

Post-war vulnerabilities

Women in fisheries in the North and the East region of post-war Sri Lanka continue to face serious safety and livelihood challenges

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When the war between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam ended in 2009, the Northern and the Eastern province of Sri Lanka resembled a disaster zone. Homes and infrastructures were damaged; many civilians were killed; many others had fled, and society was in complete disarray. Even today, military control continues in a few areas, along with settlers occupying houses and lands. This has prevented many from either returning home or regaining rightful access to their land.

Women and female-headed households have been amongst those most adversely affected by the war. Both are vulnerable groups in terms of the everyday challenges they face. The war has only made things worse. During my study, I analyzed the socio-economic challenges confronting women in fishing communities and the impact of these challenges on their quality of life. Three of the most serious challenges that women and female-headed households face are discrimination and violence, lack of access to education, and financial debt. These are a consequence of both the war and the lack of government action towards protecting these two most vulnerable groups.

Discrimination and violence are serious problems for women in the North and the East. Socio-cultural norms highly influence the way women are treated as well as perceived in sites such as the workplace. Studies have shown that women who have minority identities have to deal with many more incidents of discrimination and harassment. For example, Sinhalese women have more freedom, in terms of employment, than do Sri Lankan Moors women because Sinhalese is the dominant ethnic group. In fisheries, women are only allowed to partake in fish production processes, marketing and small miscellaneous jobs, such as net repairs. Only men can go out to sea to fish; it is regarded as taboo for women to do so. Such factors constrain women's ability to apply for jobs and go out to work.

In addition to the poor rate of participation of women in work, they also do not get the same wages as men. As in the case of most third-world countries, women in Sri Lanka too are paid a lower wage than men. Women in every stage of the supply chain receive wages that are insufficient to survive on, and as a result, they must work long hours or find additional work elsewhere. Female-headed houses have it worse, and women in such houses must work twice as

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Mullathivu fisherwomen in Northeast, Sri Lanka. Issues of indebtedness are significantly higher in post-conflict areas, and in the North and the East, women are suffering from what they call the household debt crisis

hard to make ends meet. As a result of limited employment and growth opportunities, women are pushed deeper into poverty.

Poverty also limits women's access to much-needed social support services. Daycare and childcare facilities are some of the essential services that women need but lack access to. The war destroyed many daycare centres, and when they were later restored, post-war, they were too expensive for women to afford. Today, with Coronavirus travel restrictions and lockdowns, many daycare centres are closed either temporarily or permanently. This has made it harder for women who relied on these centres to keep their children safely engaged during the workday.

The lack of childcare support significantly limits women's job opportunities. Women with children often cannot leave the house because there is no one to look after the children in their absence. Some find ways to make an income at home, such as weaving coconut leaves, while others will look for a job near their homes. Only those with proper childcare support are able to travel to another city for employment or to work longer hours, and thus enjoy stability at work. Therefore, adequate access to social support services is crucial for gender equality and to give women a better life.

In terms of financial debt, 2.4 million women are currently suffering from the indebtedness that patriarchal financial institutions have forced upon them. Issues of indebtedness are significantly higher in post-conflict areas, and in the North and the East, women are suffering from what they call the 'household debt crisis'. Due to the war, over 100,000 homes were destroyed which led to many people, including women and children, being forced into camps and settlements for internally displaced persons. Multiple organizations assisted in housing restoration in the North and the East by partially funding such reconstruction. However, those who received partial financial assistance still had to pay off the balance as well as grant installments in a timely manner. Many could not afford to do so. This led to further loans from financial institutions.

Many women had no option but to take loans at very high interest rates. They also faced many instances of corruption in financial institutions. The GoSL has failed to implement a standard interest rate and several financial institutions are functioning arbitrarily according to their own rules with differential interest rates based, in part, on the recipient's capacity. Women often lack financial understanding; they don't know how loan-agreements and credit work; this makes it easier for financial institutions to exploit them.

Additionally, women who borrow money are likelier to face harassment, and may even be driven to commit suicide due to the financial difficulties they face in paying back loans. COVID-19 has made matters worse with many women losing their jobs and income. Women reported that debt collectors seize valuable items

from their homes if loans repayment schedules are missed, and some demand bribes through favours, which in the case of these women were mostly sexual favours, either forcefully taken or given voluntarily.

