

# Gendered Genocide and Resistance: Sri Lanka's War Against the Tamil Nation

*Tasha Manoranjan, LL.M.*

*Director, People for Equality and Relief in Lanka (PEARL)*

*Laxana Paskaran, B.Sc.*

*Community organizer, Writer and Artist, Toronto, Canada*

## Abstract

This paper explores the gendered impact of Sri Lanka's conflict, and offers vignettes of women's motivations for joining resistance movements against Sri Lanka's genocide, including the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), ongoing protests led by mothers of the disappeared and women-led protests against the military's occupation of their land. We explore the vast differences between Tamil women's lives with the LTTE, before its defeat in 2009, compared to women's lives today, under the thumb of their victor's military occupation. We use an anti-colonial, feminist lens to challenge western notions, understandings, and narrations of Tamil women's resistance and agency. We analyze Sri Lanka's attacks on Tamil women within the framework of genocide, concluding that Sri Lanka's war against Tamils is both genocidal and gendered.

**Keywords:** Gender, Genocide, Tamil, Women, Protest, Militarization

## Introduction

Tamil women have suffered disproportionately throughout Sri Lanka's decades-long ethnic conflict. They have faced both the structural collapse of communities as well as the erosion of societal norms. In response, an increasing number of women joined the LTTE starting in the 1980s and throughout the years prior to 2009, and became an integral part of the armed resistance against the government. After the defeat of the LTTE in 2009, Tamil women have been spearheading non-violent resistance movements, including protests against land occupation and protests for answers about the disappeared.

As a result of prolonged exposure to armed conflict, traditional Tamil gender relations shifted dramatically. Within Tamil society, women were historically valued as the bearers of culture, responsible primarily for maintaining the home. Due to the fact that women's domains did not typically extend beyond their households, they were generally excluded from the political process. Society rigorously maintained the image of women as sacred bearers of family and community, utilizing females as symbolic markers to measure purity and respect. This reductive image of women rendered the violent experiences Tamil women faced during the war traumatic not only for them as individuals, but for the entire Tamil society as well. Indeed, that was the underlying intent behind the Sri Lankan security forces' attacks on Tamil women: by sexually assaulting a Tamil woman, they were aiming to assault her entire community.

Since the genocidal apex in 2009, the Tamil community in the North-East has existed in a state of negative peace, in heavily-militarized regions subject to state surveillance, intimidation and assault. Despite this, women remain at the forefront of challenging the

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## Citation

Manoranjan, T. and L. Paskaran. 2018. Gendered Genocide and Resistance: Sri Lanka's War Against the Tamil Nation. Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Tamil Nationhood and Genocide. May 5-6, Ottawa, ON. 2:81-90.

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state occupation and demanding accountability for the tens of thousands massacred in 2009. This demonstrates the remarkable resilience and resistance of Tamil women.

### **Women's Motivations for Joining the LTTE**

In the early 2000s, Tamil women joined the LTTE in greater numbers than their male peers. Though female cadres had different personal reasons for enlisting, many joined after experiencing some form of injustice at the hands of the Sri Lankan Army. Most women came from the heavily militarized north. The permanent insecurity of this environment inculcated a desire for freedom and statehood, which included the motivation to take up arms. One LTTE fighter, Senthulasi, described coming of age in Jaffna: her cousin was raped and killed by the Army on her way home. Senthulasi said she ran away from home at the age of 15 to join the LTTE and fight against the helplessness she felt daily. She wanted the world to know that girls who should be carrying pencils and books were instead carrying guns, keeping watch over the borders of Tamil Eelam instead of studying in school.

Although most women initially joined the LTTE to find respite from the Sri Lankan state's suffocating physical insecurity, Tamil women's involvement in the armed movement had unintended, yet profound, cultural and social consequences. Local psychologists noted that for Tamil women, "joining the militants [was a] liberating act, promising them more freedom and power.... Tamil society had always suppressed women into a subservient position... it was the war that has had a liberating role."<sup>1</sup> Many female cadres expressed a desire to fight for the liberation of both their ethnicity and also their subservient position in Tamil society.

