gender issues into policies, plans and activities to realise the goal as set in the Beijing conference in 1995.

Another important aspect of the functioning of the Bank in the conflict-ridden society of Sri Lanka is its assistance to make women self-employed by financing them. Looking at the developments of various programmes and the functioning of NGOs, the Bank has been providing micro-credit facilities to women-headed households in the north and eastern region. The promotion of the development of small-scale self-employment schemes has also helped the displaced women of the region to stand on their own. The Bank has approved further support to the affected people of the region in terms of basic social infrastructure and community services. A special project for the affected people of the north and eastern region - the ADB's¹⁰ North East Community Restoration Development (NECRD) project - has been addressing basic needs in health, education, agriculture and income generation.

The World Bank has been a partner in improving health in Sri Lanka for over 15 years, beginning with a Health and Family Planning Project which succeeded in strengthening partnerships between the government and

¹⁰ www.adb.org/Documents/News/2004/nr20040b4.asp

NGOs in the delivery of health services. Project activities led to a significant increase in the number of couples using family planning methods.

Through the Northeast Irrigated Agriculture Project, the World Bank has assisted around 119 new women's rural development societies¹¹. It has supported the reconstruction of 275 km of roads and provided over 200 wells for drinking water. Small loans have been provided to more than 6,500 women to help them start small businesses. In total, the project has benefited around 35,000 families.

The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) is one of the leading donor agencies working for the well-being of the people of Sri Lanka in general and the Tamil people in particular¹². The agency fund local NGOs to carry out different programmes in the conflict-ridden areas of Sri Lanka.

The Shakti Gender Equity Project is one of many such projects funded by the CIDA to promote gender equity in Sri Lanka by strengthening the capacity of local partners working in four critical areas; mainstreaming a gender equality approach in government and non-government programme; enabling women's full participation in the political process; prevention of

¹¹ <http://www.worldbank.org>

¹² <http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/CIDAWEB/webcountry.nsf/VLUDOCEN/Sri Lanka-projects>

violence against women and availability of supportive services for women affected by violence; promotion of economic opportunities and safeguarding the human rights of women workers. The project has benefited more than 10,000 women workers and managers working in the free trade zone in terms of information on workers rights and gender analysis of economic policies published and shared with policy makers in the government. Legal counseling and legal aid have also been provided to women victims of violence in the north and eastern part of the country.

The Centre for Women's Development and Rehabilitation (CWDR), an NGO working in all the eight districts of the northeast Sri Lanka, run several welfare centres for different projects. The CWDR focuses on rehabilitation projects at regional, district, village, family and individual levels; they are being implemented to assist women whose lives have been adversely affected physically, psychologically, and economically, due to the war¹³. Assistance was expanded to cover others also.

Vettrimani - Victory Home, one of the many welfare centers has been providing counseling for psychologically affected women. About 80 women of various ages and backgrounds who have been affected by war, victims of rape by the military, loss, separation from family, social injustices, and

¹³ <http://www.lttepeacesecretariat.com/mainpages/n24044.htm>

abuse by family members, are provided assistance and care. Most of them were found destitute, wandering in the streets. Medical attention is given and their psychological health is monitored. About 30 women have recovered, some have either returned home, one is due to be married soon; other are currently undergoing vocational training with three having already taken up employment after training¹⁴.

Similarly, *Niraimathy Illam* – Full Moon Home, another welfare centre run by the CWDR works for mentally impaired women. The Welfare Centre has helped 26 women who do not have relatives and have been abandoned by their families. *Mary Illam* – Marry's Home has been providing shelter to those refuse to young women aged 17 and above who have become destitute of the war. The Welfare Centre assist them in relocating and reuniting them with their families and relatives. About 14 women have been reunited with their families through this service. Vocational training and educational and counseling services are also given to them. 4 women have got married and the new couples are provided with a marital home. The CWDR also runs sewing centers, a pappadam factory, multipurpose shops, a coir factory, a motor mechanic workshop, a brick-making factory, a mat-weaving center, grinding and rice mills, and a 15-acre

¹⁴ Ibid.

coconut, fruit and vegetable farm. Over 120 women are employed in these establishments.¹⁵

The Population Services Lanka (PSL) established 1973 is one of the affiliate of the Marie Stopes International Worldwide working in Sri Lanka for development of women and children and to enable them to develop subsidized health care provision in slum communities and remote rural villages. The PSL's contraceptive and social marketing programme ensures that even in the most far-flung villages couples are able to easily access reliable brands of contraceptive. A range of center-based and outreach sexual and reproductive health care include family planning and contraceptive services; ante and post-natal care; female sterilization and vasectomy; primary health care; prevention, diagnosis and treatment of sexually transmitted infections (STIs); STI/HIV/AIDS awareness raising initiatives; and services for internally displaced persons.