To help women overcome these challenges, the GoSL must take strong corrective action and change the current legal frameworks that systemically discriminate against women. Sri Lanka ratified the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1981 but women's rights in the country instead of improving only seem to be getting worse. In 2017, CEDAW examined the rights of women in Sri Lanka and concluded that its laws and policies required amendment to ensure gender equality, and recommended greater involvement of women in decision-making processes for women's empowerment.

To resolve financial issues, such as the debt crisis, the government must work with financial institutions to evolve a standard agreement on loans. As mentioned, women are not aware of the current clauses that come with borrowing money from financial institutions, such as the increase in interest rates if loans aren't paid back on time. To reduce women from falling deeper into debt, the GoSL needs to actively monitor financial institutions to ensure that the proper guidelines are followed with respect to lending money as per the guaranteed standard interest rate.

Apart from policy and legal solutions, there are some practical steps that the government can take to aid women's livelihoods. Childcare services and daycare centres should be funded by the government and have longer operating hours to give parents, particularly single mothers, and among them, particularly those who work long hours in the fisheries, greater flexibility in terms of working hours. Free or subsidized daycare would help women manage their expenses and reduce their debts.

To summarize, women in fisheries play a significant role that fails to get the recognition it deserves. Their work fetches low salaries, and when they get home, they have additional unpaid work to do, often without the help of their husbands. Women cannot continue in this manner, and equality measures must be put in place to help improve their livelihoods and the future of their families.

Authorities, the GoSL and international bodies, who are all responsible for the protection of women's rights and to ensure gender equality, have failed. These institutions must work together to create a safe environment for women that offers equal opportunities and economic growth. The neglect of women's rights is a violation of the CEDAW and international laws on gender equality. The United Nations bodies must engage with GoSL to ensure that international law on gender equality and equity is applied in Sri Lanka. Without the assistance of international bodies, corruption is likely to continue in the government, and the wealthy are likely to prosper. ❏

Women and female-headed households were amongst those most adversely affected by the war

Outside the net

The lack of recognition by the state continues to cast women in fishing outside the net in Sri Lanka

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While increasingly, around the globe, women's participation in fisheries is being captured in government statistical records, the data on active fishers compiled by the Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources in Sri Lanka is not disaggregated by sex. The underlying reasoning is that the number of women contributing to the fisheries sector is so low that it does not warrant such data disaggregation. However, primary data collected for doctoral research by the first author of this article showed that there were a sizeable 596 women engaged in fisheries in Trincomalee, one of the main fish producing districts located in the eastern province of the country. Therefore, exclusion of women from government enumeration deepens their invisibility in the sector.

Women's invisibility in the labour market is a current issue of debate in Sri Lanka's policy and advocacy circles. While social media activists, elected officials and the media take sides on a range of issues regarding women, alarms are being sounded on the declining female labour force participation. Women's participation in the labour force is fundamental for the larger national economy. Further, at the micro level, the work of women contributes to the well-being of the family, in particular, the welfare of children and most importantly to the women themselves. The question here is whether the declining trends of women's labour force participation is because they are not counted in government data, especially in sectors where their labour is rendered invisible by government action, as in the case of the fisheries sector.

This article highlights the difficult physical terrain that women navigate in order to make a living in coastal Trincomalee in Sri Lanka; and their inability to access services that the Government of Sri Lanka provides to the fisher community, solely because they lack recognition by the State. Women fishers therefore lack the financial and physical support required to improve their livelihood opportunities.

The case of Trincomalee fisheries shows the need to treat women as a heterogeneous group, understand the different sub-groupings that they belong to, and recognise how these sub-groups are marginalised by the actions of the state and society. The notion of intersectionality seeks to analyse how multiple identities work simultaneously to create fissures of power and victimisation among different groups of fishers. This analysis highlights how women bear the brunt of being left out of access to government support, primarily because of gender discrimination in fisheries policy. Women fishers also get excluded due to ethno-religious affiliations, and because of where they live.

