

# Women, Gender, and the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam

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## The Beginning

Since Sri Lankan independence in 1948, conflict between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamil population has been largely continuous, leading to armed struggle from the 1970s on and civil war from 1983 on, with many Tamils desiring the establishment of an independent Tamil state or some form of federal or autonomous region political structure. While there are many distinct dimensions of this ethnic/nationalist conflict, this chapter focuses on the kinds of roles considered appropriate held by the major separatist group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Ltte) for women in nationalist struggles and in society more generally. The Ltte included women in their military and political struggles, a very unusual practice at the time that remains a standout in nationalist struggles. Despite the 2009 defeat of the Ltte and the apparent end of the Sri Lankan civil war, Ltte ideas about women and gender have been influential in Sri Lankan Tamil society for decades and arguably remain so. This chapter, then, looks at women and gender in the Ltte militant movement. The chapter starts with a brief section outlining the conflict the Ltte fought in and the goals and causes of the organization. The second section discusses the Ltte's policy of inclusion of

women and the gender dynamics of the organization's recruitment of and use of women in its ranks. The chapter assumes that Ltte's willingness to include women is only part of the story, and so a third section uses personal interview data to look at why women joined the Ltte. A fourth section discusses gender dynamics among members of the Ltte, particularly how women were conceptualized, framed, and treated within the Ltte's military and political structures. A fifth section critically relates the gender dynamics in the Ltte to the Ltte's explicit commitment to feminism, looking at the concepts of feminism it deployed and the results of its commitment to feminism both within its ranks and in Tamil society more generally. A sixth section then explores the potential for the Ltte's ideas about gender (generally and in regard to Ltte women specifically) to continue to have impacts on Tamil (and Sri Lankan) society after the war. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of women's militant action as members of the Ltte for analyzing women and gender in twenty-first-century militant and terrorist movements and global politics writ large.

## The Conflict in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is a small island with an ethnically diverse population currently

estimated to be slightly over twenty million.<sup>1</sup> According to the 1981 census, the population was 74 percent Sinhalese, 12.6 percent Sri Lankan Tamil, 5.6 percent Indian Tamil, and 7.5 percent Muslim.<sup>2</sup> Sri Lanka has an ancient and complicated history that is highly politicized and contested; competing myths of the past have become hugely significant in contemporary nationalisms. While a number of the national/ethnic groups in Sri Lanka make primordialist nationalist claims, it is clear that contemporary Sri Lankan nationalisms have a fairly recent history. Important to their development was the formation of racist and racial ideas, attributable to the impact of developing European ideas of “In war, we never think we are women” “race” that British rule brought. The British maintained (eventually) that the different groupings in Sri Lanka were different “races,” taking various combinations of language, religion, custom, and clothing to be racial markers. These categorizations of “race” and nationality were somewhat incoherent, inconsistent, and variable over time.<sup>3</sup> Only a few of these racial categories came to be politically significant. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, developing identities in Sri Lanka “were primarily directed against, and mediated by, the British,” and it was only after independence that “the British were to be replaced by the Tamil as the ‘dangerous other’ [for Sinhalese].”<sup>4</sup> Contemporary Sinhala-Tamil conflict is, however, at least in part the result of processes begun by British colonialism: the unification of the country, the introduction of a unitary bureaucratic structure, and the import of Western ideas of “race” and its relation to “nation.” The conflict also owes in part to

the impact of mass media and state education, which were likewise developed under British colonial rule.

After independence in 1948 the construction and reaffirmation of a predominantly Sinhala-Buddhist national identity, and the concomitant process of the marginalization of Tamil and other minority identities, contributed to the mobilization of Tamil nationalism. The Tamil nationalist movement in turn threatened Sinhalese hegemony and stimulated a Sinhalese crisis of identity and security.<sup>5</sup> The Citizenship Act of 1948 and the Indian and Pakistani Residents (Citizenship) Act of 1949 disenfranchised Indian Tamils and made them aliens in their own country. Language and education policies have been

