

Beyond the Margins of a Failed Insurrection:  
The Experiences of Women in Post-Terror  
Southern Sri Lanka.

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# Beyond the Margins of a Failed Insurrection: The Experiences of Women in Post Terror Southern Sri Lanka<sup>1</sup>

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## **Introduction**

Between 1988 and 1991 southern Sri Lanka experienced the most intense period of political violence and terror in modern memory in the context of the Janata Vimukti Peramuna-lead (JVP) violent insurrection and the equally violent counter insurgency campaign of the state. The violence was unprecedented not simply because of its sheer scale, but also due to its incredible brutality, and relatively sudden appearance in the socio-political landscape. In addition to the hundreds of bodies that littered the countryside, this period also introduced altered meanings of words, such as *beeshanaya* (terror), *wadbakagaraya* (torture chamber), *issuwa* (kidnapped) and *athurudahanwoowo* (the disappeared), into the journalistic as well as popular discourse. Such words, while in themselves not new to the Sinhala language were nevertheless used with substantially altered meanings specifically marked by the experiences of terror. In a different site of violence, this is what Taussig (1987) refers to as a "culture of terror," which has its own vocabulary as well as its own overall structure. The primary aim of the insurgency as well as the counter-insurgency campaign was to physically and psychologically terrorize the population in order to exert total control over that population. As a methodology of governance and control the process of terror in southern Sri Lanka was similar to the processes of terror which emerged in Guatemala, Chile, Argentina and other parts of South and Central America (Davis 1983, Brown 1985).

In terms of sheer numbers, the violence in the south was extensive even though the casualty figures available now are quite incomplete. For instance, conservative estimates suggest that at least 40,000 people were killed during the period of terror in the south and thousands of others have simply disappeared. According to the UN Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances, between 1988 and 1990 in the Southern and Central Provinces alone, 3, 255 cases of disappearances were reported. In addition to these cases the same UN agency had been informed of 7000 additional cases from the same two provinces for the same period of time that it had not yet processed at the time of the Group's visit to Sri Lanka (Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances 1992a: 6, 20). In a subsequent report it further refers to an additional 5,000 cases that were being processed in late 1992 (Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances 1992b: 16). The figures on

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<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the University of Edinburgh, 31st October 1997. Much of the information presented here in outline will be presented in detail in a forthcoming publication by the Women's Education and Research Centre, Colombo. Any comments can be directed to Sasanka Perera, Department of Sociology, University of Colombo, Colombo 3, Sri Lanka or ICES, 2 Kynsey Terrace, Colombo 8, Sri Lanka. Fax: 698048. E mail: ices\_cmb@sri.lanka.net

deaths and disappearances vary somewhat from the same source at different times. Similarly there are differences in numbers that come from different sources. Such disparities are only to be expected in a catastrophic situation such as this. What is consistent however is that all reports refer to a large-scale humanitarian disaster in southern Sri Lanka between 1987 and 1991. On the other hand, none of these numbers give any indication to the less visible social consequences of terror such as consequences of torture, dealing with trauma, issues of widowhood and concerns over re-marriage and so on.

By mid 1991 the physical wave of violence had stopped as suddenly as it had started even though most of the terror generating apparatus—especially of the state—was still intact. However, it would be problematic to suggest—as some bureaucrats and politicians often do—that the actual experience of terror had ceased. For survivors of direct violence and the kith and kin of the disappeared and the dismembered an undying sense of terror and trauma would continue, perhaps for generations. Clearly, memories of the murdered and the disappeared cannot be easily erased from the individual and collective conscience of the people.

In this brief paper I will present some information relating to the consequences of political violence referred to above as experienced by a number of women. Much of that information come from the Sinhala dominated southern Sri Lankan Districts of Monaragala in the Uva Province and Hambantota in the Southern Province where I conducted fieldwork in the latter part of 1995 and the early part of 1996. The two districts were among the most severely affected by the violence of the JVP and the state. My main source of information has been the narratives of women who had been personally touched by political violence. During 1995 and 1996 my research assistants and myself conducted 150 extended interviews in the 2 districts. In all cases, the women who talked to us had lost their husbands, male partners or other male kin in the violence through deaths or disappearances. Some of them also lived with victims and survivors of torture and other victims of trauma linked to that violence. At this stage, even though I have a large volume of ethnographic information, much of that still remain to be analysed and thought about, and hence what you will hear may have some problems in coherence. But then, the entire experience of political violence in the south was not exactly coherent for many of those who suffered the most, let alone to anthropologists like myself who are both socially and experientially distant from these sites of violence despite our regular or irregular academic intrusions into other people's lives, minds and pain.

