

Post-war Sri Lanka denies rights of women ex-combatants

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It is estimated that nearly 11 000 former LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) combatants either surrendered or were captured by the Sri Lankan security forces at the end of the civil war in May 2009. Tens of thousands of civilians from the north of Sri Lanka were displaced due to the nearly three decade long war.

According to the Minister for Prisons Reforms and Rehabilitation, Chandrasri Gajadeera, only 700 ex-combatants of 11 000 remain in the rehabilitation centers. Of these, an estimated 3000 were women. A group of 104 women ex-combatants were recently released by the Government of Sri Lanka. These brave women fought equally on the battlefields and won many battles. Families and friends were delighted when these women won battles, but now, they are isolated from society.

In Sri Lanka's post-war period, the process of reintegration for women ex-combatants is a difficult task. This is largely because Tamils, an ethnic minority community of Sri Lanka, are very conservative and traditional. Most family members of these women ex-combatants are reluctant to take their daughters, daughter-in-laws, sisters, sister-in-laws, mothers and mother-in-laws back into the family. The family members say, "It will lead to security problems for the rest of the family, we feel ashamed if they come back." It is also very difficult to find life partners for most of the unmarried women ex-combatants.

Although reintegration and rehabilitation is difficult for men ex-combatants as well, it seems to be a bigger struggle for the women, as described in the following testimonies:

Sutha (32), ex-child soldier and ex-sea tigress, North of Sri Lanka

"I joined the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Tamil Tigers as it is popularly known) in 1995 as a child soldier and became a sea tiger. I fought in many battles against the Government security forces. I lost my left arm in a battle in Paranthan (North of Sri Lanka) in 1997, but I continued to fight. I fought till the last moment and surrendered to the Sri Lankan Government security forces on 17 May 2009 in Vattuvaagal (North of Sri Lanka).

I have been in the Boosa prison for one year and three months. I was released in July 2011 after the rehabilitation.

My relatives and neighbors say that I am having relationships/ affairs with the Government security forces. The relatives use very bad language and scold me in Tamil with words such as 'whore', 'prostitute' and 'sex worker'. I have been abused with these words for the first time in my life. The neighbors often say that I paid a lot of money to the politicians and got released, that I slept with many men including the government security forces. 'You are inauspicious', 'you are a bad omen', 'you bring ill spirits', 'you are a witch', 'you are a bad woman' they say. I am proud to say that I was the only woman who was brave enough to join the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam from my remote village. I have come alive! And people are very jealous.

The IOM (International Organization for Migration) gave me 63,000 rupees worth of materials to put up a small shop to earn an income. But I am unable to do so because my relatives and society treat me very badly and kill my character daily. People around me talk badly and treat me like an alien. This is yet another tragedy in my life.

I tried to go to the Middle East as a house maid. Since I'm disabled however, the job agent said he cannot find a job for me in the Middle East.

My parents are elderly and sick. I don't want to be a burden for them. I want to commit suicide, because I cannot listen to these bad words and talks anymore. I told my younger sister to sell the materials given by the IOM and make use of the money for my funeral!

Kavi (29), ex-child soldier, Pottu Ammaan Mines Unit, North of Sri Lanka

"I have joined the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 1995 as a child soldier and later served with the Puttu Amman Mines Unit. I surrendered on 17 May 2009. I was taken to Boosa prison and released on 22 January 2012.

My father was killed in a shell attack on 2 January 2009 in Murasumottai (North of Sri Lanka). My elder brother was a sea tiger and was killed in 2003 in a sea battle between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Navy. I am not educated; I am jobless. I'm hurt and sad when I hear others passing bad remarks such as "Killers!" and "Murderers!" I am unable to get married, because I need money to give as dowry to the bridegroom. Nobody gives me work, because I am an ex woman combatant".

Abi (25), North of Sri Lanka

“I was working as a preschool teacher in the Vanni district (North of Sri Lanka). I was forcefully recruited by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 2008. I was trained in firearms. I got injured, and was transferred to Mannar hospital by the Government security forces in 2009.

After the head injury, I am unable to move my left hand and leg. The neighbours treat me badly, as do the relatives. They often ask me, “Why are you still alive?” I want to leave from this place and live with others who are physically challenged!”