extremely significant; in 1956 a “Sinhala only” policy made Sinhala the sole official language, and from 1970 on higher education policies were seen to disadvantage Tamil students.<sup>6</sup> Another important feature was the entrenchment of Buddhism within the state and Constitution. Employment and economic factors have also contributed significantly to ethnic tensions and the development of both Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms.<sup>7</sup> The Tamil population first peacefully protested against these state policies and was met with varying degrees of state repression. As conflict intensified in the 1970s, “Tamil secessionism became an active phenomenon.”<sup>8</sup> In response, the 1972 Sri Lankan Constitution entrenched the exclusivist policies of the state. Tamil political organizations subsequently proposed the establishment of a sovereign state of Tamil Eelam and declared Sri Lankan Tamils “a nation distinct and apart from the Sinhalese.”<sup>9</sup> Tamil armed struggle, initially on a small

scale, began in about 1972.<sup>10</sup> (The beginning of the civil war is generally taken as being 1983, when the violent riots that year “opened a floodgate” of young Tamils to militant groups.)<sup>11</sup> Of the five militant groups that initially fought against the Sri Lankan state, the Itte was the only one that continued to fight for an independent Tamil Eelam until their brutal May 2009 defeat.<sup>12</sup>

### **The LTTE's Inclusion of Women**

Women have been active in all the Tamil nationalist groups, but research into their military participation has focused on the Itte because they established their presence as combatants in substantial numbers in 1990s, by which point the Itte had attained primacy among the groups. The Itte “continued to aggressively recruit women into their fighting cadres.”<sup>13</sup> Initially, these women disseminated propaganda, administered medical care, gathered information and intelligence, raised money, and recruited members, but they were soon given military training and began participating in combat. In interviews, female former Itte combatants generally credited the Itte's gender-liberal approach to women's participation jointly to the leader of the Itte, Velupillai Prabhakaran, who was open to it, and women's active pursuit of an armed role in the Tamil nationalist struggle.

The Itte policy seems to me to have been the result of (1) a strategic need for more fighters owing to an insufficient number of men; (2) the ideological need to demonstrate that the Itte was an all-encompassing mass social movement; and (3) the pressure from young Tamil women themselves.<sup>14</sup> Despite its openness to women's participation, the Itte is among those militant nationalist groups around the world that have not

hesitated to draw on gendered cultural expectations of women's appearance (traditional saris or loose dresses) and behavior (nonviolent, nonthreatening) to gain access to targets for suicide bombers.<sup>15</sup> Still, though tactical reasons matter, incorporating women into nationalist military organizations is also a way of symbolically showing women's equal status in the collectivity and, therefore, showing that the movement is truly a mass social movement concerned with all members of society.<sup>16</sup> The Itte presented itself as a revolutionary movement seeking not just independence from the Sri Lankan state but widespread change within Tamil society; its insistence on women's equality and the elimination of caste discrimination were an integral part of this program.

### **Women's Choices to Join the LTTE**

The Itte's decision to include women among its ranks does not in itself explain or account for women's participation. Women also chose to be involved. There are a range of different and often intersecting reasons why women chose to join militant groups; most of these are likely to be common to both female

and male combatants, while others will be gender specific to women. There was rarely one single identifiable motivating factor in women's decisions to enlist in the Itte; more usually, a number of interlocking factors that I have tried to identify and separate out here were responsible. A significant reason for Itte women enlisting was Tamil nationalism. Of the sixteen women I interviewed who said they had voluntarily joined the Itte, nine referred explicitly to nationalist ideas of freedom for the Tamil nation, self-determination, land, and/or rights for Tamils (though this was not always

expressed in terms of a desire for a fully independent state) as part of or as the main reason why they had enlisted. Two others explicitly articulated nationalist ideas they had come to view as important since joining the Tigers. For example, Thamiltvili, who enlisted in the Itte in 1995 at the age of seventeen, explained that we have witnessed the adverse effects of shelling and military action; we have seen people die and be injured. When we ask why, we see it is that we are not free and are at the mercy of the military. This is common to all Tamil people. So I joined the Itte. Everyone in this country needs peace, especially the Tamil people need peace because since 1948, since independence, they have been discriminated against. However, it seemed to me that nationalism or nationalist ideology was a metaA reason for enlistment, beneath which there were other factors, many of which intersected with or fed into nationalism. Another motivation to enlist, intimately intertwined with nationalist ideology, was the experience and perception of Tamil suffering, oppression, and injustice. Sometimes this was related to personal or family experience; sometimes it had been received as a part of the Tamil narrative of oppression and suffering, borne out by the experience of one's friends and neighbors. My research suggests that a sense of communal Tamil suffering seemed to be an even more significant factor than direct personal or family loss in persuading many and Alison some women to join the movement. Four women discussed the death of an immediate family member. Six women mentioned that their families had been displaced, and this was clearly a contributory factor for many in their