Trincomalee is an ethno-religiously diverse district in Sri Lanka, where all three major ethnic groups—Muslims, Tamils and Sinhalese—engage in fishing. Cultural norms in all three groupings dictate that fisheries related spaces are not for women; in fact, participation of women is seen as bringing misfortune to an activity that is very strongly dependent on chance. The following extract brings out this cultural bias.

Interviewer:

“Have you been to sea by boat?”

Respondent (daughter of female gleaner, Muslim):

“People will not take the girls in the *vallam* (beach seine boat). They don't allow the women to touch the boat even. They say that there won't be a fish catch if we touch the boat. They say it will bring *tharthiriyam* (misfortune). Small girls are allowed to touch the boats but not young and married women. Once my elder brother scolded me when I touched the boat, and after that I have never touched it.”

Interestingly, despite restrictive cultural norms and ideologies, many Tamil and Muslim women also participate in fisheries, fishing in shallow sea areas and gleaning clams, prawns and crab in the numerous lagoons. But the women's work is not visible since landing sites and fish markets are clearly identified as public spaces dominated by men. This is an extension of the idea that women's role is within the safe confines of the household, and not in public spaces where one's safety cannot be guaranteed.

The three-decade long civil war in Sri Lanka that directly affected the Trincomalee district

also shaped notions of security and safety, especially for women. However, women have to leave their homes to pursue livelihood options. During certain times of the year, in an area just South of Trincomalee town called Kinniya, on the beach itself, women wait patiently on the margins until the beach seine nets are pulled ashore by men who dump 'leftovers' on the beach, which the women sieve through for seaweed. In other locations, women leave for the lagoon after they finish their morning household chores and return just before noon, with a day's catch of prawn or clam. These women use the income they generate to support their daily expenses, purchase assets, and save for future investments.

Women, however, tend to steer clear of public spaces such as fish landing sites and stay closer to home—a trend noted specifically among Muslim women, who have a strong presence in the lagoons, mostly because their houses are located in the nearby vicinity in Trincomalee. They sell their fish catch locally, within their own communities. For Tamil Hindu women engaging in fishing, their caste identities and pre-existing informal networks are critical factors, either to their benefit or detriment. Muslim and Tamil women are also often stopped and questioned by the Sri Lankan military which is largely composed of the majority Sinhalese ethnicity, when attempting to access the lagoons. With no proper identification cards issued by the Fisheries Department, the women have had to defend their livelihood options, often through negotiations that involve their male relatives.

However, it is among the indigenous Veder community that the study notes marked differences compared to the other women in Trincomalee. The women and men work side by side, pulling the nets ashore and working together in order to earn a living. However, while women have more freedom to engage in fishing, the community as a whole encounters other obstacles. They literally occupy the margins of Trincomalee, living in an area called Vakarai, bordering Trincomalee and Batticaloa. They have poor access to education and health, leaving them outside larger post-war development processes taking place in the Eastern Province. Therefore, they continue to depend on the traditional livelihood of fishing, that too within strict geographic confines.

Some interesting trends are also noted in the fish markets. Sinhalese men dominate the large scale buying and selling of fish. A relatively younger generation of Sinhalese 'war entrepreneurs' moved in from Northern Trincomalee, to fill the void created by the older generation of businessmen who were displaced from Trincomalee by war-related violence. The new entrepreneurs established control over the wholesale market by negotiating the complex civil-military bureaucracy that was in place during the war. The Muslims and Tamils remain outside these markets. Their male identity is not adequate for the men from the minority ethnicities to carve out a space within the fish markets of Trincomalee fisheries wholesale sector.

Thus, for both women and men engaged in fishing, attempting to understand their life chances through the lens of only a gender or an ethnic identity fails to capture the multitude of ways in power has to be negotiated within the sector.

At present, the Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture in Sri Lanka is redrafting the fisheries policy, an exercise that drew upon insights from our study. In any attempt to promote sustainable livelihoods among women, especially in the war-affected regions such as Trincomalee, women's contribution to the fishing industry must be duly acknowledged and recognised. The policy being drafted can help women working in the fringes of the sector, to be given due recognition, and access to policy support and assistance they deserve. While Sections 2.5.2 and 2.5.10 of the Draft Bill categorically mention the support to be rendered to women, at present, policy support is restricted to women who are the wives of men who are registered as fishers with the Fisheries Department. Ironically, the women struggling to earn a living in the brackish backwaters in the lagoons remain invisible and excluded in the new policy document.

