

# Locating Gendered Resistance: Interethnic Conflict, Environmental Disaster, and Feminist Leadership in Sri Lanka

*Allison Donine*  
Pitzer College, USA

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## Abstract

In geographically vulnerable and politically unstable regions such as Sri Lanka, I argue that linking natural hazards and climate-induced disasters to existing social problems is more pressing than ever. In the case of the 2004 *Boxing Day* tsunami, it was impossible to dissociate the two. This paper examines the following questions: Within the geo-political context of Sri Lanka, how does trauma (human-made or environmental) produce resistance to patriarchal traditions in communities along gender lines? What gaps do women-led groups and coalitions fill in responding to the needs of women in conflict and post-disaster landscapes? And how has the public participation of women in armed conflict and coalitions provided space for transgressive agency to redefine traditional expectations? I argue that a greater understanding of the ways in which women are resisting their construction as partial citizens can provide insight to their strength and role in shaping their personal identities as well as that of the state. Looking through the lens of distress, in conflict and environmental disaster, this paper explores how women have transformed moments of victimization into opportunities for resistance and agency.

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**Keywords:** Conflict, environmental disaster, gender, resistance, and crisis management

## Introduction

In Sri Lanka, the civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) formed the background against which the 2004 *Boxing Day* tsunami occurred. Understanding Sri Lanka's geo-political past is crucial to ensure that gender and conflict sensitivity are prioritized in international disaster relief. Since Sri Lanka's independence from British Rule in 1948, interethnic conflict and violence between the GoSL and the LTTE has been relatively constant. Given Sri Lanka's history with both the civil war and major environmental

disaster, the country presents an important case study to examine the experiences of women in both contexts and how they have resisted patriarchal traditions of war and relief. When the tsunami occurred, the GoSL and the LTTE had only recently agreed to a mutual ceasefire in 2002 (Bandarage, 2010). However, in the aftermath of the disaster, the ethnic borders drawn previously during the civil war became more clearly defined by the disproportionate response and impacts endured.

LTTE controlled coastal areas in the north and east, where the majority of Tamil people lived, experienced the greatest devastation when the waves struck. Three eastern districts alone made up almost 40 percent of all tsunami casualties in Sri Lanka. In addition to this, the North accounted for about 16 percent of the death toll, even though the southern portion of the country was more densely populated (Thurnheer, 2014). In a fateful few minutes, it is estimated that over 30,000 people were killed, thousands went missing, and over half a million people were displaced throughout Sri Lanka. However, the tsunami did not occur in a vacuum; during the civil war in Sri Lanka, it is estimated that over 100,000 lives were lost between 1983 and 2009 (Mahr, 2013). In this paper I examine the ways that women have responded these crises.

The women's movement in Sri Lanka gained initial traction in the 1980s, during the *Reign of Terror*, a period in which thousands of primarily male youth were murdered or 'disappeared' across the island (De Mel, 2001). Anyone the state suspected to be a 'subversive' (i.e. a left-wing activists, playwrights, lawyers, and journalists who were monitoring human rights violations) was targeted during this time (De Alwis, 1998). In protest of state oppression, the Mother's Front and the Women's Action Committee (WAC) were created (De Mel, 2001). These coalitions, and others like them, allowed new space for women to develop interethnic and inter-class linkages with one another across political borders to address mounting disappearances and human rights violations. In July 1984, the first Mother's Front was formed in the northern district of Jaffna. Six years later during in July of 1990, the first southern branch of the Mother's Front was formed in Matara, a district affected severely by disappearances (De Alwis, 1998). In just six months, the Mother's Front had spread to ten other districts.

The public presence of women within and outside the conflict has shifted traditional gender relations and shaped how women are seen in Sri Lankan society today. Neloufer de Mel, a prominent scholar on gender and nationalism, argues that women on the frontlines of combat and in coalitions actively participate in the transformation of the nation's narrative as well as their own (De Mel, 2001). Through participation in armed conflict and public activism I argue that women have strategically deployed the image of motherhood to advance their political position, reinvent tradition, and

redefine their roles in Sri Lankan society. This paper maps the forms of resistance women have used during periods of crisis and sustained interethnic violence.

