

# Reconciling Gender in Post-Conflict Societies: Sri Lanka and Sierra Leone

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### Women Left Behind – Reconciling Gender in Post-Conflict Societies: A Comparative Analysis of Sri Lanka and Sierra Leone

#### A Brief Overview of the Conflicts in Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka

Women's gendered identities and bodies become marked territories on which both state and non-state militant groups wage their wars and construct national narratives – Cynthia Enloe (as cited in Parashar 2007, pg 173)

From 1992 to 2002, Sierra Leone experienced a fairly brutal state of civil war. Although it was at first limited to a few regions, it eventually expanded to much of the country along with major attacks in Freetown. Despite a formal end to the conflict through the Lome Agreement of 1999, sporadic hostilities continued into late 2002. Christians (mostly situated in the West) account for 20% of the population, Muslims (mostly situated in the North) for 60%, and traditional African religions make-up for the remaining 20% (McFerson, 2011). While ethnic cleavages do exist and did contribute to the exacerbation of the conflict, the most prominent and immediate cause of the conflict is said to be a rush for resources (particularly diamonds) which eventually escalated, gathering all other factors into civil war.

The Sinhalese and the Tamil communities in Sri Lanka have always been facing ethnic tensions, which slowly began escalation post Sri Lanka's independence. Tensions blew into full-scale war in 1983 and despite the 2002 ceasefire, conflict once more resumed in 2006 (Hernandez-Reyna, 2013). Nearly 26 years of civil war sprung from systemic denial of access to linguistic and cultural rights to the Tamils by the Sinhalese government (International Crisis Group, 2011). Although multiple Tamil representative groups rose in the early days of the conflict, eventually the dominant and only representative became the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Although the degree to which ethnicity and identity played a role varies in the case of the two conflicts, this essay argues that there are still important grounds and common matter to compare and learn from them. Both societies are historically patriarchal and dictates of that patriarchy persist – in the case of marriage laws, both societies place the power of negotiating the marriage contract in the hands of the family of the bride, particularly male members, rather than the bride herself. Post the ceremony, the role of the husband is the dominant one in the relationship – with the wife requiring consent from him for all decisions related to reproductive rights and child rearing. Property laws in both the contexts require male consent before the woman can dispose of property she owns, either by herself or along with her husband. Domesticity is still overwhelmingly the realm women are accepted in and even women who build careers are expected to be the primary caregivers in terms of household work and child rearing within the home.

Conflict had a disproportionate impact on women in both countries (they were separated from families, they were widowed, they lost primary earners of the family, sexual violence and abduction were used as strategies in war, etc.) and in both cases, though the statistics are under-researched and often neglected, they participated as combatants as well.

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With this overview in mind, the next section will look at the need for a gender lens in the reconciliation process. But before that, it is important to outline the main theoretical framework of reconciliation that the essay shall be drawing upon.

## Framework for Reconciliation

Reconciliation can be thought of as the restoration of a state of peace to the relationship, where the entities are at least not harming each other, and can begin to be trusted not to do so in future, which means that revenge is foregone as an option. The word reconcile means to come back together into council, that is, to work harmoniously together. – Joanna Santa-Barbara (Santa-Barbara 2007, pg 174)

While analyzing conflict, Santa-Barbara (2007) starts off by looking at the relationships between two entities. If they are peaceful, she argues, then resolution of any differences will also be peaceful. This is because, over time, non-violent behavior has become the expectation each has of the other and therefore neither will resort to unprovoked violence. In the case of conflicting interests, however, this is not how two entities typically function. When they perceive harm, whether immediate or potential, to the body or to the mind, the relationship ceases to be peaceful.

She looks at three ways in which retaliation will occur in such a scenario – revenge, isolation and reconciliation. She argues that since humans live in social networks, when an aspect of the network is harmed, the network itself reverberates with the harm (Santa-Barbara, 2007). Isolation, thus, is a difficult and often undesirable or even impossible option to resort to – states cannot move away from or ignore the continued existence of neighbouring states, neither can ethnicities entirely. The options are thus mostly limited to revenge or reconciliation.

