

# A double struggle

**Fishing communities, in particular women, in Sri Lanka's war and disaster ravaged regions require support**

By **Cornelie Quist**  
(corneliequist@gmail.com),  
Member, ICSF,  
with special thanks to  
**Anthony Jesudasan** and  
**Herman Kumara**, NAFSO  
(nafsosl@gmail.com)

Sri Lanka receives many tourists from all over the world, attracted by its beautiful coasts and other natural and cultural treasures. But few people know that small-scale fishing communities in Sri Lanka face difficult challenges and hardships, in particular, due to displacement and eviction from coastal beaches and lands, which have been their home and working space for many generations.

Ever since reconstruction began after the tsunami of 2004, small-scale fishing communities have faced severe problems of displacement due to the government's policy of promoting tourism and urban and industrial development, in particular at Negombo, Kalpitya, Hambantota, Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara.

After Sri Lanka's civil war ended in 2009, fishing communities of the Tamil population in north Sri Lanka began facing severe hardships as they tried to rebuild their livelihoods. For decades they were denied access to their fishing grounds by the armed forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and yet the post-war period has not brought them much respite. Licences are provided to better equipped fishers from the southern districts of the country to fish in their northern waters. Acres of their ancestral lands continue to be under occupation by the military.

Women are in the forefront of the struggle to reclaim the rights of their communities. Many of them, in particular in the War-affected

North and East Sri Lanka, are widows and women whose husbands and other relatives are missing. They organize sit-in protests in front of military camps and local government offices in cities such as Mannar, Jaffna, Vavuniya, Killinochi, Mullaithivu, Batticaloa and Ampara. Besides struggling for their communities' rights, they also need to fight for their rights as women.

While in earlier reports on Sri Lanka (see *Yemaya* 41 and *Yemaya* 50), I have described the situation of women in the fishing communities of Batticaloa and Mannar, my visit to Sri Lanka this year included the district of Mullaithivu. The visit was intended to get a glimpse of the post-war situation and learn about the lives and work of the local fishing communities, in particular about the struggles of the women of whom I had learned through the National Fisheries Solidarity Movement (NAFSO), a Sri Lankan national small-scale fisheries' organization, and other media.

The fishing community of the Mullaithivu district in Northeast Sri Lanka went through tremendous devastation during the last phase of the War, and before that, the tsunami and decades of displacement. Almost every family has lost one or more persons; most of their homes were devastated and their fishing livelihoods were brought to a standstill. Yet the post-war period has not brought any real improvement in their lives. According to government data, in 2012-13, Mullaithivu had the highest percentage of poor households in the country at 24.7 per cent. The District Secretariat records reveal that Mullaithivu has nearly 6000 women who are the sole breadwinners in the family. At least 5000 are widows, many of them being 'war-widows'. Over 750 people are reported missing in the district.

Writing in in May this year in the *Daily Mirror*, one of Sri Lanka's English language national newspapers, the Sri Lankan researcher Ahilan Kadigamar, a regular visitor to Mullaithivu, expressed his concern: "After the War, the Rajapaksa regime further humiliated this population by interning them in camps, undermined their economic revival with militarized restrictions on fishing, and intimidated them for years with surveillance. Sadly, even after regime change two years ago, their economic situation has become worse. Their fishing livelihoods have been undermined by the arrival of hordes of fishing enterprises from other regions.

CORNELIE QUIST



The livelihoods of women here have been further undermined after the War by the hordes of fishing enterprises that have arrived from other regions

Ironically, it is the Fisheries Ministry responsible for developing sustainable local fisheries that is at the centre of the current controversy. Excessive licences are granted to hundreds of gill-net fishermen and companies that send divers to collect sea cucumber for exports. The large inflow of licenced fishermen has also provided cover for unlicensed fishermen and illegal fishing practices including the use of light course and dynamite, which are all draining the ability of the Mullaitivu fishing community to recover.”