### **The State of Gender and Crisis Management in Sri Lanka**

While significant research has investigated gender dynamics within the context of conflict, it was not until the 2004 *Boxing Day* tsunami that scholars began to draw parallels between women's experiences in war with those of women following disaster (Siapno, 2009; Thurnheer, 2014; De Mel, 2008; De Alwis & Hedman, 2009; Le Billon & Waizenegger, 2007) In the aftermath of the tsunami, it became impossible to dissociate pre-existing interethnic tension or gender relations. However, aside from the recent work of scholars in Sri Lanka, the overwhelming majority of disaster research has yet to thoroughly examine gendered impacts with the added stratum of conflict. Greater cross-pollination between scholars in the fields of gender, conflict, and disaster social science is critical. Communication and collaboration among scholars in these areas is needed to ensure the needs of diverse communities in complex socio-economic contexts are identified and met during periods of crisis. Disasters are inherently interdisciplinary and the literature should reflect this.

### **Sri Lanka as a Case Study**

There is an assumption in the literature that violence caused by weapons and violence caused by waves will result in different outcomes—as the case study of Sri Lanka proves, this is incorrect (Catani, et. a., 2008; Hyndman, 2008; De Mel, 2008). In the overwhelming majority of large-scale climate-induced and periods of crisis, social disparities are magnified and tensions are exacerbated. In the case of Sri Lanka, sustained crisis has also opened up opportunities for women to enter the public sphere and disrupt traditional gender norms. This paper examines the strategies women have used to navigate these complex spaces and build social resiliency. Examining the active role of women in coalition building and context sensitive community engagement during the war and after the tsunami, can provide important information and insight to practitioners in the fields of disaster, conflict and crisis management.

### **Ethnography of Political Violence**

In 2002, with the assistance of Norwegian officials, the GoSL and the LTTE agreed upon a ceasefire. The GoSL was still in the midst of peace talk negotiations with the LTTE when the 2004 Tsunami struck Sri Lanka's coast, interrupting the process and resulting in increased tensions. The ceasefire agreement held very little weight in the aftermath of the tsunami. It

did not take long for cease-fire violations and conflict to escalate between the two groups, as concerns were raised over the distribution of foreign aid, the implementation of disproportionate coastal buffer zones, and proposed plans for post-disaster development. August of 2006, an undeclared war broke out, but it took until January 2008 for the Sri Lankan government to officially declare the Cease-Fire Agreement void (De Alwis & Hedman, 2009). On May 18, 2009, after taking control of the entire island and killing Velupillai Prabhakaran, the leader of the LTTE, the GoSL declared a formal end to the twenty-five year long civil war (Weaver & Chamberlain, 2009). It is estimated that over 7,000 ethnic Tamil civilians were killed between January and May of 2009 in the final and brutal attacks by Sri Lankan government forces (Weaver & Chamberlain, 2009).

### **Women in War: The Recruitment of Female Combatants**

To understand the current status of women in Sri Lanka, it is necessary to observe their roles as both perpetrators of violence and upholders of peace within the civil war (Bandarage, 2010). Beginning in the 1980s, the LTTE began the recruitment and training of Tamil female-combatants to aid in the fight against the separatist Sinhala-Buddhist state (Parashar, 2009). The participation of Tamil women in the LTTE provided unmapped terrain for women to publically display their choice to sacrifice for the Tamil people and their resistance to gendered and ethnic oppression by the state. Eventually, LTTE forces consisted of about one-fifth women; this was unprecedented for the time and defied the gendered tradition of war (Parashar, 2009). Within the LTTE, women played an active role both behind the scenes and on the frontlines of the civil war, including logistical activities and carrying out suicide bombings. The transition of women from the private sphere of the home into military training camps has had an indelible impact on the nation. Through engaging in traditionally ‘masculine’ activities, and confronting patriarchal gendered norms, women have transcended their prescribed socio-cultural roles (De Mel, 2001). As Miranda Alison (2013) emphasizes, women do not lack agency in this space (Alison, 2013).