Three things determine the difficulty in picking reconciliation over revenge (even though, in the long run, reconciliation promotes less harm than revenge seeking behavior) – the intentionality of the harm, the degree of personalization of the harm and the irreversibility of the harm (Santa-Barbara, 2007). For the limited scope of this paper, we will move past the stage where the degrees of these three factors are high and discuss what happens when the entities have decided to reconcile.

This kind of reconciliation typically occurs after attempts at debt cancellation through revenge Galtung (2007) uses three Rs to define what needs to be done at this point: Reconstruction of physical, social and cultural infrastructure and rehabilitation of persons; Reconciliation of relationships; and Resolution of the conflict that erupted in violence (Santa-Barbara, 2007). Santa-Barbara also notes a consensus in the theorizing of Galtung, Kriesberg and Lederach while observing the multiple processes involved in reaching the three Rs. This paper, will be looking at four of them in particular: uncovering the truth; justice in some form; resuming constructive aspects of the relationship; and rebuilding trust over time (Santa-Barbara, 2007).

In each case, when we analyze the conflicts in Sri Lanka and Sierra Leone, we will look at how policy has engaged with issues of gender and the impact of such treatment. Before that, however, the next section looks at the role an understanding of gender plays in understanding conflict before reconciliation can begin or attempt to be successful.

## Bringing in Gender – The Need and the Gains

Claiming, as they do, that gender hierarchies are socially constructed allows feminists, like critical security scholars, to pursue an emancipatory agenda and postulate a world that could be otherwise. – Ann J Tickner (Tickner 2004, pg 47)

As observed by scholars from the fields of Critical Security Studies and Feminist International Relations from early in the 80s, using the language of gender neutrality to describe war, conflict and international relations, far from removing bias from theorization, actually takes away from the critical importance of a gendered perspective. As Tickner (2004) notes, most IR theorists would deny that their theories have anything to do with gender as gender is viewed as synonymous with 'women'. This strict adherence to rational choice theory that, for the longest time, viewed Feminism and International Relations as incompatible disciplines is slowly breaking down with the growing

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importance of Critical Security Studies. Feminists in IR argue that to acknowledge the human-rights dimensions of women's experiences, claims of gender neutral truth must be abandoned in order to give more space to analyze gendered forms of violence and create diverse strategies that can hurdle structural barriers to women's participation during and following conflict (Tickner, 2004).

Tickner further emphasizes the need for a bottom up approach to gain 'practical knowledge' and better understand relations from a feminist perspective. Arguing that the claims of objectivity and universality that IR boasts of are typically understanding and gendering knowledge masculine, she calls for the integration of the emancipatory language of feminism into IR as theory cannot be separated from political practice (Tickner, 2004). According to her, the security perspectives that diverge from a state-centric understanding of security and move towards an individual-centric understanding of security are the entry point of feminist theorizing. She recognizes patterns of increased intimacy in warfare with the rise in ethno national conflicts and believes that when identity and attack on identity are crucial to the very incubation of conflict, it is important to understand identity (through a feminist sociological lens), rather than absolve it in the name of rationality, in order to work towards resolution.

Feminists seek to understand how the security of individuals and groups is compromised by violence, both physical and structural, at all levels. They have questioned the role of the state as a security provider, suggesting that, in many of today's wars, states may actually be threatening to their own populations, either through direct violence or through tradeoffs that tend to get made between warfare and welfare. (Tickner 2004, pg 45)

In this context, the contributions of Feminist IR are integral to our understanding of conflicts, militarization and the state. Military prostitution and rape as wartime strategy, for instance, are two important issues that feminists have brought into the security agenda. Further, accepted understandings of conflict view men as aggressors and women as peaceful (McEvoy, 2010). Feminists, on grounds that these essentialisms devalue notions of both women and peace, have sought to expand our understandings of the role of women in conflict. It is on this particular point of enquiry that this paper draws upon the application of the lens of Gender to conflict reconciliation.