In discussions around women in fisheries, while it is important to explore new avenues of employment generation, it is equally important to address issues faced by women in their existing occupations; and government policy interventions should seek to support their work. Such interventions can generate multiplier effects, with positive impacts on women's working conditions, their earnings, and the well-being of their families. ❏

Attempting to understand life chances through the lens of only a gender or a ethnic identity fails to capture the multitude of ways in power has to be negotiated

A double struggle

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

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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.

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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 unlicenced 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 9th 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 Wickremasinghe. 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 26th 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. ❏

Widows' struggles in post-war Sri Lanka

This report documents the post-war struggle of women, mainly widows, from the fishing communities of Mannar, Sri Lanka, attempting to reconstruct their lives

By **Cornelie Quist**
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In 2012, Yemaya had carried a report based on my meetings with women of fishing communities of Batticaloa, a district on the east coast of Sri Lanka which had been badly affected by both the ethnic based civil war in Sri Lanka and the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004 (see *Yemaya* Issue 41). This year, at the end of August, I had the opportunity to return to Sri Lanka where I met widows who are organizing themselves in groups to survive and meaningfully reconstruct their lives.

There are an estimated 89,000 such war widows in Sri Lanka. Since 2009, the guns have fallen silent after 26 years of ethnic based civil war, but the widows are still struggling to feed themselves and their children. Many war widows belong to fishing communities in the north and east of Sri Lanka. Their plight has recently been captured in an Al Jazeera documentary as well (see <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/101east/2015/04/sri-lanka-widows-war-150421161203533.html>).

I was able to talk to some of these widows during my meeting with women's groups at Mannar Island, a fisheries dependent area in north Sri Lanka. The meetings were arranged by the National Fisheries Solidarity Movement (NAFSO), an NGO that works with fishing communities all over Sri Lanka.

Mannar Island is located in the Mannar district of the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, and is connected to the mainland by a causeway. It is situated in the Gulf of Mannar, a large shallow bay forming part of the Laccadive Sea in the Indian Ocean. The bay lies between the southeastern tip of India and the west coast of Sri Lanka. From Thalaimannar at the western tip of Mannar Island, a chain of reefs, sandbanks and islets nearly connects Sri Lanka to India at Rameswaram).

The Gulf of Mannar is an ecosystem with high biodiversity. It is rich in fishery resources, and fishing is a major contributor to the economy of Mannar Island. Approximately half of the island's population (99,051 in 2012) is involved in fisheries. The large majority of fishers practise small-scale fisheries using fibre reinforced plastic boats with outboard engines, motorized traditional boats (*vallam*), non-motorized traditional boats (*theppam*) and non-motorized beach seine boats, and a large variety of nets. Although much of the catch is from the sea, lagoon fishery is also practised. Mannar Island is famous for its dry fish production.

Mannar Island was hit hard by the war because of its location. It was a major exit and entry point from and to India, and became a key host to Tamil refugees from all over Sri Lanka. The island's large Muslim population was driven out by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1990. After the war, the composition of Mannar's population changed. It now has around 80 per cent Tamils, the majority of whom are Christian, and 16 per cent Muslim—a demographic change responsible for growing tension between the two ethnic groups.

The war had a major impact on the fishing communities of Mannar. Many fisher families were displaced. The situation was compounded by restrictions on fishing hours and fishing grounds. Since the end of the war in 2009, the fisheries have revived, but fishing communities still face major difficulties in their life and livelihood.

The fishing village of Santhipuram has 450 families of which 75 are headed by women—60 widows and 15 deserted women. Fishery is the main livelihood source. The men go out to sea, fishing, and the women do various types of related work. To provide food

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Women helping in cleaning nets, Mannar Island, Sri Lanka.
The livelihood of the widows and deserted women is very fragile

and income to their households, the widows go to the beach at four in the morning to help in removing fish from nets, and cleaning and repairing nets. In return, they are given some small fish. The men sell the big and valuable ones to middlemen. The women keep some of their earned fish for food and process the larger part into dry fish. In the absence of adequate facilities, the dry fish processing is carried out under unhygienic conditions.