Priya (25), North of Sri Lanka

“I had chest pain. So, my mother took me and left me with my maternal Uncle in Vanni to get local treatment for the illness. I was forcefully conscripted by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 2008, while I was studying in Vanni district (North of Sri Lanka). I was trained in firearms for a short period. I was with the medical team of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. I surrendered in May 2009. I was released in January 2010.

I don't want to marry, because nobody wants to marry me, since I have been a combatant. Tamil men think that women ex combatants are too dangerous to get married to, and difficult to handle”. I don't want to get married and get tortured. I am not ready to face yet another tragedy in my life. I like to stay single!”

Uma (22), North of Sri Lanka

“I was forcefully taken by the male combatants of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 2008 from my home. I was trained for a month in handling weapons. I got injured in the head and leg in February 2009. I was transferred to the hospital by the Government security forces.

Neighbours and relatives hurt me with the worst words in Tamil language, such as ‘Bitch’ and ‘Don't come in front of us’. I want to study further and find employment. But, if I begin to go out, the neighbours and relatives will start to call me with so many bad names, therefore, I have decided to confine myself to a corner of the house.”

Leela (49), ex-commander of women tigers, North of Sri Lanka

"I have joined the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 1984 and fought till the last moment. I was a commander for the women tigers. We won many battles. I got injured numerous times, but continued to fight in the jungles as a single woman and a married woman without food and water. I have been a front line fighter for many years. My husband surrendered to the Government security forces, but no news about him yet. I have handed over the women fighters who were with me to the security forces and surrendered myself as well on 18 May 2012, as the decades long war was coming to an end.

I thought several times about whether to live or kill myself. I have decided not to bite the cyanide capsule (which was around my neck) and commit suicide, because there is nobody to take care of my children.

The Tamil people were very proud when we Tamil women broke the traditional barriers and joined a fighting force in the early 1980s. But, sadly, now they are not willing to accept us (women ex combatants) into the same society! I'm sad to see their endless bad behaviour and treatment towards us.

I get up very early to fetch water from the well before dawn. And, I go to the well again only in the night to fetch water and wash, because I don't want to see anybody. I neither go out nor send my children to play out. People don't think twice before they move their tongues with the worst words to hurt us.

I lead a life in a cow's shed now. People asked me 'how much money and gold jewellery did I bring along when I returned from the war zone?' We have fought for the Tamil community as a whole, but we are neither respected, nor is our service recognized."

Women's economic, social and cultural rights

Despite the war being over for several years, most of these women ex-combatants are still traumatized. They are struggling to get back to normalcy. Some of them have young children. The majority of them are married and their husbands are either killed, disappeared, detained or being rehabilitated (if they were combatants). These women ex-combatants were undergoing a yearlong government rehabilitation programme.

These ex-women combatants are dumped and abandoned by society. Social stigma continues to haunt them. The discrimination against these women continues endlessly in many forms. While the Tamil community took pride and praise in these women decades ago, it now refuses to provide a helping hand to them in their hour of need. They still fear for their lives: they are verbally and emotionally stamped upon, leading them to fear that the 'Tamil Tiger' label will be stuck with them forever. They face a tough time returning to civilian life, with fewer prospects for education, employment and marriage due to the prevailing social stigma. They suffer silently. They are dismayed and demoralized.

These women were frontline fighters for nearly 30 years. Many of them stopped their schooling and joined the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), trained to fight, they fought, were injured, survived, and finally surrendered. The indignity and social stigma faced by these women is unacceptable. They fought for self determination, but now face isolation by society.

In fact, their society should be a source of strength for them. Society has failed to protect the basic rights of these women ex-combatants. Their economic, social and cultural rights are violated in post-war Sri Lanka. Their rights to livelihood, to freedom, to speech, education, and their right to work are all being denied and violated in myriad ways.

Society should remember that every woman is an agent of change. It is the society's duty to make them WINNERS from VICTIMS.

**LTTE or Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam ((Tamil Tigers as it is popularly known) fought for nearly 30 for a separate state (North and East) in Sri Lanka. The war was officially brought to an end on 19 May 2009.*

**Boosa Prison is where the LTTE suspects are detained.*

**Names have been changed to protect identities.*