While it is important to be critical of women’s agency and its limitations in the context of the LTTE, the symbolic significance and impact of their involvement should not be overlooked. For example, through the women’s wing of the LTTE, the Freedom Birds, female combatants played a crucial role in the armed force during the war (Bandarage, 2010). The national image of women as peaceful, docile, and weak was quickly ripped away as women became involved in the LTTE fight. As Bandarage reports, “The young women cadres were known for their harsh treatment not only of the ethnic and gender other—the Sinhala males—but also non-LTTE Tamil

women, especially women from rival militant organizations” (Bandarage, 2010, p. 658). These women were brutal, unforgiving, and committed to the Tamil cause. In such examples, it is clear how women in Sri Lanka have used their agency in periods of crisis to chip away at the base of gender constructions and patriarchal infrastructures. In Sri Lanka, the involvement of women in war, a highly gendered space, has aided in this deconstruction.

### **Disappearances and Killings: A Cause for Resistance**

Between the years 1987 to 1991, Sri Lanka experienced an uprising from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a group of Sinhala nationalist youth in opposition to the actions taken by the Sri Lankan Government (De Alwis, 1998). JVP militants terrorized and murdered anyone who criticized their group or whom they suspected of collaborating with the state. In response to the uprising, the Sri Lankan government fought fire with fire, but on a much larger scale. The GoSL enacted a *Reign of Terror* in which anyone suspected of being a subversive of the state was murdered or disappeared (De Mel, 2001). Subsequently, JVP Sinhala youth became a primary target of the government during this time. Between the years, 1988 and 1990, “bodies, rotting on beaches, smoldering in grotesque heaps by the roadsides and floating down rivers, were a daily sight during the height of state repression” (De Alwis, 1998, p. 152). Second to Iraq, Sri Lanka is reported by the United Nations to have the highest number of disappearances in the world (Manimekalai, 2013). During this period, terror became a formal mechanism of control by the Sri Lankan government.

Despite the pervasive culture of fear and abuse perpetrated by the Sri Lankan government, women came together as mothers to protest the disappearances of their sons publically. I argue that the magnitude of social stress mothers endured as a result of the kidnappings and murders of their children, created an environment in which women could no longer conceal their opposition to the state. Unified as mothers, sisters, and wives, women took to the streets and demanded that justice be served and the government be held accountable. It was during this period of terror and militancy that the first southern Mother’s Front was founded in the province of Matara (De Mel, 2001). Two year later, in 1992, the Mother’s Front membership soared to over 25,00 (De Mel, 2001). This marked an incredible transition of women from the private sphere of the home to the public space of protest. Protests led by the Mother’s Fronts drew international attention to the human rights abuses in Sri Lanka.

### **Feminist Cultures of Resistance**

For a long time, scholars have had a contested relationship with nationalism and feminism. Does separatist nationalism in Sri Lanka open

space for women's resistance? Or does it instead confine women to the boundaries of nationalist goals and projects, further reinforcing their roles as reproducers and bearers of cultural tradition? The argument many scholars have adopted is that while gendered restrictions exist within this framework, the social transformation of women's roles in armed conflict and activism cannot be denied in Sri Lankan society (Coomaraswamy & Perera-Rajasingham, 2009). Greater examination of the moments where feminism and nationalism intersect can further this understanding. Historically, the nationalist state has sought to suppress the modern woman, for her body is the "discursive terrain on which significant socio-cultural tenets of the nation are produced" (De Mel, 2001, p. 16). In this sense, to preserve the traditional women is to preserve the nation. While the GoSL has been proactive in controlling and suppressing the status of women in the nationalist framework, the LTTE has been vocal in claiming the liberation of women as one of its primary tenants. However within both organizations, control over women's bodies is being exercised. The moments in which feminism and nationalism intersect, draw attention to the mechanisms of resistance women are using to oppose their construction as partial citizens in the nationalist patriarchal framework. Kumari Jayawardena, in her work, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, seeks to "'uncover' the role played by women in nationalist struggles rather than highlight their subordination within them" (De Alwis, 2003). Using tears on the streets and guns on the battlefield, I argue that these women have deployed both feminine and masculine strategies of resistance to their advantage.

### **Public Sacrifice and Resistance: Women in the LTTE**

In 1983, the LTTE set up its first special unit for women called the *Vituthalai Pulikal Munani* (Women's Front of the Liberation Tigers). This move by the LTTE forwarded a great transformation in the role of women in Sri Lanka. Within the LTTE, and other Tamil militant groups, a strong commitment to linking women's liberation with their goal of national liberation has been expressed (Alison, 2003, p. 45). In a speech given by LTTE leader Prabhakaran, he states that "[t]he Tamil Eelam revolutionary woman has transformed herself as a Tiger for the Liberation of our land and liberation of women. She, like a fire that burns injustices, has taken up arms" (Alison, 2003, p. 45). While the sincerity of the LTTE's commitment to women's liberation is debatable, it has great symbolic significance.