decision to enlist. Ten cadres I interviewed spoke of their areas coming under attack by the military during the war, their anger over the suffering of people in their communities, and/or witnessing violence, and gave this as a partial or primary reason for enlisting. As Sudarvili told me, "Our people have been suffering.

The common places and the churches and the *kovils* [Hindu temples] was bombed by the government, without any reason. [W]e don't have anybody to save us, and what we feel is if we have someone to safeguard us then there won't be any problem. Because of the occupation of the army we have been forced to take arms in our hands." A third reason that women might have joined the Itte was educational disruption and restrictions. Given that Sri Lankan policies of "standardization" had effectively discriminated against Tamils with respect to university entrance, I was expecting this to be given by some of the interviewees as a motivating factor for joining the Itte. In a Panos oral testimony project, the standardization system is mentioned as one reason for young Tamils to take up arms.<sup>17</sup> However, my research revealed that the general disruption to all levels of education caused by the war, which was particularly linked to experiences of displacement, was perhaps more significant. Eight of the interviewees discussed disruption to education (either their own or more generally) as a result of displacement and war. Four of these women specifically mentioned educational disruption as part of the reason they joined. Poverty is another factor that is often associated with people's decision to join insurgent groups, and the Itte is no exception.



Nevertheless, most of the people I interviewed were the rough equivalent of lower middle class. It seemed to me that the war-related disjunctures between past and present, between aspiration and reality, were at least as significant, or more so, as was outright poverty. Still, four of my interviewees spoke to the importance of economic motivations. For example, Thangachi explained that “I was a child. I thought that if I join Ltte I would lead a better life. We were struggling even to get food. If I join the Ltte, at least these basic needs of mine would be taken care of but, after joining Ltte, worries about my family started. I was getting good food. They took care of me very well. But worries about my family grew every day.” “In war, we never think we are women” All of the reasons for enlisting in the Ltte that I have so far described are equally applicable to men and women. I also found, however, that there were some reasons for taking up arms that are gender-specific to women. One is sexual violence against Tamil women. Sexual violence against Tamil women by Sinhalese military members and police was a long-standing problem during the conflict, and many say it persists in the postconflict period.<sup>18</sup> Ten women discussed the fear and reality of rape as being a reason in general to join the Ltte and fear of or anger about this was part of their own reasoning for four of them. In the context of a question about whether she thought that being in the Ltte had been good for her, Barathy volunteered that “particularly in the Jaffna Peninsula, Tamil girls are raped by the Sri Lankan army” and declared that it was a part of her motivation for joining. A number of researchers have suggested that women joined the Ltte for a variety of reasons related to women’s

emancipation and the desire to expand their life opportunities. A commitment to women’s liberation is part all Tamil militant groups’ commitment to national liberation. According to Sarita Subramaniam, the Ltte regarded “its female cadres” as “the ultimate symbol of women’s liberation” and believed that women “achieve liberation from oppressive gender roles through active combat.”<sup>19</sup> The majority of the women I interviewed said they had not been aware of issues relating to women’s social conditions, women’s rights, or equality before joining the movement. However, all of their awareness on this front had been raised since being with the movement and many of them expressed a clear commitment to wanting to improve life for Tamil women. All of these matters, gender-specific or otherwise, pertain to voluntary enlistment. It is important, however, to note that the Ltte also forcibly recruited by conscription, and one of the women I interviewed had not enlisted voluntarily.<sup>20</sup> Noncombatant Tamils I spoke to were divided in opinion on conscription; some seemed to believe this was a lie made up to slander the image of the Ltte, while others (including some who supported the Ltte on the whole) asserted that it had certainly happened. Kavitha reported that she was forcibly conscripted by the Ltte from her Batticaloa boarding school in 1990, at the age of only fifteen, but was released after ten months and sent home. She was immediately arrested for having been in the Ltte and was then imprisoned for a year, during which time she was beaten and tortured with electrical currents. Despite her conscription, she supports the Ltte’s political agenda, though not their methods.