Women's organizations and NGOs in Sri Lanka have played an important role in addressing the problems and challenges women face during conflict and to promote gender equality. The most significant and tangible impacts are perhaps at the macro-level, where differences are made to individual life. Micro-credit projects have saved women beneficiaries and

¹⁵ Ibid.

their families from destitution, replacing coping strategies with the livelihood. Activities at the micro-level have instilled confidence in many of the beneficiaries, putting them at better position to pursue other economic and personal endeavours. The projects of these organizations on reproductive rights, education, health, housing, violence against women, economic inequality, and women's right to landed property have been critical to the actual and potential empowerment of the Sri Lankan women¹⁶. Many women have gained important practical skill, leadership experience, and organizational abilities through their participation in projects with women's organization.

Receiving psycho-social support as well as help with vocational studies and other matters, many women have been able to return to their communities with new skills and confidence. Women's organizations also play a part in raising consciousness among individual women. Involvement of women in different women's organization with a feminist agenda has refined and altered individual notions of feminism and contributed to personal growth. The *Voice of Women* (Kantha Handa), a women's group in Sri Lanka formed in 1978, was the first organization to promote the ideals of

¹⁶ Martha Walsh, "Women's Organizations in Post-Conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina" in Krishna Kumar ed., *Women and Civil War* (London, 2001), pp. 171, 195.

feminism¹⁷. Through its multitude functions the organization is committed to the social, political, economic and legal development of women at grass root level. It also carries out different research projects involving women's issues and disseminate information among the general public and other such organizations to inform them of recent events and issues related to women so that they can bring about necessary changes in the lives of women. It has been emphasizing on education in the Sri Lankan society as the development of women is an important aspect of the advancement of the country. Through its intensive research and other academic endeavour, the organization has been striving to empower women by sensitizing the society to provide them their rightful place in all spheres. Besides, this initiative also expose areas of violence and gender discrimination through publication of a trilingual journal published every six months highlighting the problems and issues women face during conflict and violence. This has helped all concerned to redesign their priorities for the empowerment of women.

EMACE, another organization working for the development of women, primarily focuses on marginalized community groups in Sri Lanka

¹⁷ <http://www.cenwor.lk/voiceofwomen.html>

with special emphasis on gender equity and childcare¹⁸. It has assisted the marginalized women and children in the northern and eastern province of Sri Lanka. Its focus on imparting training to women in non-traditional skills helping them find alternative employment. To promote entrepreneurial ability among them the organization has set-up women's club which has provided revolving loan scheme to enable them to have easy access to affordable credit for their economic empowerment. It has also worked for the promotion and protection of basic social, economic and cultural rights.

The Rural Women's Organisation Network (RWON) has been striving to empower women by assisting them with financial and technical assistance along with training programmes¹⁹. It has promoted a participatory approach in solving a particular problem. By encouraging rural women to organize themselves into groups and attending to a problem unitedly the organization has successfully promoted friendship and mutual understanding among the members. It has resulted in instilling confidence to solve their problems on their own. Women are more and more able to speak out in public and communicate more effectively thereby bringing a positive change in their lives.

¹⁸ <http://www.cenwor.lk/emac.html>

¹⁹ <http://www.cenwor.lk/rwon.html>

The World University Service of Canada (WUSC) has been working since 1989 to empower individuals and communities of the poorer districts of Sri Lanka particularly affected by conflict²⁰. Its project emphasizes on meeting the needs of marginalized women and youth by building skills, creating employment and generating new income by enhancing the capacity of local partners. WUSC's development activities help reduce poverty, improve living conditions and provide viable economic options to the disadvantaged population. It has integrated a gender strategy into all aspects of programming to address the challenges faced by the beneficiaries. More than 100 people have been trained in basic rights awareness. While about 1200 trainees successfully completing vocational training programme annually, 74 per cent of them find employment and their income increases five fold. These organizations have enabled some women to articulate educated arguments of feminist ideals that they understood intuitively but could not express.

Having realised the primacy of empowering the conflict affected women, various agencies such as international organisations/donor agencies, local non governmental organisations and women's organisations, are working in the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. These

²⁰ www.wusc.ca

organisations have not only provided humanitarian assistance to mitigate the sufferings arising out of the conflict, but also focused on gender sensitive programmes to empower women so as to enable them to deal with the conflict and post-conflict situations. While some of the organisations have been assisting Tamil women to make them economically self-sufficient, some others have been working to make them aware of their rights and providing them access to legal services. However, the role of these agencies in alleviating the suffering of women in war can increase if rapid and unimpeded access is granted to conflict affected persons. Humanitarian organisations such as the ICRC are not given access to the areas where the worst fighting took place²¹.