When women first began to join the LTTE in the early stages of the war, they primarily worked in service and support roles as caregivers for the wounded, but later took on positions as frontline soldiers and in leadership roles. This initially met with opposition from within the conservative Tamil community. Many of the earlier female cadres reported that male Tigers "wanted them to flee with the civilians."<sup>2</sup> Women had to demonstrate their strength and competence to earn the respect of male LTTE cadres; one cadre said women were "challenged to lift bigger bombs"<sup>3</sup> to prove themselves. One can also attribute the acceptance of women's participation in the war to the government's

indiscriminate bombings of civilian homes and schools: "a clear sexual division of labor in war... usually disappears when there is no clear differentiation between the 'battle front' and the 'home front' or 'rear'."<sup>4</sup> Women were forced to protect not only their own physical integrity, but also that of their families. Female cadres eventually prided themselves on performing all tasks done by their male counterparts. The LTTE even established male and female artillery divisions, in the face of skepticism that women could not manage an artillery team due to the weight of heavy weaponry. Another female cadre, Isaimozhi, remarked with pride that they surpassed male cadres in certain areas of fighting, such as sharpshooting<sup>5</sup>.

The LTTE explicitly committed itself to gender equality and women's empowerment. The LTTE expanded the agency of both female cadres and civilian women within its territory by abolishing the dowry system and promoting girls' education. Vanni had billboards prominently displayed along the A9 road, denouncing the dowry system and encouraging families to value children of both genders equally. Under the LTTE, female civilians and cadres confidently drove motorcycles in saris and helmets – unheard of in previous decades.

As Tamil women advanced to new roles in society, they strove to realize their political aspirations. Female cadres said that Sri Lankan soldiers fought only for a paycheck, whereas the LTTE fought for the freedom of their people and land. Isaimozhi said she aimed to kill on the battlefield, but simultaneously regretted that violence was the only way to actualize Eelam<sup>6</sup>. Isaimozhi cited the decades of police brutality, discrimination, and repression of Tamil rights, and concluded that war was the only path to freedom<sup>7</sup>. Isaimozhi said, "Tamils have been living as slaves for the Sinhalese for decades. We can't live like that anymore. We have to all achieve freedom or we have to all die trying."<sup>8</sup>

Sexual assault has been a perennial feature of Sri Lanka's conflict, and is traditionally considered a fate worse than death in the Tamil community. One female LTTE cadre, Vengai, described the strict policy of never leaving a fallen cadre's body behind<sup>9</sup>. She remarked, "It is worth risking my life to save the lifeless body of another female cadre.... It would be easier to accept my own death, than the mutilation of their bodies and spirits."<sup>10</sup> Stories concerning the rape and mutilation of women are well-known among

Tamils; Krishanthi Kumaraswami's death is particularly infamous. Kumaraswami was an eighteen year old Tamil student who was arrested while passing through a Sri Lankan Army checkpoint in 1996. Her mother, younger brother, and a neighbor went to the checkpoint that afternoon to find her, refusing to leave until she returned safely with them. The soldiers killed all three of them. An hour later, they gang raped Krishanthi and buried her body. Reflecting on the significance of this crime within the Tamil community, a Tamil schoolteacher Padmini Ganesan, said, "Every Tamil remembers the Krishanthi case.... For us, the checkpoints are slow-motion: the trauma and the fear that we go through."<sup>11</sup>

However, these stories do more than reflect on the vulnerable position of women in conflict. For many Tamils, the high rates of sexual assault against Tamil women in the war represented an attack on the integrity of their community.

#### **Tamil Women After 2009**

Tamil women have been uniquely affected and indeed targeted throughout Sri Lanka's war. Post-2009, Tamil women have been targeted particularly because of the active role they played during the armed struggle. Women who were in the LTTE, or are perceived as being supportive of the LTTE – as all Vanni Tamils are perceived – are punished as a collective by triumphant Sri Lankan forces.

