



# EMPOWERING TAMIL WOMEN: RECOVERY IN POST-CONFLICT SRI LANKA

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*More than five years after the Sri Lankan government's victory over the LTTE insurgency, billions of dollars have been invested in infrastructure development projects in war-ravaged northern Sri Lanka. However, post-conflict normalization remains undermined by the fact that many Tamil women continue to be significantly marginalized in access to reconstruction aid. Martina Klimesova and Bimsara Premaratne argue that through small-scale, targeted projects, progress can be achieved towards a gender-balanced post-war recovery.*

It has been more than five years since the Sri Lankan government's military victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a conflict which spanned over twenty-five years, ravaged the north-east of the island, and led to over 100,000 deaths. While billions of dollars have been invested since May 2009 in speedy physical infrastructure development projects, the previously LTTE-dominated conflict-affected districts of the north are in desperate need of socio-cultural reconstruction assistance directed towards community capacity development, particularly the empowerment of women-headed households. Successful social regeneration of former LTTE-controlled areas cannot occur without the engagement of the Tamil widows and Tamil community empowerment. Failure to do so will miss an important opportunity for such women to become positive agents of change in post-conflict recovery in Sri Lanka.

## Double Marginalization

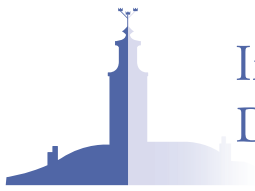
Government estimates indicate there were up to 59,000 widows at the end of the armed conflict, and NGOs estimate that up to 40,000 households in the north are currently headed by women. It is these Tamil women who are facing double marginalization. They are firstly disadvantaged in access to employment as most work opportunities are in construction and other roles generally regarded as unsuitable for women. Even if willing to take on employment in such sectors, they are not successful when applying for positions. Furthermore, many of those who find employment (with private employers) are often subjected to unfair treatment and slave-like conditions.

Second, Tamil women formerly affiliated with the LTTE network, most often through their husbands or sons, are marginalized by the local communities. In an attempt to deal with the troublesome LTTE past, Tamil communities ostracize LTTE widows. In contrast to the period under the LTTE rule, association or affiliation with the organization is now deemed as a societal burden. Whereas many former LTTE female cadres have opted to build new lives through programs for reintegration outside of their original communities and villages, the same opportunities have not been afforded to non-combatant women affiliated to the Tamil Tigers. It is this group which is not only the most vulnerable to economic and social hardship and increased security threats, but also has the highest potential to become agents of change for sustainable reconstruction.

## Government Efforts and Mistrust

The empowerment of widows and women-headed households through targeted social policies is one of the main programs under the government's women empowerment agenda administered by the Ministry of Child Development and Women's Affairs. The Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration is also currently working on a new national policy directive on Social Integration, in which women will be recognized as agents of change for community development.

In spite of the central government's will to improve the dire situation of the Tamil women in conflict-affected areas in the north, this is hindered by the prevailing negative perceptions and mistrust of central institutions



in the Tamil-dominated north. The large number of cases of undocumented disappearances and alleged illegal detention of civilians and former LTTE affiliates from 2009 and the war's immediate aftermath also remains unresolved. Although a Northern Provincial Council election was held in September 2013 (the first time this has happened since this provision was included in the 1987 constitutional amendment), this attempt to devolve power has not yet led to organized assistance to the most marginalized groups in the north. Instead, it is NGOs which have far greater room for maneuver and more opportunities to make an impact where it is needed.

## Community-based Initiatives

Between August 2013 and July 2014, the Colombo-based *Initiative for Political and Conflict Transformation* (Inpact) carried out a project aimed at healing and empowering widows and other marginalized women in rural and impoverished regions in the Jaffna district. The project successfully reached 234 such women with an operational budget of €4000. Through theater-based workshops the project identified specific problems that the marginalized women faced and were otherwise reluctant to share in an open forum.

The initiative highlighted that a lack of security for women is a recurring issue and many of the women participating in the project reported feeling threatened or disadvantaged in their opportunities to sustain their livelihoods. They also cannot rely on material or moral support from their community due to their LTTE linkages. Moreover, most of the participants have experienced some form of hardship or sexual abuse within their families, from their employers, or from law enforcement authorities. Interestingly, the workshops showed that the affected women benefited greatly from creating a sense of community spirit among themselves and that in some cases has led to joint small-scale business initiatives.

The project also highlighted that the community has lacked a space where the conflict-affected women could meet, not only to share their burdens and find support, but also to encourage each other to re-start their lives. For instance, after the Inpact workshops several women together wrote a letter to government representatives claiming compensation benefits. The project served as a first trigger for them to explore new opportunities and possibilities in their lives beyond the conflict. In sum, such small-scale and low-cost projects can contribute to both the economic and so-

cial empowerment of affected Tamil women.

## Towards Sustainable Empowerment

Whereas political reconciliation between the Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim ethnic groups in Sri Lanka is necessarily a much longer-term process, community reconciliation and assistance to marginalized women is urgently needed now. Effective community initiatives are still extremely scarce in the Tamil-dominated areas, but those which have been carried out in the past two years have shown high and immediate positive impact on community empowerment. In turn, this contributes to post-conflict normalization and the overall healing of Tamil society.

### *Small-scale Projects with Direct Impact*

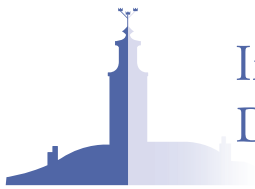
Much of the post-war reconstruction efforts have been focused on infrastructure and physical reconstruction. China has become one of the most prominent donors in Sri Lanka, shouldering one-quarter of the costs of overall reconstruction. But other external actors can also contribute significantly towards community reconstruction. Larger external donors can allocate more funds to small yet high impact projects which are likely to be more effective at re-integrating people in the affected districts on the individual and community-based level.

### *Local Partners*

It is easier for external donors to facilitate small-scale projects with local partners rather than through official partnerships with government agencies. Smaller projects can also ease the bureaucratic burden which often limits larger initiatives. Moreover, local partners become essential when facilitating contacts and starting projects in the formerly LTTE-controlled areas, especially given the sensitive security situation in the region. As the Sri Lankan government has brought disadvantaged women into focus, the general perception of community-based projects for marginalized women has also improved. This serves to expedite cooperation with local partners.

### *Increasing Human Security Through Empowerment*

Empowerment of the most vulnerable groups in the region will also help improve human security and the re-establishment of sustainable livelihoods. To achieve this, these groups require more than just material support, but also capacity building and psychological assistance in order for



them to be able to see and grasp new opportunities, and to take the rebuilding of their communities into their own hands.

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