At this point in time, there is an important methodological problem with regards to contemporary anthropological and sociological knowledge production on and in Sri Lanka that also needs to be briefly clarified. It is clear that issues of gender in general, and women's status and role in society in particular, have entered the agenda of social science research today at an international level. Even so, much of contemporary anthropological and sociological investigations into Sri Lankan society and culture are specifically marked by their continued disinterest in these issues as a primary focus of investigation. Except in a few exceptional cases, due to a number of reasons, such issues usually end up as footnotes or at best, merely as minor sections in selected ethnographies or papers. As an example of how this kind of

exclusion may happen, let me, for a moment refer to the following observations by Moore in a recent essay:

“The gross brutality of the methods of murder, torture and mutilation and display of corpses employed by both the JVP and their opponents is something that requires mention but no elaboration . . . The story of the creation of anti-JVP ‘vigilantes’ is of more analytic interest” (Moore 1993).

In his rather hegemonic model Moore considers that the story of the creation of anti JVP vigilantes is of more analytic interest and that the details of the violence perpetrated by both the JVP and the state need no elaboration. I would suggest that in the process of such exclusions, many other aspects of the socio-political history of that violence also tend to disappear beyond the margins of social science research. One could surely accept that we do not need to enthrall ourselves in that violence referred to as the ‘eroticism of violence’ by Timerman (1981: 14). We also do not need to construct what Stirrat calls a ‘pornography of violence’ (1996) out of such investigations nor to make such dubious claims as that of Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano who claimed that “the first time in violence is like the first time in love” (quoted in Timerman 1981: 19).

But surely, the nature of that violence has much to do with its consequences, particularly with regards to survivors, many of whom are women and children, which is particularly the case in the Sri Lankan context. For instance, many of them saw the brutal murder of their husbands or fathers and other male kin. Moreover, they had to endure the repression of the normal means of mourning as per demands made by the JVP or the agents of the state. Since then they have lived with those memories as well as their consequences. So the disregarding of the nature of violence would also mean we would be disregarding and silencing an entire spectrum of experiences related to that violence. Thus I would suggest that the over-emphasis on vigilantes or death squads and the JVP would overshadow the experiences of many others in the realm of terror, particularly women and children. Unfortunately however, for many academics experiences of women as well as children are perhaps less exciting, and less violent, and less graphic to deserve their academic attention.

In such a context marked by problematic exclusions it is hardly surprising that the status of women during as well as consequent to terror in southern Sri Lanka has hardly attracted any serious scholarly attention. As far as I know only one serious paper by Dutch anthropologist Therese Onderdenwijngaard titled “Hema’s Story: A Narrative Without Plot” attempts to make some sense out of women’s experiences with violence. Referring to women’s stories from the period of terror she correctly makes the following observation:

“testimonies, however, generally disappear in the margins of the political history of the insurrection. They make up an account which appears to be fortuitously rather than inherently linked to this history” (Onderdenwijngaard 1995: 187).

In this context, most investigations into Sri Lankan politics and culture, and certainly politics of violence have disregarded experiences of women as well as other socially marginalised groups in preference to more dominant groups. Moreover, the few testimonies recorded in the handful of cases linked to the violence of the late 1980s are likely to disappear in the manner suggested by

Onderdenwijngaard. A similar fate is also likely to befall the thousands of testimonies recorded by the three regional commissions that were appointed to investigate the disappearances of the late 1980s.

On the other hand, the activist interventions of non-government organisations (NGOs) or other concerned institutions or individuals lack any sustained and serious scholarly rigor in investigation as well as analysis. In most cases they amount to compiling statistics and basic documentation. That is not to say such endeavours do not have their place in the production of discourse. But a distinction needs to be drawn between basic documentation, and ethnographically based analysis and understanding of social phenomena such as political violence or consequences of it. Thus it is important to note that with regard to the consequences of violence in the south there is a very specific and clearly problematic lack of knowledge in academia.