A report released in March 2014 by the International Truth and Justice Project found: "Abduction, arbitrary detention, torture, rape and sexual violence have increased in the post-war period . . . These widespread and systematic violations by the Sri Lankan security forces occur in a manner that indicates a coordinated, systematic plan approved by the highest levels of government."<sup>12</sup> This reflects the fact that sexual violence was not due to "a few bad apples" in the Sri Lankan security forces – rather, sexual assault was an approved method of warfare against the Tamil people.

In testimonies revealing the extent of sexual assault committed after 2009, survivors reported being raped by uniformed male officers from the Sri Lankan military. One woman was told, "you Tamil, you slave, if we make you pregnant we will make you abort . . . you are Tamil we will rape you like this, this is how you will be treated, even after an abortion you will be raped again."<sup>13</sup>

In August 2013, reports from local human rights groups documented hundreds of Tamil women in

northern Sri Lanka being forced to accept surgical implantation of long-term birth control.<sup>14</sup> These reports add to previous reports of forced sterilization of Tamil women both during and after the war. In May 2007, a confidential cable from the United States Embassy in Colombo discussed "an EPDP medical doctor named Dr. Sinnathambi, who performed forced abortions, often under the guise of a regular check-up, on Tamil women suspected of being aligned with the LTTE."<sup>15</sup>

A Health Department report from the Northern Province in 2012 found a 30-times higher rate of birth control implants of Tamil women in Mullaitivu, compared to the much more densely-populated Jaffna.<sup>16</sup> In August 2013, government health workers forced mothers to accept surgically-implanted birth control in three villages, Veravil, Keranchi, and Valaipaddu, in Kilinochchi.<sup>17</sup> When some women objected, the nurses said that if they did not agree to the contraceptive, they could be denied treatment at the hospital in the future.<sup>18</sup>

According to the Home for Human Rights, more than 80 percent of Tamil women in central Sri Lanka were offered a lump sum payment of usually 500 rupees in return for their ability to reproduce.<sup>19</sup> After receiving this payment, women underwent surgical sterilization. Though seemingly small, the sum is large for these predominately plantation workers. The population of this Tamil group has dropped annually since 1996 by five percent, whereas the population of the country overall has grown by 14 percent.<sup>20</sup> Home for Human Rights reported: "This systematic pattern of authority-sanctioned coerced sterilizations may amount to an intentional destruction. . . of the Tamil estate population."<sup>21</sup>

In contrast, police and army officers have been encouraged to have a third child, through payment of 100,000 rupees from the government. The officers taking advantage of this offer are overwhelmingly Sinhalese.<sup>22</sup>

#### **Gendered Genocide**

Article II of the Genocide Convention provides the following definition of genocide:

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;

- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.<sup>23</sup>

Under Article II, the group must intend to commit the specific “acts”—*e.g.*, killing—with the requisite genocidal intent, meaning an “intent to destroy, in whole or in part, . . . [the protected] group, as such.” Sri Lanka is a party to the Genocide Convention.

Cases of coerced birth control and forced sterilization are clear evidence of genocide. The attempts in 2013 to forcefully implant long-term birth control in women in Kilinochchi contravenes Article II, Section (d) of the Genocide Convention. This genocidal act is only the latest in a long history of the Sri Lankan state actively attempting to control and limit Tamil births.

Analysis of Sri Lanka’s genocide under the other sections of Article II of the Genocide Convention fall outside the scope of this paper. However, readers are invited to review American University’s Washington College of Law UNROW Human Rights Impact Litigation Clinic’s brief on this matter, “The Legal Case of the Tamil Genocide,” for a lengthy exposition on this subject.<sup>24</sup>

The Genocide Convention obligation to prevent and punish genocide is not a matter of political choice or calculation, but one of binding international law. Deeply entrenched, institutionalized impunity for Sri Lanka’s past crimes against Tamils has enabled ongoing violations against Tamil women to flourish. Tamils, and especially Tamil women, currently live in an environment absent of both war and peace.