²¹ The Impact of armed conflict on women, <http://www.eldis.org/static/DOC8951.htm>

CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

The two-decade long ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has made considerable impact on the lives of the Tamil women. The death, destruction and suffering caused by the ethnic conflict coupled with traditional patriarchal social order brought immense miseries to them. Many Tamils have become refugees in their own backyard. Women and children became the worst sufferer of such mindless killing, torture, intimidation and sexual exploitation at the hands of the police, military and hostile Sinhalese people. The ethnic conflict has resulted in large scale disappearance of men. With the absence of men the Tamil women were forced to take up new roles such as the head of household, venturing out to the public space, negotiating with the army and police and government agencies.

To mitigate the miseries of the Tamil women, agencies such as non-governmental organizations, international donor agencies, women organizations and the government agencies have extended their helping hand. Due to the efforts of these agencies, women have become conscious of their rights and realized their potential. Unlike the practices in the traditional society women have come in a large numbers to fight for their rights. For example, sexually abused women are now coming forward and cooperating with the investigating process to see to it that the culprit is

punished. Cooperation among different groups and communities enabled them to discuss their problems freely and charting out plans to deal with it.

The adoption of intensive as well as extensive strategies both at micro and macro level by these agencies have brought about qualitative changes in the lives of Tamil women. The study highlighted the newly acquired status of the Tamil women in the conflict-ridden society. Though in a limited manner, the agencies have helped the Tamil women to stake a claim about their rights.

The Tamil women who lost their home, land and near and dear ones have learnt a few things during the course of their stay in the relief/rehabilitation camps. The study has focused on the plights of the Tamil women and, at the same time, it has thrown light on their varied experience. Since the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is far from over, this study is basically a transitional one. In the post-conflict situation, it would be better to have a comparative analysis of the status of Tamil women in conflict and post-conflict situations.

It has been seen that the strategy adopted by different agencies have resulted in empowering the Tamil women in more than one ways. The study analyzed how different agencies have helped the Tamil women to acquire a

new status by providing them opportunities for rebuilding their homes, families and lives during the conflict.

Conflict Induced Empowerment

Conflict brought women to the public sphere. With the indiscriminate killings and disappearances of male members, the onus of maintaining the day-to-day affair of the family lies on women. While dealing with life in the public sphere they come across new situations, which were hitherto dealt by men. Their *de facto* assumption of male responsibilities in the absence of men gives them chance to re-negotiate gender roles. Their involvement and participation in these spheres give them a new sense of independence *vis-à-vis* their pre-conflict status. Thus, the conflict, besides bringing miseries in the lives of Tamil women has also created opportunities for their empowerment.

With the help of different agencies women became conscious of their social, economic and human rights that enabled them to deal with these spheres successfully. Special programmes have been undertaken to assist women-headed household with a view to enhancing their income and protect them from social and economic exploitation. Women are financed to take up small business to supplement their income. The agencies have also provided psychological support through counseling to create confidence and self-

belief among the traumatized victims of the conflict. Legal support has also been extended to the affected women of the north and eastern region. Different agencies have documented the miseries and plight of women and children and brought it to the notice of the government and international bodies to prevent the occurrence of such events and provided the victims the right platform to ventilate their grievances. As reflected in the study the agencies have in fact played an important role in successfully empowering Tamil women in the conflict situation. The study thereby corroborates the hypothesis that though conflict affects women's physical, mental and psychological well being they also empower them to take newer challenges in a changing society.

Women's Role as Combatant

The study examined the empowerment of Tamil women from a different angle. The question whether the status of women as combatants can be categorized as empowered is a debatable one. As combatants, women get a place beside their male counterpart. The traditional societal norm, which place women merely as an adjunct to men also, takes a back seat. The LTTE also gives women due credit by accepting them a part of the struggle for liberation. The critics, however, are of the opinion that the LTTE's acceptance of women as their partner in the struggle is more of a

convenience than a commitment for empowerment of women. Whether the LTTE is really for the empowerment of their women folk or the declaration is a mere publicity stunt to maintain their strength can be seen only when normalcy returns. Further, the status women are enjoying at the moment is temporary one or to continue can also be seen in the post-conflict situation. Since the study is transitional in nature testing of hypothesis, that the women's role as combatants do not necessarily signify their real empowerment, any inference drawn at this point of time will be inconclusive.