As McEvoy (2010) summarizes the arguments of Sjoberg and Gentry, it is important to analyze the women's uses of politicized violence if we are to ever recognize the role of women in conflict as beyond victims. She draws upon Enloe's (Enloe, 1983 as cited by McEvoy 2010) argument that lack of interest in the lives of women in conflict leads to an incomplete IR theory at best and a faulty one at worse. Taking off from here, she argues that we need to reduce the widespread understanding that women are irrelevant to the making and fighting of wars and instead embrace their diverse roles.

This process, she notes, begins with the 'seemingly surprising idea that someone with the ability to bring life has a desire to take it' (McEvoy 2010, pg 131). Though the participation of women through out the histories of conflict is notable, it is often neglected, she further notes. Women in conflict are viewed as crazed and unthinking, or easily manipulated (for instance, those in the Chechnyan conflict were called as Black Widows – lethal but not smart or independently driven). Often, the decision to enter war is not credited as their rational decision but one that they have been forced to take. McEvoy, here, does not deny the existence of abductee women in conflict, but rather draws attention to the various ways in which participatory non-abductee women are denied any agency in their actions (McEvoy, 2010). Through her analysis, in particular of the conflict in Northern Ireland, she notes that this denial of agency is so systemic that often even their own comrades at war underplay their role – a denial that poses key structural barriers to taking in their unique interests in the post conflict reconciliation process.

McEvoy (McEvoy, 2010) further notes three main lessons that can be incorporated into effective post conflict policy if one listened to the voices of women: first, women too are violent and they can pose a severe security threat. To avoid this becoming a breach they must be included while negotiating peace. Second, combatant women have particular unique insights about the war that are lost during reconciliation if they are not included effectively. Finally, this inclusion can interrupt stereotypes about women, the least of which is that they are always peace loving.

Taking off from them above theorists, the next section attempts to look at two reconciliation processes through a feminist lens and see what policy results may have been omitted or may be yielded.

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## Women in Conflict – Roles, Positions and Post-Conflict Reconciliation

What we hear and do not hear about the world we occupy is no accident... Shaping knowledge and a lack of knowledge constitutes a basic element of power. Silences, spheres where knowledge has been kept from public awareness are undeniably political. – Carolyn Nordstrom (as cited in Mackenzie 2010, pg 164)

As per the CEDAW Report (CEDAW, 1979), according to accepted norms of conflict reconciliation, states must use measurable indicators to assess the impact of laws, policies and programmes, and respond with models of positive action. This includes an obligation to counter norms and traditions that influence gender roles in society and which produce disadvantage.

In post-conflict Sierra Leone, the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) Process was begun in an attempt to reconcile a little over a decade of conflict. In Post-Conflict Sri Lanka, the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) was instituted to help the people move past twenty six years of conflict. This section attempts to look at the ways in which gender was (or was not) woven into the two reconciliation processes, and analyzes them retrospectively keeping Galtung's (2007) three Rs in mind.

MacKenzie (2010) notes several inconsistencies within the DDR Programming in the treatment of male and female participants in the conflict. The programme, primarily, was advertised as an initiative to transform soldiers to citizens. At the very offset, one notices that this initiative is aimed at making citizens out of (in effect, normalizing) soldiers. Before we look at what a normal existence in Sierra Leone means to these soldiers, we must look at what the programme defines as soldiers.

MacKenzie whittles the definition of soldiers down to one key phrase based on her reading of the conflict, its government documents and its (primarily female) respondents – men with guns. Here she draws upon the Copenhagen School's Conception of Security<sup>[1]</sup> (as discussed by MacKenzie 2010, pg 163 – see endnote) and notes that even when women participated in activities of 'high politics' (those traditionally recognized as security issues) they were shuffled out of the public sphere and delegated into the domestic sphere (in line with McEvoy's (McEvoy, 2010) theorization about the systemic denial of agency).