Our visit to Mullaithivu is between late June and early July 2017. Every morning, we go to the beautiful beach in a village near Mullaithivu town, where we mingle with the local fishermen and women amongst colourful fibreglass boats illustrated with the names of donor agencies, to observe their work and listen to their stories. Earlier, we had befriended a Tamil fisherman who lived in a refugee camp in India for 20 years and only recently returned to his home in Mullaithivu. Now he is our ‘interpreter’. There are a lot of people on the beach, both men and women, helping with pushing boats on shore, cleaning nets, reorganizing hook and line and gill nets, and sorting the catch. “In our community there are many jobless people and also many widows. We are all one family, we help each other,” we are told.

The community does not seem to have boats for every fisher family. We learn that after the tsunami and the War, several NGOs came to donate boats on loan. Many fishers already had high debts, and so, only a limited number could afford to purchase boats and nets. Their daily catch does not look very big: on the average, one boat has about four kilos of big, commercially valuable fish (such as ribbon fish, tuna, barracuda) and a few kilos of small fish, primarily sardine. The big fish is taken to the traders who wait with their weighing equipments and refrigerated vans in small sheds near the beach. Their vans announce where they have come from and it seems that most are from the far south of the country. The small fish is mostly kept aside, and distributed among those who are helping or sold to local people.

We are invited by a friendly fisher couple to their home. Every morning, the woman brings fresh tea and food to the beach for her husband and the helpers. She is also responsible for distributing and selling the small fish. We sit under a big mango tree in front of their simple home. “This mango tree was planted by my uncle 40 years ago. Like

us, it has survived both the tsunami and the War,” she says, adding softly, “We are so happy that there is peace now.” She and her husband lost three daughters during the 2004 tsunami. Twice her house was destroyed, once during the tsunami and another time during the last phase of the War in 2009, when there was continuous shelling and bombing. They lived in a refugee camp for two years. They have one son left, who is fifteen now and goes to school. With support from NGOs, they were able to rebuild their house and restart their livelihood. “I love my husband and son very much. I never want to leave them or my community. We all are one big family here and help each other,” she says with renewed strength in her voice. Her husband smiles broadly and hugs his wife. Then he adds, “We love our way of life but we are worried because our catches are declining.” He explains how after the War, Indian trawlers intruded in their waters using destructive gears to catch shrimp. (On 6 July 2017, the Sri Lankan Parliament approved a law that prohibits bottom trawling. This ban on trawling particularly hits Indian fishers from Tamil Nadu, who engage in bottom trawling and are often found trespassing into Sri Lanka’s territorial waters.)

Lately, fishers from far away regions of Sri Lanka have been coming in big numbers to Mullaithivu attracted by its rich fish resources. “We are willing to share our resources, but the livelihood and future of our local community need to be protected. In our community, we live and work in harmony, but we feel so powerless to protect ourselves against these outsiders that come to destroy our livelihood,” says the fisherman sadly. We ask about the big holiday resort built on the beach in the corner of the lagoon. We had been told it was built by a German and would open soon. To us the beach looked too small to be shared by both the fisher people and the tourists. The fisher couple looks at us with uncertainty. Our question, about whether they were consulted about the construction of the resort in their village and on the beach where they work, seems to surprise them.

On our walks along the coast to Mullaithivu town, we observe the many ruins of houses, still not rebuilt. We are moved to see that real efforts are being made to decorate gates and house fronts as beautifully as possible, as if in an attempt to bring colour and life back into the environment of destruction.

Mullaithivu’s beaches are beautiful and clean, but every time our path is blocked by

**It is very important to continually extend support to the campaigns of these courageous women’s groups**

a military camp and are we sent back by the soldiers on duty. They are very friendly, but somehow we feel the War is not over yet.

Arriving at Mullaithivu town, it is impossible not to notice the group of women sitting in a shed with many portraits of mostly young people, in front of the District Government Agent Office. They are women whose family members disappeared during and short after the civil war ended in 2009. "I 'surrendered' my only son to the LTTE during the final stages of their battle against the Sri Lankan armed forces and since then he is missing," says one of the women, who is from a fishing community. She firmly believes that her son is alive. Being a widow, having the support of her only son is of enormous importance to her. The other women are already engaged in a sit-in for more than 150 days demanding that the national government disclose the names of their near and dear who are now missing—political prisoners, detainees and those who surrendered to the armed forces. "Without knowing where our loved ones are, we cannot pick up our lives again. Everything feels meaningless," she says with deep sadness. Together with women of other areas in the former War zones who have joined this protest, they have met and petitioned various commissions and government officials. Till now the list of names has not been released.