### **Gendered Impact of Militarization**

There are a total 243,000 active members of the Sri Lankan military. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, this number indicates that Sri Lanka has a larger active military than France, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom.<sup>25</sup> There are a total of seven regional commands that constitute the Sri Lankan Army.<sup>26</sup> Five of the seven regional commands are stationed in the Northern and Eastern provinces of the country: Security Forces Headquarters (SFHQ)- Vanni, SFHQ- Kilinochchi and SFHQ- Mullaitivu.<sup>27</sup> There are three divisions, 59, 64, 68, in the SFHQ Mullaitivu with three

brigades in each of these divisions. Based on recent field research conducted by PEARL and the Adayaalam Centre of Policy Research, there is 1 soldier for every 2 Tamils in Mullaitivu: an unconscionably high ratio given that war ostensibly ended 9 years ago.<sup>28</sup>

In Tamil-speaking areas, the Sri Lankan military has increased its economic role, expanded the amount of land it controls, and is essentially establishing itself as a permanent, occupying presence. The extreme level of militarization uniquely affects Tamil women. There are approximately 90,000 female-headed households after the end of the armed conflict. These women are especially vulnerable to sexual violence due to the military’s predatory practices. In 2012, local NGOs focusing on women’s rights reported on the forced conscription of 109 young Tamil women and girls from Vanni into the 99% Sinhalese military, under the pretext of performing clerical work.<sup>29</sup> These women were not allowed to leave or contact their families when informed that they would be performing military duties. There were reports they were subject to regular sexual assault by Sinhala soldiers.<sup>30</sup> In December 2012, thirteen of these women were admitted to Kilinochchi Hospital – many were unconscious. They were denied access to hospital staff, their families, and a local Tamil parliamentarian who inquired after their condition.

However, the resilience of Tamil women must be recognized, particularly within the context of ongoing protests against forced disappearances and the military’s occupation of the Tamil homeland. These protests have sparked conversation regarding Sri Lanka’s lack of commitment to peace while also resisting a narrative that places Tamil women within a specific framework of victimhood.

### **Resistance: Women-Led Protests**

#### **a. Keppapilavu Land Protests**

Keppapilavu, a village in Mullaitivu District, has been under military occupation since the end of armed conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. The families who called Keppapilavu home were displaced to Menik Farm, an Internally Displaced Persons “rehabilitation” camp rife with human rights abuses, after the culmination of the war in May 2009. Menik Farm was closed after sustained international pressure in September 2012, however, families from Keppapilavu continue to be displaced as their village is still under occupation by a Sri Lankan Air Force camp.

Rita Izsak-Ndiaye, UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, recommended the following in her report on Sri Lanka during the 34<sup>th</sup> session of the Human Rights Council:

“As a matter of priority, the Government must continue and step up the release to the civilian populations of the remaining 6,124 acres of the land currently held by the military in the North as well as other lands and coastal areas occupied by the military.<sup>31</sup>” This recommendation came amidst ongoing protests against land acquisitions by the Sri Lankan government in the village of Keppapilavu in the Northern Province. The families of Keppapilavu learned on January 31, 2017 that their land would not be released as previously promised by the Sri Lankan government. On March 1, 2017 land was released to 54 of the 84 families. Protests continue, over a year later, for the release of the remaining land. Tamils in the North-East have expressed the necessity of demilitarization and land returns since 2009, however, the Sri Lankan government has delivered countless unfulfilled promises on both issues. Therefore, frustrated and fueled with distrust, Tamil women spearheaded protests outlining their concerns with the continued militarization of their lands. Mrs. S. Chandraleela, an activist and leader of the Keppapilavu Women’s Development Organization, told journalists with *Tamil Guardian*: “we would rather go live on our own lands with nothing than live on the Model Resettlement Village because at least we know that on our lands there is the potential to make something sustainable and make a livelihood.”<sup>32</sup> It was later reported that as of March 8, 2017 the Sri Lankan Air Forces had recaptured Mrs. S. Chandraleela’s land and after over an entire year of protesting, her home is still occupied by an Army officer.<sup>33</sup>