The reason this was particularly problematic was because, as explained by the Copenhagen School, there is a distinction between securitized and non-securitized politics. Security matters were viewed as those that were a greater concern when compared to 'everyday politics' (MacKenzie, 2010). As MacKenzie summarizes, the DDR process, through its reduction of women into the roles of 'camp followers, wives and sex slaves', depoliticizes the security concerns of women. Their relegation into the domestic realm meant that the only roles women were recognized in were that of passive supporter (camp followers, wives) or unwilling participant (widows, sex slaves).

This meant that (as MacKenzie's (2010) field work corroborates) participation of women in the DDR process was negligible. Several reasons were noted. Firstly, the advertisement of the DDR programme as an initiative to help soldiers with guns mistakenly sent out the message that those without firearms (typically combatant women on the lower ranks of militarized groups) were not the targets of the policy. Secondly, several women escapees felt distanced from the rebel groups they were part of and thus took affiliation to be literal and did not opt for reconciliation. Within this group itself, several feared social retaliation for the double bind of being a female conflict-inducing rebel. Thirdly, women felt a stigma in confessing to being combatants at war – it took away from the idea of women as peaceful and also lent a certain air of sexual pollution as female combatants were viewed more as sex slaves rather than soldiers in the larger social and administrative understanding of their roles. Finally, and most interestingly, some women even found the DDR programme beneath them. They cited pride in the liberating actions they performed as combatants and claimed to have charted out better plans for themselves – the programme did not offer them what they were looking for.

This field-work provides a rather complicated understanding of women's motivations for war as well as roles in it. By ignoring the complexity of their participation and typecasting their politics as merely a need for a 'return to the normal', argues MacKenzie (2010), the DDR programme lost an opportunity to rethink and reshape post conflict

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governance. By selectively securitizing women and men, the women are thus regressed and the issues of gender grow unaddressed.

When attempting to reconstruct physical, social and cultural infrastructure and rehabilitation of persons (the first of Galtung's Rs), I argue that the DDR process, by ignoring the movement of women beyond the domestic sphere and merely reverting to their positions in pre conflict society, negates the progress that was made, little though it may be in the container of conflict. Reconciliation of relationships (the second of Galtung's Rs) is just as problematic with the omission of gender, as the only relationships of women that are drawn by the reconciliation process is that of a passive observer or suffering victim of war – ignoring the complexity of women's relationship with other cadres, rebel groups and militancy. Finally, when attempting to resolve the conflict that erupted in violence (the final R of Galtung), the DDR process once more suffers a setback by not recognizing the threat of female militancy (especially considering the interplay of militancy and pride that some female rebel combatants experienced).

To sum up, I concur with MacKenzie that failure to address gender as a factor in post conflict programming sacrificed both gender equality and overall efficacy of the DDR programme, as well as 'chances of a tremendous and lasting transformation from conflict to peace' (MacKenzie 2010, pg 151) .

In Sri Lanka, the situation is even more complex. During the Sri Lankan conflict, as Parashar (2010) notes, about twenty percent of LTTE's force consists of women – and they have been participants in deadly military activities as well as high profile ones. Senior LTTE leadership often claimed that the respect women have gained militarily will give them the right to share leadership if peace can be achieved (Parashar, 2010). Moreover, as she further explains, several headways have been made in terms of positive development for women in the LTTE – anti dowry policies, strict anti domestic violence strategies, etc. At the same time, however, LTTE has been criticized for its masculinist structures, and has also been accused of never allowing women to play key decision making roles. While the women have emerged out of the traditional domestic confines, they are still subordinated and pushed down the ranks within the LTTE.

These factors, as Baker (2011) notes, have contributed to the targeted exclusion of women from peace building and reconstruction, despite binding commitments and strong recommendations made by past Commissions of Inquiry – and more importantly despite Tamil women making up the majority of conflict afflicted survivors.

In order to analyze female agency in Sri Lanka, according to Baker (2011), a critical exploration of the gender role shifts among Tamil communities is important. While the aforementioned advances and advantages pushed women up the ranks, the LTTE's rhetoric of female emancipation was only accepted when it flowed in tandem with the national cause. This meant that the now empowered women themselves tried to impose control over other women by pushing forward a particular understanding of the Tamil way to behave or dress. If on a passive level, the Tamil women faced subtle but strong control messages from the LTTE, more actively, they too, like the women in Sierra Leone, faced stigma and abuse because of the strong connotations of sexual pollution associated with those who were part of the war.