Miranda Alison's work, *Cogs in the Wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam*, provides important insight to the gender-specific reasons behind women's choices in joining the movement. In her analysis Alison (2003) includes interviews with fourteen female LTTE combatants and ex-combatants to gauge their perspective on liberation within the conflict.

While nationalist sentiment may have been one reason behind women's choice to join the fight of the Tamil Ealam, Alison argues that there are "more personal factors operating" (Alison, 2003, p. 40). She notes that many of the women who chose to join the LTTE cadres also came from families and regions that had been particularly affected by the war, their motivations were both political and personal.

Many scholars have leapt to the conclusion that female combatants are pawns at the disposal of male LTTE superiors. Radhika Coomaraswamy states that, "[the LTTE women] are not initiators of ideas. They are only implementers of policy made by someone else..." (Parashar, 2009, p. 241). This assumption discounts the agency and personal narratives of women in spaces of extreme violence. James Scott (1990), an expert on domination and resistance, suggests that "To do so is to see the performance as totally determined from above and to miss the agency of the actor in appropriating the performance for his own ends" (p. 34). The majority of women interviewed in Alison's study outlined disruption to education and protection as two important motivating factors for joining the LTTE. Five of the fourteen women interviewed stated that because of displacement caused by the war and discrimination against Tamil youth in university entrance, access to higher education was limited. One woman reported explicitly that she joined the movement because "She does not want this disruption to education to happen to future generations and wanted to help end this" (Alison, 2003, p. 42). Another reason behind women's participation was anger and fear towards the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF), of which members had raped and molested hundreds of Tamil women between 1987-90 in the northeast. In one interviews, a woman explained that fear of sexual violence was a primary motivating factor for her choice to join the LTTE, she explained that "Everyone has to protect themselves" (Alison, 2003, p. 43). As expressed in these examples, the social stress caused by the war motivated women to take up arms of their own, to fight against the atrocities of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces and IPKF in their communities, and participate in the struggle for Tamil liberation. While women's involvement in the LTTE may not have resulted in the overall emancipation or liberation of women in Sri Lanka, I argue it created space for *liberating* experiences during the conflict. The involvement of women in the LTTE armed forces not only changed the way society saw them but also how they viewed their own capacity for action.

### **Female Suicide Bombers: An Examination of Empowerment**

During the civil war, women made up one-third of the LTTE's suicide unit (Bandarage, 2010). In committing extreme acts of self-sacrifice, these brave women broke taboos and impositions of female identity. (De

Mel, 2001). De Mel (2001) argues that such acts “can be viewed as an agentive moment in the militant’s life, the pinnacle in a career of dedication” (p. 225). While coercion is likely to have played a role in women’s sacrifice, the choices women make in this space are often more complex. Dhanu is one of the most well known female suicide bombers in the LTTE. When she was just seventeen years old, she carried out an attack on Rajiv Gandhi, the former Indian Prime Minister (Bandarage, 2010). While her suicide was one of sacrifice, it was equally if not more so, one of revenge. After the attack, the LTTE came forward stating that Dhanu chose to avenge herself after being raped by members of the IPKF who had been sent to Sri Lanka under the supervision of Gandhi (Bandarage, 2010).

In the fourth clause of the LTTE’s Women’s Manifesto, one of the tenets listed is to “Ensure that women control their own lives” (De Mel, 2001, p. 222). De Mel (2001) critiques this claim and those made by Velupillai Pribakaran, the leader of the LTTE and founder of the Women’s Military unit of the Liberation Tigers. She states that despite these declarations for equality and liberation, Pribakaran is only the “midwife of their agency” reinforcing the “gender hierarchies which keep women in reliance on men...” (De Mel, 2001, p. 222). While De Mel (2001) recognizes the complex nature of female combatants in her work, I disagree with the absolute nature of this statement. I argue that women’s empowerment is a process. Women are continuously conforming, transforming, and re-creating themselves in the face of patriarchy and in their active resistance to it. It is important to critique the structures that limit women’s potential for agency, but scholars must be cautious of how these limitations are perpetuated in their work.