The livelihood of the widows and deserted women is very fragile. Selling dry fish at the local market is their mainstay. They earn around SLR 500 (USD 3.5) per day when there is fish, and SLR 100 (USD 0.70) when there is none. The fishing season is only six months long, and for the rest of the year, they live off their savings, and from selling dry fish and some homemade food in other villages. They take micro-credit loans from NGOs for poultry or goat keeping, but these do not provide a real alternative livelihood. There is no programme to help these women to improve their dry fish processing and marketing. The women feel they are drowning in debt, but still take more loans to educate their children, in the hope that they will bring a better future.

In all the fishing villages, there were similar stories. Women related that the major problems of fishing families after the war are access to land and sea. Many had lost their homes and land when they fled during the war, leaving behind all their documents, including land titles. When they returned, they found their houses destroyed, belongings looted, and all their livelihood equipment had gone missing. Their lands are now occupied by other people or confiscated by the Sri Lankan security forces, who even today keep the former war zone areas under tight control.

In the lagoon fishing village of Pallimunai, the land and houses of 22 families are still occupied by the Navy. Of these families, 12 are headed by widows. These families have been displaced by war since 1990. One woman said: "For so many years we have lived nomadic lives, shifting between camps for displaced persons and the homes of relatives. Now it is our biggest dream to have our family land and houses back, and our livelihood and community life restored." It was only in 2013 that the affected families of Pallimunai were able to go to court to get their land and houses returned; but their cases are still to be settled and they feel very frustrated. The navy had offered the families alternative lands, but these were far away from the coast and therefore not suitable. Fishing is

their traditional livelihood and they need to live close to the coast. The widows said that they wanted to stay in their traditional communities, where they felt safe and looked after. With their traditional lands occupied by the navy, the women also lost their spaces for drying fish.

During the war, restricted access to their lands and fish resources was a major livelihood constraint for Mannar's fishing communities. After the war, fishing restrictions were lifted, but the process was extremely slow. Furthermore, another threat arose from large fleets of Indian trawlers invading the Palk Bay and Gulf of Mannar, attracted by its rich fish resources. The Indian trawlers fish very intensively near the shore and leave little fish for the local fishing communities who primarily use small traditional boats and gear. Further, these trawlers also destroy the nets of the locals. Women of Pallimunai, as also of Santhipuram, Jim Brown Nagar and other villages, related that their fishermen could hardly make a living now from fishing: "Our resources and livelihood are being ruined and we are without any compensation. The Indian trawlers must be stopped from fishing in our waters." The women spoke strongly, and some also blamed the occupation of their land by the navy on the intrusion of the Indian trawlers: "Because of the Indian trawlers, the navy camp is here".

After the war, the Sri Lankan government started reconstruction of the war affected areas, with a focus on building and infrastructure. On Mannar Island, a highway and the causeway to the main land were reconstructed, and since April 2015 the railway has also been restored. Mannar is now connected again to the mainland and to Colombo, the country's capital. But the government paid practically no attention to rebuilding local village infrastructure and rehabilitating displaced and traumatized people, including, and in particular, the war widows.

The women of Mannar's fishing villages indicated that they felt forgotten by the government. The lack of assistance from the government and limited assistance by United Nations bodies and NGOs compelled people to fend for themselves. In the fishing village of Jim Brown Nagar, a woman leader had this to say: "We lost everything in the war. In the IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camps, we were only given dry rations and not allowed to go out to undertake livelihood activities. And now, six years after the war is over, we still live in misery. With no access and equipment to engage in our traditional fisheries activities, it is hard to survive. There are no other livelihood options for us. Our housing conditions are also poor. Women feel unsafe when going to the jungle for

toilet needs or to collect firewood. In the rainy season, the temporary houses we live in are often flooded and many families have to seek shelter in the church. Of course it is good that there is no more killing and raiding, but our housing and livelihood problems are not being solved. And we still live in fear because of the presence of the security forces.”