Observers note that the LLRC did not even attempt to make the paltry headway that even the DDR programme in Sierra Leone made in terms of establishing comfort for those coming out with their stories (Baker, 2011). Gender Training of staff in Sierra Leone by UNIFEM and other similar groups, Baker (2011) argues, contributed to increasing the broad contributions from women and reduced the previously clearly discriminatory attitudes that blamed victims. The lack of even consideration of such initiative makes the Sri Lankan case more appalling, especially given that the LLRC could have learnt from the shortcomings of the DDR programme.

When attempting to reconstruct physical, social and cultural infrastructure and rehabilitate persons (the first of Galtung's Rs), it is important to recognize the progress that women who joined the LTTE have made in terms of negotiating space for themselves rather than merely reconstructing social relations as they are and losing the headway made in fighting domestic violence and bride pricing. Reconciliation of relationships (the second R of Galtung) is only effective when, unlike in the case of Sri Lanka, there is space for women to navigate between the two extreme positions of active participant and passive victim. Finally, in order to resolve the conflict that erupted in

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violence (the final R of Galtung), the promises of more political recognition and space for women (systematically promised in the LTTE campaigns and agenda) ought to be translated into policy rather than abandoned – to avoid leaving out about half the actors that the LLRC promised to rehabilitate.

## Conclusion – Lessons Learnt and Ways Forward

If women become warriors, it reinforces the war system. If women are seen only as peacemakers, it reinforces both militarized masculinity and women's marginality with respect to the national security functions of the state. – Ann J Tickner (Tickner 2004, pg 47)

Despite the differences in the causes for brewing and escalation of conflict in Sri Lanka and Sierra Leone, the two societies provide adequate and important grounds for comparison given the similar ways their societies have been gendered. Thus, while analyzing the 3 Rs of Galtung's reconciliation framework, it is important to additionally incorporate gender at every level of analysis before estimating the success of outcomes.

On a deeper reading through the gender lens, both societies depict a neglect of complicated relationships between gender and agency in the case of women in the conflicts. The unfortunate dichotomy between victims and soldiers that women are forced to pick between in some situations is as harmful as the abject denial of the role of 'soldier' to women who participated in combat. Such gender-blind policies have denied justice to victims, agency and rehabilitation to participants and progress to the drives towards more gender-equal society.

Although Critical Security Studies and Feminist IR have brought to light the harms of formulating Post-Conflict policy without recognizing the need to assimilate gender into the framework, the reconciliation processes in Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka are examples of disregard for the same. While the processes themselves cannot be undone and re-done, going forward, it is important to bear in mind the lessons from such harmful neglect.

One step towards the same will be recognition of both the diversity and the complexity of the roles women play in society – both in and post conflict. This must be done with a conscious effort to break down the language of patriarchy that essentializes womanhood – in order to encourage both victims of and participants in war to come forward and discuss the past rather than deny it. The remaining retributive trials must strive to strike a balance between providing justice to victims of extraneous circumstances while parallelly not denying agency to those who made complex decisions. A revisit of some trials by enhancing calls for retrials will also go a long way in serving justice, hitherto delayed by the absence of analysis of gender. While formulating public policy, both governments must bear in mind the shifts from domesticity that women experienced during war.

These are but small lessons to be remembered and learnt from the reconciliation process and the conflict itself. There is no framework that governments can draw upon to craft Final Solutions – but recognition of these flaws and translation of the same into policies that encourage more political participation of women will perhaps go a long way in actual reconciliation, irrespective of the errors of the policy so far.

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## Endnotes

[1] The Copenhagen School's approach to security can be used to explain the tendency for actors to highlight security concerns while neglecting others. It places the securitizing actor and the audience as the central players in the construction of security. Thus it bestows a particular legitimacy on the parties capable of raising an issue to securitized status

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