### **Backing Away from Binaries: Women in War**

“Looking at women as vulnerable, passive and acted upon...reinforces the maleness of agency” (Tuana, 2013, p. 29)

In the literature on conflict, but also environmental disaster, women are overwhelmingly depicted as victims of cultural traditions, gendered stereotypes, the nationalist struggle, and other patriarchal structures. However, the situation for women is neither black nor white. While it is important to understand how women are vulnerable to certain forms of violence, it is equally important that their strengths individually and collectively are recognized in the face of adversity. Significant social stress (during the conflict and following the tsunami) has generated resistance to state sanctioned violence and provided an opportunity to for women to transform their social and political identities. I agree with Parashar (2009) that with regards to women in crisis, “The reality is somewhere in between the binaries of agency and victimhood, private and public, voice and

silence...” (p. 254). Given choices under conditions of social stress, I argue that Sri Lankan women have chosen to abandon cultures of patriarchy. Women’s involvement in the LTTE illustrates a vast departure from the tradition behavior of Tamil women. Under extreme social stress, these women have chosen to resist the status quo, take up arms, and become agents in the fight for social change.

Within the discourse on women in war, scholars have had difficulty reconciling the roles of women in peace activism with those in armed combat. Parashar (2009) states that, “Women are often labeled as inherently peaceful and their violence is explained as the consequence of male victimization and maneuvering” (p. 251). Such labels depict women as lacking personal political motivation or nationalist aspirations, presenting a major obstacle to their agency. We cannot mainstream women’s voices effectively into discussions of peace if we do not understand their motivations for violence. The field of Feminist International Relations will need to accept the diversity and legitimacy of women’s experiences in conflict so that the women’s participation in violence is no longer marginalized, but rather understood through the lens of agency.

### **Gendered Struggle and Public Resistance: The Rise of Women’s Groups**

Over the last several decades, women in Sri Lanka have made their presence known in the political and public sphere. Periods of increased trauma and social stress have resulted in new opportunities for resistance among women of all ethnic groups and classes. As such, female-led organizations have been overwhelmingly successful in speaking across geopolitical and methodological borders to address issues of nationalism, militarization, and gender violence in the context of war (Giles, 2003). The formation of the Women’s Action Committee (WAC) in 1982 marked the beginning of contemporary feminist peace activism in Sri Lanka (Bandarage, 2010). However, the WAC was eventually forced to disband after supporting the controversial entrance of the IPKF to Sri Lanka as well as after having received serious threats from the JVP (Bandarage, 2010). After a period of hiatus, these women re-emerged in 1989 when the group Mothers and Daughters of Lanka (MDL) was formed. Similar to the WAC, the MDL worked primarily on creating a political platform for devolution and to negotiate an end to the war (De Mel, 2001). During the same year that the WAC was formed, Tamil women in the Northern city of Jaffna mobilized the first Mother’s Front (Samuel, 2003). Two years after the formation of the WAC, in 1984 the Northern Mother’s Front was formed in Jaffna and six years later in 1990, Sinhalese women expanded the Mother’s Front in the southern province of Matara (Samuel, 2003). While these women’s

organizations oppose dominant nationalism, it is important to remember that they also function within it.

### **The Mother's Front: The Politics and Strategy of Motherhood**

The emergence of Mother's Fronts during the height of the Reign of Terror, demonstrated tremendous courage. During this time Tamil women in the north and Sinhalese women in the south took to the streets and demanded justice. Together they protested the arbitrary disappearances and murders of their sons by Sri Lankan state forces (Bandarage, 2010). Wenona Giles (2003), a prominent feminist scholar, explains that "In times of war and socio-political insecurity, the figure of the mother becomes a central signifier of racial and cultural values, national pride and purity, and is intrinsically connected in this way to the nation's honor" (p. 167). While historically the Sri Lankan government has used motherhood as a tactic of oppression—members of the Mother's Front chose to reclaim motherhood as a site of protest, demonstrating their collective unity and potential. Through public activism and the deployment of "Mother Politics," women have brought about significant changes in the balance of political power (Giles, 2003). While motherhood may not have been the most transformative feminist tactic, it was effective in elevating the concerns of women, offering protection in the dangerous and politically unstable context of the Sri Lankan civil war.