We also go to Keppapilavu, a village on the other side of the lagoon, where 138 families held a sit-in protest in front of a military camp to reclaim their ancestral lands occupied by the army. As their lands and beaches had been occupied by the army for decades, they had lost access to their traditional livelihood activities.

We are led to a shed put up at the entrance of an army camp. It is covered with banners that announce, in Sinhalese and Tamil, the main issues and demands. We sit in a circle with the protesters, most of whom are women, and listen to their stories. They had started their sit-in on the 9<sup>th</sup> of February this year and today was already Day 121 of their protest. The military had cut off electricity and drinking water facilities and blocked the road. Several women had fallen ill due to the difficult conditions of their long sit-in. In one case of a woman who developed a serious heart condition, the ambulance could not reach the sit-in site. Their places of worship have been made inaccessible by the road blocks. "We have lost everything. We have been running for a long time—displaced continuously. When will we return to our homes and lands? I am an old woman now.

I want to die on my ancestral lands. These lands won't be there for our children if we don't continue our protest," says one woman, among the courageous many who have been in the protest from the beginning.

Among the affected families are 60 'war-widows'. Several have their sons 'disappeared'.

The leadership of the protest is mostly in the hands of women. They have petitioned many commissions and met countless officials, both at the district and central level. They even held a protest in front of the President's office in Colombo. Many politicians came to meet them and their representatives even met Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. However, only a few families got their lands back. The majority is still waiting.

Why is this the case, we ask? The women say that it primarily has to do with a lack of genuine concern of the politicians and authorities. "Politicians in neither Colombo nor Jaffna know anything about how we live in Mullaithivu or the hardships we undergo," says Jeyaseeli, an outspoken woman leader of the Keppapilavu families. The women feel abandoned. They are convinced that the central government is not interested in allowing the people of the former War zones to come up in life, and that protecting the interests of the army is their priority.

After the War, the army began to exploit the lands they had occupied in the north and east. They now cultivate cash crops for additional income and compete with local farmers. Sometimes they lease out large tracts of the lands they occupy to big companies for commercial crops. On beaches, the army participates in the construction and operation of tourist resorts. Some of these activities are detailed here. This is all lucrative business and therefore the army is not willing to give up these lands without proper compensation by the government. The women in Keppapilavu have heard that the army has received SLR 5,000,000 (US\$ 32,895) compensation by the government for 189 acres of occupied agriculture land at Keppapilavu. But the lands have not yet been released. Further, these 189 acres are also only a part of the 482 acres that the villagers claim to be their ancestral lands.

The return of their land is of vital importance to them, emphasize the women of Keppapilavu. "Before the War we had a good life, we had our own houses and our own livelihoods on the land or on the shore," they say, adding that only when they are back on their ancestral land can they feel at peace; only then can they pick up their lives again

and rebuild their livelihood. “We can then regain our self-confidence and give up our lives as ‘losers,’” says one of the women. How do you survive now, we ask? They tell us that they live in temporary houses with little or no facilities, or stay with relatives. Because families have expanded in the last decade, they are now forced to live in crowded conditions. They are dependent on irregular daily wage labour and odd jobs in exchange for a small income or some food. There is not enough work, the women say. Mullaithivu is dependent on agriculture and fisheries, and local fishers and farmers find it hard to invest, facing not only threats from external sources but also declining production. This year it is even worse because of the drought, the women say. They now make and sell food items in the village or package grocery items in small quantities, but they can’t really make a living from this.

Last year, Hirdarami, one of Sri Lanka’s largest apparel companies, built a factory at Mullaithivu. The company worked closely with the Sri Lankan army. The army not only helped the company find a suitable location for the factory but also allowed a workers’ training centre to be set up within the premises of its headquarters.

Jobs in this company are only for the happy few. Usually these are young unmarried women from families with friendly connections with the army. It is common knowledge that the women workers in the factory must work standing on their feet all day in order to earn a few hundred rupees daily.