Need for Institutionalization

The work done by different agencies are expected to be there even after the conflict. The kind of exposure women got during conflict situation, the skills they develop by undergoing training, and the coping mechanism they developed among themselves can help them to strongly claim for their rightful place in the society. Awareness about their rights, economic independence, ability to take up newer vocations and their ability to chalk out new strategies for their welfare can also help them in charting out gender specific policies during post-conflict situations. The state has a greater role in guiding and strengthening their efforts in this direction. The state needs to recognize their contributions and bring out new legislations to do away with

discriminatory practices that hinder their welfare. Besides, different organs of the state machinery also need to realize the same and work accordingly. Mere legislation may not be enough to protect women from being exploited and discriminated. Strict adherence to international treaties, implementations of existing laws and rules will therefore hold the key for institutionalizing the change taken place during the conflict situation.

The present study offers plenty of avenues for scholars to examine whether the empowerment of women during conflict situation is a permanent feature or women will again adhere to their pre-conflict gender status quo. Further studies can be undertaken as to how best women can be protected during conflict situations.

Recommendations

There is an urgent need to include women while evolving strategies for empowering them as women's involvement often results in a more holistic view of policy making - bringing in issues such as economic exploitation, psychological abuse, issues of housing and poverty as well as physical planning. Women often have a greater sense of awareness of the linkages between issues, areas and approaches.¹

¹ Empowerment Strategies,
http://www.femmesetvilles.org/seminar/english/pres_en/round_sum1_pres_en.htm

Partnership with local authorities such as municipalities is also essential. Local governments must be involved, as they play key role in activities so vital for women's daily lives. Proper coordination among different groups and communities will help in disseminating and channelising information/resources to the lowest rung in the society.

In order to strengthen the empowerment strategy, and to determine the most appropriate remedies, increased attention should be given to consult women who have suffered from sexual violence during armed conflict. Failing to do so would result in further disempowering them as the solutions imposed on them would be inappropriate. Sexual violence must be seen as an assault on the fundamental human dignity of the person of women.

International community must be vigilant in order to bring about redress and prevent such violations from occurring in future. Rights of women need to be guarded at all costs. As long as women remain in a subordinate position, violations of their rights will continue and they will not have access to effective redress. As part of this process mechanisms should be put into place, which make state and non-state actors responsible for the violations of their armed forces. Those in charge as well as those committing violations must be held accountable. Judicial institutions remain the most important mechanism for the defence and promotion of fundamental rights.

However, more work must be undertaken to ensure that gender based persecutions come within the mandate of the judiciary, whether it operates at a national or international level. In addition, steps must be taken to ensure the safety of victims, witnesses and their families.

Changing the focus of the discussion in this way should help to alleviate some of the ostracism that women experience when they come forward to complain. The rejection they face compounds the effects of the violations they have experienced. Therefore, it is imperative that any trial or judicial proceedings must assist in restoring woman's sense of control over her life. It should also bolster her confidence in the judicial system and in her community.

To sensitize the judiciary about gender problems, gender-sensitive training should be imparted among the lawyers, judges and legal personnel so that it increases their sensitivity to the problems of gender discrimination inherent in the legal system. Such training programs should be offered to national and international judges and includes sessions, which consider various forms of sexual violence and assault that occur during armed conflict. In addition attention should be given to the procedures which could be adopted to ensure that trials are conducted with an understanding of the emotional trauma experienced by women during the trial of such cases.

Post-conflict societies are often identified with the lack of social control, disintegration of community and ineffective law enforcement mechanism. In such situations, civilian security in general and the physical security of women in particular should be protected. Greater representations of women in police forces and judiciary, training of security staffs on women's rights, and establishment of peace committees to prevent the eruption of violence need to be carried out sensitively.

This apart, women's access to productive resources/assets is a major factor that reflects the economic empowerment of women. Due to the gendered division of labour, women are deprived of possessing any productive assets during peacetime. The situation further worsens in the post-conflict scenario when women are denied legal rights to land and other resources owned by their dead husbands, fathers or other close male relatives. This forces them to live in abject poverty and penury. To enhance their social and economic status, efforts need to be taken at different levels - regional, national and international- to provide property rights to women.

Political empowerment holds the key to other forms of empowerment. Whatever gains women achieve by increasing their access to and control of productive resources can only be consolidated when they share political power and frame national policies accordingly. Women's political

leadership/empowerment is, therefore, an essential element for the empowerment strategy. Women's participation in public affairs will further lead to articulation of their grievances and formulate suitable policies to support them to fight discrimination. It is pertinent to mention that sincere efforts should be made and policy should be designed in such a manner that women do not go back to their pre-conflict status. The new status they have gained during this conflict period needs to be internalized. Any empowerment strategy should, therefore, be designed to address the urgent and immediate needs of women in the aftermath of conflict. Further, the strategy should contribute to women's social, economic and political empowerment in order to promote a balanced gender relation.

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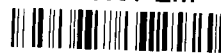
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