In James Scott's work, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990), he states that "Conformity in the face of domination is thus occasionally—and unforgettably—a question of suppressing a violent rage in the interest of oneself and loved ones" (p. 37). While women might have expressed varying degrees of rage publically, they had to be careful of where and how they did so. Motherhood as a strategy allowed women to balance the need to protection with that of remaining heard. The international attention attracted by the mothers of the disappeared, combined with the government's efforts to cover up human rights abuses, afforded women both moral legitimacy and political protection in activism.

### **When Waves Crash on a Broken Shore**

When the tsunami struck Sri Lanka's shore in 2004, Sri Lanka was already broken. Not only had 80,000 people been killed and more than 800,000 people displaced, shortly after the disaster, war was resumed in 2006. The ceasefire agreement signed between the GoSL and LTTE in 2002 quickly fell apart as tensions mounted over foreign aid. During the second phase of the war, another estimated 21,000 people were killed followed by tens of thousands more in the final military campaigns of 2009 (Thurnheer, 2014). With the influx of foreign aid focused solely on victims of the

tsunami, previously Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from the war who were not tsunami-affected received little, if any, aid (Hyndman, 2009). Tensions arose due to aid reserved for those affected by the tsunami *versus* those affected by the war (Thurnheer, 2014). The lack of gender, political, and socio-cultural sensitivity by international relief, furthered the conflict in the country.

### **The Gendered Terrain of Disaster**

Kathleen Thurnheer, an anthropologist who has written significantly on violence and disaster in Sri Lanka, states that while disasters discriminate based on established differences such as class, caste, gender, ethnicity and age, “ultimately, power relationships lie at the core of a disaster’s impact” (Thurnheer, 2014, p. 110). In the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami, it was estimated that approximately three times as many women than men were killed between the ages of sixteen and thirty years old (Hydman, 2008). This sparked concern among scholars, thus spurring an academic movement to look at gendered data in disasters more closely in order to better understand the multiple layers of women’s vulnerability.

When determining who is most vulnerable in a disaster situation, it is important to look at who has the least assets and capacity to adapt to such changes. By this equation, women who work as substance farmers and land managers in the rural north and east worn-torn territories are the most vulnerable, provided their dependent position on their land, in most cases their husband, and the responsibility to their family to provide food, care, water, etc. As stated by Chew, in *Caught in the Storm: The Impact of Natural Disasters on Women*, in countries similar to Sri Lanka, “Women are especially likely to work in agricultural industry or the informal economy, both of which tend to be heavily impacted by natural disasters.” (Chew, 2005, p. 3). In addition, due to head-of-household rules governing eligibility for assistance, after the tsunami women who had become widowed were put at a significant disadvantage in their recovery. Inheritance and property laws also limited women’s ability to acquire assets for recovery (Tierney, 2007). Women play keys roles in their homes and communities. As Elaine Enarson, an expert on disaster sociology states, “women are significant economic actors whose time, efforts, and income sustain life for others, and their economic losses impact overall household and community recovery after disasters” (Enarson, 2000, p. 9). Enarson emphasizes that the inclusion of women in development projects, relief efforts, and decision-making is critical to move entire communities forward.

In addition to lacking certain financial resources to adapt, due to cultural norms and socialization women were placed in especially vulnerable positions when the waves struck. In addition to wearing restrictive and long

clothing, which made it difficult to swim, many women lacked certain survival skills (generally taught to males) such as tree climbing and swimming (Thurnheer, 2014). A number of women also reported being unable to evacuate their homes in time because they were traveling with smaller children who could not walk or run as fast.

### **Pre-Existing Gender-Biased Policies: Socio-Economic Vulnerability**

In comparison with other South Asian countries, women in Sri Lanka rank highly in terms of literacy and health. However, these rankings do not necessarily equate to economic or social security. Studies show that in post disaster circumstances women often face heightened risk of inequality and violence. According to scholarship conducted on ecofeminism and natural disasters in Sri Lanka, policies that favor men financially such as gender-biased inheritance allow for a culture where women are forced to remain dependent on men for their survival (Banford & Froude, 2015). For instance, “Many Sri Lankan women whose husbands died in the tsunami were left without their former property because of inhibition under Sharia law prohibiting women from property inheritance (Banford & Froude, 2015). This is just one example of how pre-existing structures made it more difficult for women to cope and adapt—women are more vulnerable not because they are less capable but because they have been historically and structurally disadvantaged in society. Because of these restraints on women, resources allocated towards building their economic and adaptation capacity should be prioritized.