The women’s (widows’) groups in Mannar Island have been in existence for only a couple of years. Earlier, there had been many restrictions imposed by the security forces for people to organize. NGOs were only allowed to support government programmes. Community assistance was primarily organized by the church or mosque and these institutions played a binding role for the people, although unfortunately the relations between Christian Tamils and Muslims are still tense.

The Negombo-based NAFSO came to Mannar in 2004. The NGO supports Tamil women’s (widows’) groups and citizen groups in fishing communities, generally in collaboration with the Catholic Church. They started with providing livelihood loans to families headed by women, but later also took up land rights issues and the issue of intrusion by Indian trawlers. Presently, there are 13 village level women’s groups supported by NAFSO, which are federated at the district level under the name Valarpirai (‘ascending moon’) Women’s District Committee. The village level meetings mostly deal with the immediate needs of widows and deserted women, such as children’s issues and livelihood problems. Community services, including helping the sick, are also rendered. At the district level, common problems such as land and other rights issues are discussed. The women are encouraged to write petitions to the authorities, for which they get assistance from NAFSO. The women’s organization of Mannar also became a member of the national Women’s Federation, organized by NAFSO.

When asked what has changed for them since they began to participate in the Valarpirai women’s organization, the women’s groups in Mannar Island responded enthusiastically: “We feel more self-confident now to fight for our dignity and rights. Earlier we felt so isolated and alone. Now we meet other women’s groups from fishing communities, also from other parts of the country, and get solidarity.” The women are aware of the need to speak out and actively approach the authorities with their problems. But, as they emphasized, “without solidarity and support from outside this is really difficult”. The NGO had encouraged the women to vote in the recent General Elections. For many women this was the first time they cast their vote. Disappointingly, the Mannar district had no women candidates, but the women said they hoped that this would change in the future.

The new government in Sri Lanka promises to focus more on reconciliation, restoration of human rights and rehabilitation of livelihood. The women said that a survey has now been conducted of displaced people in their area. These developments have generated fresh hope.

On 7 September 2015, war widows and human rights activists handed over a fact finding report on war-displaced people to the government in Colombo (see <http://wodep.blogspot.nl/2015/09/round-table-discussion-on-ensure-land.html>). At this event, Nimalka Fernando, a women’s rights activist and president of the International Movement against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism, spoke in solidarity with the war widows and called on the newly elected President and Parliament to accept the responsibility to return land to Sri Lanka’s war widows and allow them to rebuild their lives: “It is not enough for the government to run vocational training for internally displaced persons. Give them back their sea, lands and jungle; let them restart their livelihoods. It is their fundamental right.” ❏

The underestimation of women’s labour in fisheries can lead us to understate the costs of fishing, while overstating and oversimplifying their economic benefits.

Tsunami, war and difficult recovery

This report on the struggle of fishing communities of Batticaloa, Sri Lanka, to recover from both civil war and the tsunami of 2004, is based on the author's visit there and meetings with local women leaders in June 2012

By **Cornelie Quist** (cornelie.quist@gmail.com), Member, ICSF. (With special thanks to J. Ranjithkumar of the District Fisheries Committee, and Nalini Ratnarajah, gender consultant and women's rights activist, for facilitating the meeting and for translation.)

Batticaloa, a district on the east coast of Sri Lanka, has been badly affected by both the ethnic-based civil war in Sri Lanka and the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004. The district is now one of the poorest regions of Sri Lanka. Fisheries and agriculture are the most important livelihood activities of the district. I visited the area last June and had a meeting with women leaders of local fisher communities, who revealed to me their situation and hopes.

Batticaloa and Amparai were the districts worst affected by the 2004 tsunami. Many people, in particular women and children, lost their lives. A total of 9,517 fisher families lost their assets and livelihoods for several months. Subsequent to the tsunami, when NGOs and government authorities supplied fishing families with gear and other assets, there were several discrepancies in the distribution. As a result, the fisher families were weakened in their co-operative and collaborative efforts rather than empowered for sustainability and development. Many fisher families also had been relocated far from their original villages

and workplaces, which meant a big change to their way of life.