## **Gender Relations and Experiences in the LTTE**

In 1991, the Women's Front of the Ltte, which had been trying to publicize the unequal position of women in Tamil society, formulated the following ambitious aims: to secure the right to self-determination of the Tamil Eelam people and establish an independent democratic state of Tamil Eelam, to abolish oppressive caste discrimination and divisions and customs like dowry, to eliminate all discrimination against Tamil women and all other discrimination, to secure social, political, and economic equality, to ensure that Tamil women control their own lives, and to secure legal protection for women who are sexually harassed, raped, and subjected to domestic violence.<sup>21</sup> Though the Ltte had a formal commitment to women's equality, separate organization of men and women fulfilled Tamil cultural expectations prohibiting fraternization between young men and women, reduced the perceived problem of sexual relations between cadres, and gave young women the opportunity to develop skills and grow in confidence in a supportive environment. Thamiltvily explained that "men and women train and live separately because the movement is very conscious of discipline. Society is not quite happy to have women join the movement, so to have men and women train together would raise eyebrows. A€.A€.A€. Also because the Ltte is so strong on discipline, they want to avoid questionable behavior." Through experience fighting alongside female cadres, the men, Adele Ann claims, came to accept and respect them, and "as mutual confidence and comradeship grew from the battle experience the gender distinctions in the allocations of

responsibilities and military duties started to melt away."<sup>22</sup> Many of my interviewees, particularly those who joined the Ltte after 1990, said things like "we were treated as equals and we did not have any difference between us. We were like brothers and sisters" (Geetha enlisted in 1993). Margaret Trawick argued in 1999, however, that "[s]ome of the men are conservative, and uncomfortable with the idea of sisters in trousers."<sup>23</sup> Thamiltvily maintained that "when we do something then men get to know about our capabilities, but our country's attitude towards women is different and men are always praised for doing harder and cleverer jobs, so on seeing women doing "In war, we never think we are women" work it will kindle the men's ego and ego tends to stop women's growth in this aspect, but on that situation we need to be courageous and patient." Six of the women I interviewed discussed specific social restrictions on women, and they were all happy that within the Ltte they had the opportunity to do things that they were raised to believe were inappropriate or dangerous for women. Geetha explained that the Ltte experience was "good for me" and credited the Ltte with giving women the ability to "seek livelihood for ourselves by working in other jobs." Furthermore, many non-Ltte women told me that the organization opposed domestic violence and punished offenders. The war and recruitment of women into militant groups also produced changes in the lives of some nonmilitant Tamil women, who started behaving unconventionally.<sup>24</sup> There was some backlash against this, however, both within the Ltte and in society more generally. The concern over women's appropriate attire, the disparity between

women within and without the Itte, and the difficulties that come with attempting to balance significant social change against more traditional community attitudes and expectations in the context of nationalist mobilization all tie into the issue of the representation and rationalization of women cadres. Early in the Tamil movement, the idealized Tamil woman was a mother who sent her son to fight in the war. Appeals to the importance of motherhood have also been used in militant Tamil depictions of state family planning as a genocidal plot. The change from “brave mother” to “woman warrior” in the construction of “woman” was a “categorical shift” although the significance of motherhood was not abandoned.<sup>25</sup> In fact, in the mid-1990s, Sitralega Maunaguru was arguing that a “mother-warrior” construction of Tamil womanhood had emerged, resulting in gun-and-baby representations.<sup>26</sup> The conjunction of motherhood and combat and the challenges and ambiguities this presents all seem to have made their way into popular representations of the Tigers as well.

## Notes

1. *The Breakup of Sri Lanka: the Sinhalese-Tamil Conflict* [London: Hurst, 1988], v). I use “Sri Lanka” because that is how most people outside the country know it.
2. *In the Shadow of a Cease-Fire: The Impact of Small Arms Availability and Misuse in Sri Lanka*, Occasional Paper no. 11, [Geneva: Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International Studies, 2003], 3). “
3. Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, “Ambivalent Empowerment: The Tragedy of

Tamil Women in Conflict,” in *Women, War, and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood*

to Agency, ed. Rita Manchanda (New Delhi: Sage, 2001), 14–20.