A study of 200 homes in the eastern Tamil province of Batticaloa found that 80% of the people who died in the tsunami were women, in addition to the loss of lives, “women’s wealth, often in the form of gold jewelry (but also bicycles), was also swept away by the destructive waves” (Hydman, 2008, p. 108). The loss of lives and capital among women was grave throughout Sri Lanka and was more severe in marginalized communities, such as Batticaloa. Women who were widowed after the tsunami faced significant challenges in accessing emergency relief and overcoming cultural stigmatization. In the aftermath of the tsunami, “52.2 percent of Sinhala women heads interviewed were widows, 67.2 percent of Tamil women and 61 percent of Muslim women heads were widows” (Hydman, 2008, p. 112). Jennifer Hydman (2008), a researcher on feminism, conflict, and disasters in post tsunami Sri Lanka, advocates for greater analysis of the power relations between men and women that result in social reproduction and deep-rooted inequality. Hydman’s states that, “The practices of aid, policy and history which position certain groups of people in hierarchical relation to others are not easily unraveled” (Hydman, 2008, p. 118). However, Hydman (2008) suggests that through a feminist lens and

approach these structures can be dissembled.

### **Increased Ethnic Tensions**

As foreign aid flowed into the country, its distribution was shaped unevenly by the pre-existing political geography. Hyndman (2009) argues, and I agree, “Without a strong understanding of ‘new political formations emerging on the global periphery,’ humanitarian aid will be incorporated into the fabric of political violence” (Hyndman, 2009, p. 57). This was precisely the case in Sri Lanka: the concentration of aid in the hands of the government sparked resentment and polarization within the LTTE (Thurnheer, 2014). In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami the LTTE and GoSL had agreed to a joint mechanism to distribute aid, the Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS), this plan was never actually implemented (Thurnheer, 2014). Regional aid was prioritized not based on need; instead, the areas that were politically more dominant (i.e. Sinhalese communities in the south) saw more access to relief personnel, humanitarian items, and financial aid (Thurnheer, 2014). In Hambantota, a southern province, a year following the tsunami it was reported by a local aid official that agencies were constructing 4,478 homes, even though only 2,445 were needed. As this was happening in the south, in the Tamil district of Ampara (reported to have been hit hardest by the tsunami), only 3,136 homes were being built for over 18,000 families whose homes had been destroyed (Hyndman, 2009). Following the norm in large-scale environmental disasters, NGOs implemented band-aid solutions rather than using their potential power to promote political solutions and long-term reconstruction (Thurnheer, 2014). Instead, devastation caused by the tsunami and insensitive relief operations, led to further conflict and lives lost.

### **Role of Women in Meeting Survivor Needs**

In post-tsunami Sri Lanka, I argue local women’s organizations were more effective than formal aid institutions in meeting the diverse needs of women and marginalized communities. Their prior-experiences working during the conflict years, provided them with a level of sensitivity and consciousness that lacked in foreign aid interventions. Women’s activism for human rights provided a useful frame of reference, enabling them to “draw attention to the contiguities between the political and ‘natural’ disasters of the war and the tsunami, and to go beyond the actual events themselves towards a feminist understanding of their impact as dynamic processes that affect women in particular gendered ways” (De Mel, 2008, p. 252). In this section I uncover the critical role women’s groups played in responding to the tsunami and how this was influenced by their activity during the war.