Sri Lanka’s continued occupation of Tamil land is a political manifestation of settler colonial gendered violence, uniquely targeting and impacting Tamil women. The interconnectivity between capturing of land and women’s bodies has long been a component of the colonial violence perpetrated by the Sri Lankan government. After an entire year of street-side protests the women at the forefront remain committed to protesting until they regain their rightful land. Ms. S. Chandraleela recently stated: “Whether it is here or in other parts where the military is still holding on to our land, the areas are rich in natural resources. From small-scale fishing to coconut plantations to jack

trees, you can make some good money. May be that is why the Army doesn’t want to part with the land.”<sup>34</sup>

As mentioned above, the highly militarized North-East was a reason for the subsequent rise in the direct participation of Tamil women in the LTTE.<sup>35</sup> The same tactics used to maintain power over the Tamil community through sexual violence and assault are symbolized through the placement of military monuments in the North-East of Sri Lanka. The two different generations of women discussed in this paper – those who joined the LTTE and those currently spearheading protests against land grabs and disappearances – reflect the continuity of women’s resistance against military occupation and oppression. The resistance against land grabs must be viewed through a feminist lens, appreciating women’s agency in initiating and maintaining these protests.<sup>36</sup> Patriarchy, racism, inter-communal sexism, the Sinhailisation of Tamil land, and a history of ethnic tension following British colonial rule, are all factors that contribute to the targeting of Tamil women and their resistance to oppression.

#### b. Mothers of the Disappeared

Tamil women have also been at the forefront of protests demanding answers for “disappeared” loved ones. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court defines enforced disappearances as the following:

“the arrest, detention or abduction of persons by, or with the authorization, support or acquiescence of, a State or a political organization, followed by a refusal to acknowledge that deprivation of freedom or to give information on the fate or whereabouts of those persons, with the intention of removing them from the protection of the law for a prolonged period of time.”<sup>37</sup>

The Rome Statute categorizes enforced disappearances as a crime against humanity. Enforced disappearances, popularized through Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s use of “white vans,” have been used by successive regimes of Sri Lanka to eliminate dissident voices and keep the Tamil population subjugated in silence.

Mothers of the disappeared launched continuous roadside protests in early 2017 in Vavuniya, Mullaitivu, Trincomalee, Kilinochchi, and Marunthankerny.<sup>38</sup> These women have courageously withstood harassment, intimidation, poor weather conditions, and extreme stress in order to demand

answers about their loved ones.<sup>39</sup> They are deeply frustrated with the lack of information about their missing relatives.<sup>40</sup> One mother explained that these roadside protests are a result of continued silence after years of “giving evidence to UN, police, human rights groups,” expressing frustration that no one has been able to tell her the whereabouts of her child.<sup>41</sup> Their demands to the government include:

1. releasing a list of all those who surrendered or were detained by the Sri Lankan armed forces during and after the war, particularly during the last phase<sup>42</sup>
2. releasing a list of all secret detention centres, their status and list of detainees<sup>43</sup>
3. releasing a list of all detainees held under the PTA and detainees held in detention centers<sup>44</sup>
4. releasing these lists to representatives from the families of the disappeared,<sup>45</sup>
5. releasing in public all reports by commissions appointed over the years to address the issue of disappearances and the Government’s response to those reports<sup>46</sup>

Mothers protesting are exposed to daily surveillance and intimidation by government and military personnel. Indeed, in August 2017, an anti-disappearances campaigner who was leading the Mullaitivu protest, Mariasuresh Easwary, was assaulted and groped by two men, and told to stop her campaign for answers about the disappeared.<sup>47</sup> In spite of all this, the protests have been ongoing for over a year. Many mothers have battled illnesses and other mothers have passed away due to the stress and mental and physical exhaustion of maintaining these continuous protests. On June 12, 2017 President Sirisena met with protesters in Jaffna and agreed to the following:

1. To release a list of all those who surrendered to or were detained by the military in the final weeks of the war;<sup>48</sup>
2. To release a list of all detainees and the location of any secret detention camps.<sup>49</sup>

Neither list has been released. The mothers marked Tamil New Years on April 14, 2018 with black attire to express their frustration with continued inaction.<sup>50</sup> The mothers have shared poignant stories with journalists and local activists about their loved ones. These stories provide a multilayered depiction of enforced disappearances under the context of militarization and ongoing gendered genocide.

Around day 150 of an ongoing protest outside a Murugan Temple, one mother, Srimathy, spoke to *Tamil Guardian* about her daughter, Abirami. 22 years old at the time of her disappearance, Abirami is described by her mother as an outstanding student, musician, and prospective Jaffna University student. “When we were travelling during the war we got separated,” Srimathy recounted. “There were so many people, so we were separated like that,” she explained. She was told her daughter was seen in Menik Farm after she had crossed the Nandikadal lagoon into government territory. Abirami was last seen in Menik Farm being loaded onto a bus.<sup>51</sup> Her whereabouts remain unknown.

According to the UN Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka, there were a total of approximately 290,000 internally displaced people who were held at Menik Farm and other camps. The Army screened everyone as they entered these camps.<sup>52</sup> The UN Panel of Experts described the screening process: “people were transferred, often by foot, to initial screening sites...at these sites, the SLA called those who had been associated with the LTTE, even for a day, to identify themselves and surrender, and promised vocational training and employment abroad for those who did. Instead, those identified as LTTE were taken to separate camps. A significant number of suspected LTTE were women and children...in particular, the screening process resulted in cases of executions, disappearances, and rape and sexual violence.”<sup>53</sup>

The International Crimes Evidence Project also found that the Sri Lankan security forces targeted young Tamils to torture and forcibly disappear during these screening processes. The ICEP found evidence of sexual violence being committed by state actors, further victimizing Tamil women navigating the camps immediately after surviving the height of the genocide. The UN Panel of Experts found credible allegations of torture at Menik Farm. It reported that the “CID and TID maintained ‘units’ within Menik Farm, and the sounds of beating and screams could be heard from interrogation tents.”<sup>54</sup> Witnesses recounted to ICEP that women were being ‘sexually assaulted and/or raped’ at Menik Farm during their daily activities within the camp, even outside of screening processes.<sup>55</sup>

Each of the mothers’ stories of their missing loved ones provide a nuanced understanding of the ongoing threat of sexual violence on the island,

especially within the context of enforced disappearances of young Tamil women. In addition to protesting disappeared loved ones, Tamil women protesters are also resisting the military occupation of their villages.

### **Tamil Women's Resistance of Military Occupation**

The differences between Tamil and Sinhala narratives surrounding the end of the armed conflict between the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE reflects the dynamics of privilege and power on the island. The Sri Lankan state's celebrations of victory juxtaposed with the Tamil community's collective mourning of thousands lost indicates a polarization of experiences and emotions on the island. There have been several photos published through media outlets that showcase military vehicles looming over Tamil women protesters in Keppapilavu. The position of the Sri Lankan Army vehicles allude to the heavy surveillance and intimidation faced by the families demanding the release of their lands. The presence of the military vehicle reflects the oppressive atmosphere that Tamil women have been forced to navigate on their own land under state control.

The anxieties of the Sri Lankan state are portrayed through its dedication to the hyper-visibility of "victory" through the placement of military monuments and war museums in the North-East of the island. The fear of militant resistance from an increasingly aggravated Tamil minority is tied to this underlying apprehension felt by the Sri Lankan state; the state seeks to remind the Tamil community of its abject subjugation. The placement of monuments also reflects the government's efforts to spread Sri Lankan nationalism throughout the former de-facto state of Tamil Eelam, despite the fact that Sri Lankan nationalism has always been Sinhala nationalism. Sri Lanka's settler colonial agenda is embodied through physical land grabs and subsequently works towards to the eradication of Tamil identity.