4. Elizabeth Nissan and R. L. Stirrat, in “The Generation of Communal Identities,”

*Sri Lanka: History and Roots of the Conflict*, ed. Jonathan Spencer (London: Routledge, 1990), 32.

5. Serena Tennekoon, “Newspaper Nationalism: Sinhala Identity as Historical Discourse,” in *Sri Lanka*, 205.

6. Neil DeVotta, “Illiberalism and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (2002): 86–89.

7. See Siri Gamage, “Post-Independent Political Conflicts in Sri Lanka: Elites, Ethnicity, and Class Contradictions,” *South Asia-Journal of South Asian Studies*

20, no. 1 (1997): 359–95, and Deborah Winslow and Michael D. Woost, eds. *Economy, Culture and Civil War in Sri Lanka* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

8. Wilson, *The Breakup of Sri Lanka*, 86.

9. M. R. Narayan Swamy, *Tigers of Lanka, from Boys to Guerillas* (Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1994), 31–32. The term “Eelam” (or “Ilam”)

10. Purnaka L. de Silva, “The Growth of Tamil Paramilitary Nationalisms: Sinhala Chauvinism and Tamil Responses,” in *Conflict and Community*, 97.

11. Narayan Swamy, *Tigers of Lanka*, 96.

12. The period from July 1983 until the 1987 Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord (or until the collapse of this in 1990) is

sometimes described as the first “Eelam war.” The second

“Eelam war” was fought between 1990 and 1995 with a brief ceasefire in 1995.

The third

“Eelam war” was fought from 1995 until the start of the ceasefire at the end of 2001. The

fourth “Eelam war” began in 2008 and ended in May 2009.

13. Vidyamali Samarasinghe, “Soldiers, Housewives, and Peace Makers: Ethnic Conflict and Gender in Sri Lanka,” *Ethnic Studies Report* 14, no.2 (1996): 213.

14. Miranda Alison, “Women as Agents of Political Violence: Gendering Security,” *Security Dialogue* 35, no. 4 (2004): 447–63.

15. Ibid.

16. Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997), 98.

17. Olivia Bennett, Jo Bexley and Kitty Warnock, eds., *Arms to Fight, Arms to Protect:*

*Women Speak Out about Conflict* (London: Panos, 1995).

18. Amnesty International, *Sri Lanka: Rape in Custody Must Be Stopped Immediately*,

2002, asa 37/001/2002, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA37/001/2002>

/en/2c91e5d4-d8a7-11dd-ad8c-f3d4445c118e/asa370012002en.pdf

(accessed May 20, 2010);

Amnesty International, *Sri Lanka: Torture in Custody*, 1999, asa 37/10/99, <http://www>

.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA37/010/1999/en/ea0ed8ee-e1d8-11dd-a03a-6b5b1e49bce3/asa370101999en.pdf (accessed January 18, 2001).

19. Sarita Subramaniam, “Women Lead Rebel Attacks, but Tiger Leaders are

Men,” *Inter Press Service*, August 11, 1997,

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(accessed February 16, 2002); Margaret Trawick, “Reasons for Violence: A Preliminary

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20. Human Rights Watch, *Living in Fear: Child Soldiers and the Tamil Tigers in Sri*

*Lanka*, hrw 16, no. 13 (2004), [www.hrw.org/reports/2004/srilanka1104/srilanka1104.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/reports/2004/srilanka1104/srilanka1104.pdf)

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21. Peter Schlak, “Women Fighters of the Liberation Tigers in Tamil Ilam: The Martial Feminism of Atel Palacinkam,” *South Asia Research* 14, no. 2 (1994): 169.

22. Adele Ann, *Women Fighters of the Liberation Tigers* (Jaffna: Itte Publication Section, 1993), 100.

23. Trawick, “Reasons for Violence,” 145.

24. Sitralega Maunaguru, “Gendering Tamil Nationalism: The Construction of ‘Woman’ in Projects of Protest and Control” in *Unmaking the Nation: The Politics of*

*Identity and History in Modern Sri Lanka*, ed. Pradeep Jeganathan and Qadri Ismail

(Columbo: Social Scientists’ Association, 1995), 169.

25. Ibid., 163–64.

26. Ibid., 164.