Three years after the tsunami, a large-scale war erupted in the east of Sri Lanka and was most severe in Batticaloa. This again disrupted the local society. Due to a ban on sea fishing and restrictions in several fishing areas on the time and type of gear local fishermen could use for fishing, and due to destruction of infrastructure, the fisher families once again lost most of their ability for income generation.

Normalcy returned in 2009 but new forms of conflict in fishing escalated as illegal fishing increased in the traditional fishing areas of local fishing communities. A new body of fisheries societies at the district level was formed under the Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources. This replaced the existing District Federation of Fisheries Co-operative Societies (FCS) that was functioning to bring out the issues of fishermen and resolve them with the authorities at district and regional levels. However, this new body is not active or efficient in bringing solutions to the issues of local fishers, because it is controlled by the ministry, based on a top-down approach. In this situation, a vast number of fishing resources are being destroyed or captured by wealthy and influential fishermen. Big fishermen (using multi-day boats) and traders from the ethnic majority community from other parts of the country arrived and established their stake in the fishing resources and the 70-mile-long shoreline of the district, depriving local fishing families of their opportunities for income generation. Large-scale outside investors are taking over coastal and mangrove lands for the development of the tourism industry and prawn farms, which do not give local fishing families any long-term benefits.

A recent (2010) household income and expenditure survey revealed that 20 per cent of the population of Batticaloa district live below the poverty line. Most fishing families have borrowed money or mortgaged their assets, and got entrapped in a vicious cycle of exploitation. Communal feelings and hatred are on the rise among the local fishing communities, who generally belong to the Tamil ethnic minority and who feel treated as a lost community in an ethnic war.

The women revealed to me the hardships that women of fishing communities of

CORNELIE QUIST



Women in the district of Batticaloa, Sri Lanka would like to see effective fisheries management with their active participation

Batticaloa face at present. Many households have lost their male breadwinners and have become female-headed. Besides having the burden of taking care of the family alone, women without husbands (widows, deserted or with missing husbands) suffer also from a low status in society. Violence against women, and child abuse have become frequent. Women also are not aware about their legal rights.

During the war, many girls from fishing communities were conscripted by the militants (the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam). I was told that of the female ex-combatants arrested by the Sri Lankan army after the war, a large group (around 1,860) was from fishing communities. They now need to be 're-integrated'. However, most of them are traumatized, have little education, few skills and are in poor health. Many are also physically disabled. It appears that women-headed households bear the main burden of caring for these (injured) female ex-combatants and traumatized former child soldiers.

Though fisher and other families in Batticaloa have been displaced, dispossessed and dispirited by the long-running war and the 2004 tsunami, matrilineal traditions and support provided by matrilineal kinship networks seemed to have survived (Batticaloa has a matrilineal society). These female support networks seem to be of enormous value for emotional stability and feelings of security. However, women receive very little outside support and professional help. There are also practically no opportunities for them to set up small businesses or find other sources of employment to generate adequate income.

Women in Batticaloa used to be actively involved in fisheries, but this has changed, in particular, after the disruption caused by the 2004 tsunami and the war. The women in our meeting felt there was great potential for women to develop livelihood activities in fisheries, but that they lacked the necessary skills and resources. There are several NGOs that target women for microcredit projects. However, as the women revealed to me, these quite often resulted in an increased burden for the women, as they could not repay the loans. I was told that, in several cases, husbands had even left their wives because of the problems of repaying loans. The women told me that they felt a great need for training on fish marketing, fish processing with upgraded technology, and financial and business management.

The women also felt very worried about the destructive impact of illegal fishing and gear conflicts, and felt the need to do something about it. They would like to see effective fisheries management with active participation of the local fishing communities.

Women of fishing communities, however, are not represented in the formal fisheries societies. The women leaders of fishing communities, with whom I had the meeting, would very much like to see this changed to be able to take their interests and concerns forward to the fisheries authorities and other concerned officials. They also indicated being very interested to connect with women of traditional small-scale fishing communities in other parts of Sri Lanka to break their isolation and learn from new experiences, as also for the purpose of enhancing ethnic reconciliation and solidarity linkages. ❏

Though families in Batticaloa have been displaced and dispirited by war and the 2004 tsunami, matrilineal traditions and support networks have survived and provide emotional stability.