The presence of Sri Lankan Army vehicles and technology also exists as a warning against imaginations of a Tamil homeland. Sumathi Ramaswamy's ideas on maps as narratives and their relationship to "the temporal processes of loss and dispossession"<sup>56</sup> are useful when theorizing the threat of erasure proposed by the existence of Sri Lankan military monuments on historically Tamil land. As mentioned before, the LTTE administered a de-facto

state of Tamil Eelam, and the loss of this state in May 2009 led to the "loss of language, literature; of purity, authenticity, sovereignty, and unity; and not least, of territory"<sup>57</sup>. Thus, the hyper-visibility of the military is a constant reminder of that loss endured by the Tamil community. Ramaswamy's ideas around loss further contextualize Tamils' lack of trust in the Sri Lankan government. This distrust also explains the participation of Tamil women in armed resistance: an important parallel to make with the current women-led protests around land occupation and the disappeared. Militarized masculinity showcased through Sri Lanka's strategies of settler colonialism, militarization, and Sinhala nationalism are inherently violent and continue to limit any dialogue around the Tamils' right to self-determination within the island.

The trauma induced by the presence of military occupation is detrimental for several reasons. It acts as a psychological trigger for the atrocity crimes committed by the Sri Lankan security forces, and particularly sexual violence. The constant reminder of the Sri Lankan state's capacity to use sexual violence to control and maintain power over the Tamil community reigns over the occupied North-East. As previously mentioned, the military monuments loom over women protestors as a symbol of constant surveillance, intimidation and the threat of sexual violence. This fear forces many to stay silent. The silence becomes a normalized result of trauma inflicted by Sri Lankan state structures that benefit from the continued marginalization of Tamil people. Resistance, through means of physical protests, showcases the resilience of Tamil women against layers of historical and contemporary state oppression. Further, the shame associated with rape works as a covert tactic of dominance and power. Here, trauma and silence are coupled together to coerce the Tamil community into submission. This further highlights the immense bravery of Tamil women currently leading and participating in protests. A history of sexual violence may not be immediately evident but its legacy is inscribed onto the bodies of the women, and by extension the entire Tamil community. Those who place themselves on the frontline cannot and should not be forgotten.

### **Conclusion**

Sri Lanka's suffocating militarization and ongoing impunity will only breed further violence and instability. Tamil women must play a greater role in the political and economic development of the North-

East, and a just political solution must address their historically disadvantaged situation. The LTTE made strides in this direction when it conscientiously embraced a policy of gender equality, both in its armed movement and in its state-building apparatus. The lives of women in LTTE-controlled areas gradually but markedly improved over time.

These advances have been steadily corroded after the government's genocidal assault in 2009. Where Tamil women once felt safe and secure, they are now vulnerable under the military's gaze and thumb.

As evidence of ongoing atrocities is added to evidence of the 2009 massacres – such as the mass graves found earlier in Mullaitivu<sup>58</sup> – an international mechanism for accountability is needed now more than ever. The UN Security Council should refer Sri Lanka to the International Criminal Court for investigation and prosecutions into war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. Concurrently, countries with universal jurisdiction should invoke these laws to prosecute Sri Lanka's crimes. Sri Lanka has clearly shown itself unwilling and unable to provide justice for the Tamil genocide. Tamil women-led protests, a continuation of a history of resistance, are direct responses to the inaction and obfuscation of the Sri Lankan government towards processes of peace and transitional justice. Tamil women continuously shoulder the responsibility of community leadership and resistance under state occupation and oppression. However, without accountability and a political solution that provides self-determination to Tamils, Sri Lanka is fated for further conflict.

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