When the tsunami occurred, women's organizations were already deeply embedded in women's issues in Sri Lanka, such as gendered violence, displacement, and the livelihoods of widows. This prior knowledge formed the basis for their work following the disaster. As De Mel (2008) states, "A significant feminist trend in this post-tsunami activity...drew from prior experience in the work of gender and human rights in the context of armed violence" (De Mel, 2008, p. 247). In addition to pre-existing organizations, the Coalition for Assisting Tsunami Affected Women (CATAW) was formed. CATAW is an example of a feminist group that saw its purpose as linking developmental and rehabilitation goals with human rights (De Mel, 2008). This group was one of the only ones to send out a fact-finding team to gather specific information on the impacts of the tsunami on women (De Mel, 2008). Most of CATAW's work took place in conflict areas and focused on bringing awareness to women about their rights through legal clinics (De Mel, 2008). CATAW also advocated that the state allow women complete ownership over personal property or at least joint-ownership with their husband, or children if they were widowed (De Mel, 2008). However, due to some ethnic bias of the CATAW, Tamil and Muslim women have been relatively more aware of their rights than less dominant ethnic minorities such as the Burghers, who were less directly involved in the war (De Mel, 2008). While CATAW assisted in meeting the immediate needs of women and providing important information related to women's rights—the goals and mission of the organization moving forward would be benefited by a more progressive agenda, using disaster as a way to promote women's advancement rather than a return to pre-tsunami status quo.

### **International Disaster Aid- Moving Forward From Sri Lanka**

Unlike during the war years, Sri Lanka experienced a massive influx of foreign aid following the tsunami. In many ways the internal shock of the disaster also led to the marginalization of war-related deaths as tsunami relief efforts became increasingly politicized in the country (De Mel, 2008). Israel and Sachs (2013) argue that if international aid agencies continue to operate under the guise of "partial knowledge" with regards to gendered and social impacts, they cannot adequately manage and respond to disasters. Feminist scholars call for greater engagement with diverse stakeholders and vulnerable populations in disaster planning and relief decision-making.<sup>2</sup> Locating differences between social groups and being able to critically assess their needs, as well as strengths, will allow foreign aid to better prepare against the further marginalization of vulnerable communities following an environmental disaster.

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<sup>2</sup> Enarson, 2013; Israel & Sachs, 2013

Within international aid agencies women are overwhelmingly labeled as victims. This narrative is both pervasive and problematic. It causes women to become dependent on relief handouts rather than building their own capacities and lives outside of the aid framework (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2004). For example, rather than helping to promote positive changes in social relations, international aid agencies found it easier to replace boats that had been lost instead (Hyndman, 2009). While NGOs provide a number of services, such as education, health care, and economic empowerment, it has been critiqued by Asoka Bandarage (2010) that many still “represent a form of ‘Neo-Orientalism,’ upholding the long-standing hierarchical power dynamics between the Western donors and native subjects” (Bandarage, 2010, p. 656). In Argenti-Pillen’s work, *Masking Terror: How Women Contain Violence in Southern Sri Lanka*, she studies Euro-American methods of dealing with trauma survivors during the war. These findings are equally relevant in the context of the tsunami. Argenti-Pillen argues that the Euro-American methods used by foreign NGOs pose a threat to culture-specific methods local women use to contain violence (Argenti-Pillen, 2003). Not only must foreign NGOs and international aid agencies navigate the political terrain of Sri Lanka sensitively, but also the cultural terrain.

Male dominance in relief and recovery work, as well as in important decision-making, is a central issue in Disaster Risk Management (DRM). A major concern in male dominated decision-making is the likelihood of erroneous gender assumptions. Madhavi Ariyabandu (2005), an expert on gender issues in recovery following the 2004 tsunami, worries that these “assumptions by policy makers and practitioners may not only deny benefits to women, but also worsen the situation for women, in terms of their social and economic position” (Ariyabandu, 2005, p. 7). Systematic exclusion on this level must be addressed in order for disaster risk management to be streamlined effectively and for relief to be administered equitably.

## **Conclusion**

Policy recommendations and discussions cannot be made unless women’s vulnerability and agency are fully understood and recognized in the context of crisis. If policy-makers and project managers view women as being acted upon, this leaves little room in the way of policy prescription. Working with existing agency is an entirely different policy discussion than assuming women lack agency to begin with. Difference in vulnerability is identified among men and women during crisis, however differences in strengths overwhelmingly are not. It is time that the knowledge, past experiences, and capacities of women are taken more seriously in disaster response and crisis management. However, there is still a critical need for more people out in the field, collecting data, and drawing attention to this

issue. Unless urgency is demonstrated in the research agenda and literature, we cannot expect to see changes being made in the political sphere.

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