On the other hand much of what happened during the terror in the late 1980s, and its consequences have to be understood in the context of disruption of community. Here we also have to remember that much of the violence in the south was located in the rural sector. One of the fundamental problems that any society in a post terror situation may have to face would be the possibility of the rupture or disruption of the sense of community. In this context I have used the concept of “community” quite broadly in the Weberian sense as a sense of belonging together (Weber 1978). This formulation also takes into account the existence of a combination of effective and cognitive elements as well as a feeling of solidarity and perceptions of shared identity. Thus notions of community in this sense was seen in varying degrees in many of the villages in both Monaragala and Hambantota, and elsewhere particularly in what is known as *purana* villages or old villages. The sense of community in re-settlement areas was not as widely entrenched given their relatively recent origins and the lack of extensive kin networks. In such places, the sense of community was to a certain extent in a state of flux, which still needed to be more clearly articulated at the level of community ideology. However, by using this conceptual outline of community, I do not mean to romanticise the Sinhala village as a harmonious unit of social relationships and social action where conflict was low or non-existent in which context notions of community were taken for granted. That kind of ideal village is the creation of paternalistic anthropologists and the naive yearnings of urban Sinhala elites. Many of them wanted to construct an ideal village in the sense that had been re-invented and re-constructed in the rhetoric of post 20th century Sinhala nationalism.

Village communities always had their cleavages based on caste, access to means of production and property, ruptures of kin relationships due to numerous reasons and politics. In fact the village was not the harmonious place that many urban intellectuals and foreign anthropologists strove to present it as. But there was a certain sense of community which comes out in people’s ideological statements even in the post terror context when much of that sense of community has in fact been dismantled. But the narratives of their experience during and after the period of terror indicate a situation where whatever sense of community that was, has been ruptured and disrupted to a considerable extent.

One of the immediate casualties of extensive violence is the dismantling of everyday routine life. Such a situation, combined with fear and constant suspicion and anxiety could lead to a state of affairs where sense of community may be seriously undermined. Desjarlais and others observe that “the constant threat of violence ruptures the routines of everyday life; that which was commonsensical loses relevance when violence becomes an element of the everyday” (Desjarlais et al. 1995: 121). They further argue that in such situations “violence is not accepted as part of everyday life but rather produces an uncanny and unsettling dis-ease” (Desjarlais et al. 1995: 121).

It is under these kinds of conditions of entrenched violence and fear that the sense of community in many areas of Sri Lanka was seriously undermined. But as I noted earlier, this outcome cannot, and should not be over-stated because many communities have a remarkable resilience to re-order their lives even consequent to major catastrophes. But the lack of support, particularly during the period of terror, was a theme that constantly emerged from many of the narratives of women in Monaragala and Hambantota. Consider the following observation by a woman in Monaragala:

“No one helped us. When my husband disappeared, other women’s husbands were also taken that same day. They also did not come back. People came to funerals, and weddings and offered a little bit of help to organize such events. My husband’s relatives do not even come home to see my children. --- My parents cannot afford to help us financially. The only ones who help us whenever possible are the people who have suffered like me.”

This woman’s observation places many of the issues I want to outline regarding the dismantling of community. For instance, in addition to the extensive perpetration of both JVP and state terror, the widespread poverty in these areas also played a role in people’s inability to help others. On the other hand, kin networks tended to rupture often consequent to the murder or disappearance of men who were married. Much of this unhinging occurred due to the patriarchal cultural bias in the Sinhala kinship system in particular and Sinhala society in general. The man was the main link in those networks, and after his removal, on many occasions his relatives became distant or even hostile to the surviving wife and her children.

Another reason for the dismantling of community is located in the nature of the cleavages which already existed in many villages and the manner in which they were utilised by various factions in the terror-generating apparatus. Despite the romanticised notions of the village as a harmonious closely-knit place, often it was characterised by petty rivalries and jealousies, which sometimes led to serious enmities, litigation and even murder. But these conditions, as far as community was concerned, were not disruptive in the long run. They were part of village life. But the period of terror assured that different agents used such cleavages and their various manifestations for different purposes. For instance, those linked to the JVP informed local party operatives that some of their neighbours were providing the military or police with information regarding JVP movements. Others similarly informed the police or other state agencies of terror that certain people were JVP activists. Often such information proved to be disastrous to those who were informed against. Petty rivalries and jealousies were the main reasons for these kinds of betrayals, which assured that the rifts, and cleavages in many villages were

institutionalised and were to continue. In other words, those rifts were more painfully marked in people's memories. In this sense, violence in villages in the period of terror more often than not originated from within the village or in its vicinity—with the participation of local people. This collapse of trust may be graphically illustrated by evoking the figure of *goni billo* during the period of terror. The *goni billo* were masked men who assisted the army to identify people who were arrested to be later interrogated, tortured, and murdered. They became "the disappeared." For local communities, the unestablished identity of the *goni billo*—were they friends, relatives or neighbours—made everyday relations fraught with apprehension and distrust (Perera 1995b).