Do women face different problems from the men of their community, we ask. The women unanimously answer ‘yes’. Women face huge economic hardships, they say, in particular, the War widows and other single women heading households. Daily labour opportunities in agriculture and fisheries are few and mostly given to men. Daily wages for men are also almost twice as much as for women. Women must walk long distances, sometimes up to six or seven kilometres, for a daily wage job and, despite the lack of safety on the roads, they return home late, after dark. Women are also primarily responsible for household chores, and because wells have dried up due to drought, they have to walk miles to fetch water. Most women take loans, particularly for the education of their children or to set up some small business, and many find themselves deeply trapped in debt. Some women are even forced to go into prostitution for income and food. There are some governmental and NGO income



Mullaithivu-women’s protest release list of disappeared children and relatives. War widows and other single women heading households face economic hardships.

generation programmes that teach women to sew, make sweets or *pappadam* (a lentil-based cracker), but these do not help generate meaningful incomes because of marketing constraints. And there is also discrimination in the selection of beneficiaries, the women say. Often the poorest women are not selected, particularly if they are known to have engaged in prostitution or are suspected of having connections with LTTE fighters. One of the women recalls how she used to dry fish in earlier times. The income was meagre but regular. “Now that has become impossible!” she says. After the War, the Rajapakse regime introduced a new system of Rural Fisheries Societies (RFS) through which it extends financial support for economic activities in the fisheries. However, not only did these RFSs tend to exclude women, they turned out to be highly prone to political patronage as well as destructive to the long tradition of fisheries cooperatives through which the local fisheries were managed. The present government has not changed this policy. Women, with the exception of the very few who represent their husband’s business, participate neither in the RFSs nor in the fishermen’s cooperatives.

“Both government and NGO programmes generally make people compete with each other and so, they divide us,” says Jayaseeli sadly. However, if there is a silver lining in the dark clouds that face her and other women in fishing communities, it is the support of NAFSO, which has been organizing leadership training as well as raising awareness around the international guidelines governing tenure and the small-scale fisheries. With the support of NAFSO, the women have united with other women at the district level and formed an organization called Thenral. “Earlier we had no voice. We did not know how to confront

government officials and politicians with our problems and how to negotiate with them for our rights,” says Jayaseeli, “Earlier we lived in isolation. Now we have links with people in other parts of the country, particularly with women’s groups and groups from the southern districts. They could learn about our struggles and extend solidarity just as we also extended our solidarity for their struggles.”

Due to her leadership skills, Jeyaseeli was selected to be part of the Sri Lanka civil society delegation for the fifth review of Sri Lanka by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UNCESCR) at Geneva in June this year. The UNCESCR is a body of 18 independent experts responsible for monitoring the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights by state parties. It was an unforgettable experience for Jayaseeli, who is extremely happy with the recommendations passed. Particularly noteworthy are Recommendation 50 of the 5th Periodic Report of Sri Lanka, which asks the Sri Lanka government to “end military involvement in commercial and other civilian activities and establish and develop a national land policy, in line with the recommendations of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission,” and Recommendation 54 that asks the government “to ensure that women headed households have access to livelihood assistance, housing and land in their own name, as well as low

interest or interest free credit schemes. It also urges the state party to ensure those officials who commit sexual exploitation, bribery and harassment are prosecuted and sentenced, and victims to have access to remedy and compensation.”

Subsequent to our visit, a delegation from Keppapilavu was received by the Ministry of Resettlement in Colombo. There, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of July, they were informed about the decision of the central government to release their lands in a phased manner within a period of six months—110 acres, 30 acres and finally 70 acres. The Keppapilavu people responded by resolving not to give up their protest “until they were all settled and able to drink a cup of tea on their ancestral lands”.

Upon returning from Sri Lanka, I have been reflecting upon the question of what visitors, be they development practitioners, researchers or just tourists like me, can do by way of supporting Sri Lanka’s fishing communities. Given the existing power dynamics, these fishing communities will not be free from the existential threats they face. The burden will fall mainly on the shoulders of the women, who, admirably, still find the strength to stand up for their rights. In one way or another, it is very important to continually extend support to the campaigns of these courageous women’s groups in the north and south of Sri Lanka as well as to organizations like NAFSO that support them. Writing this report is only one step. ❏