A number of main issues have emerged as dominant themes from the narratives of women in Monaragala and Hambantota. Moreover, similar themes have emerged in less extensive interviews from other parts of the country such the Central, North Central and North Western provinces. These include concerns over sexual harassment and re-marriage, consequences of trauma and lack of access to medical or mental health services, disruption of community and the disruption of inter and intra-family relationships, frustrations of expectations of justice and so on. In what follows, I would briefly focus on four of these issues, namely, the disruption of inter and intra-family relationships, concerns about rape and sexual harassment, concerns over re-marriage and the consequences of dealing with children who have experienced trauma.

### *Disruption of Inter and Intra-Family Relationships Consequent to Violence*

The violence has clearly impacted upon the manner in which personal relationships were formed and continued within and between families and extended kin networks. The violence has impacted upon family relationships both at the societal and psychological levels. As far as the social context was concerned, some of these issues have to be placed in the context of the highly patriarchal bias in the social organisation of Sinhala society and its logical cultural consequences. As interviews with many women clearly indicate, the relationships with their husband's relatives (including his mother and father) have deteriorated on many instances after the death or disappearance of the husband. For instance, of the 50 women from the Hambantota District, whose interviews were used for this analysis, only 10 said that their contacts with their husbands' families continue cordially and regularly even after their deaths or disappearances. As opposed to this, 39 clearly stated that they receive no help from their husbands' families and that their relationships with them have, in practical terms come to an end or was minimal. Of the 39 women whose relationships with the husbands' families had deteriorated, about half also said that they were also a source of problems as well, particularly with reference to property matters. A similar scenario also emerged from the interviews conducted in Monaragala.

This sudden deterioration or cessation of relationships with husbands' kin networks was particularly severe in situations where the couple had married against the wishes of their parents or had eloped without family consent. In numerous such situations it was quite common to see the husband's parents and relatives perceive the death or the disappearance of their kinsman as the result of bad luck brought upon by the unwelcome woman he had married against their wishes. Moreover, if the widowed women

had no children, particularly sons who would be perceived by their paternal relatives as part of their kindred, the situation could be even more difficult.

Under these kinds of circumstances the survivors are victimised by political violence as well as consequent societal insensitivity. What this means in real terms is that one section of the extended family that ideally should have been available as a network of support in a time of crisis has ceased to exist. In fact on many occasions, the cessation of interaction had been sudden, leaving the bereaved family in serious financial, emotional and social crisis. On one occasion, in a village near Wellawaya in Monaragala District, the husband of a woman we interviewed had been killed by the JVP in 1989. According to the woman, soon after the funeral rites (seven days after the death) for her husband had been completed, the husband's family (his father, mother and brothers) took over their grocery store, removed all the goods to their own home, and denied the woman or her children any access to the property. Rather than being the exception, such problems over property with the husband's family seem to occur often. Similarly, there have been many attempts by such family members to seize land as well as houses occupied by affected families, particularly in situations where deeds to the properties concerned were having legal problems.

Such cases are also frequently reported from Hambantota. R.D. Dayawati is a 32-year-old mother of three children, aged nine to fifteen. She and her family live in a small village several kilometres towards Kataragama off the main Kataragama - Hambantota highway. Her husband disappeared in February 1991 while he was on his way to visit two of his children who had been hospitalised. According to Dayawati's eldest daughter Rasika who is fifteen years, her father was abducted by the police because of rumors spread by some villagers that he was active in JVP politics. According to Rasika not only does the family not receive any help from her father's family, but one of her father's brothers was now trying to acquire the plot of land where they were living and currently cultivating. A similar story is narrated by 33 year old Kalyani whose husband was abducted by the army in February 1989 for alleged JVP involvement. According to Kalyani, jealous neighbours spread the rumours of his involvement with JVP politics. Until his death, her husband cultivated a two and half acre plot of paddy land, which belonged to her husband's father. But soon after his death, the husband's family, including his father, had taken over the land insisting that they needed to cultivate it again. Kalyani could not do much since she had no legal right to the land. Currently, she has constructed a small hut in a plot of land where she has settled illegally with her two daughters aged nine and thirteen.

The story of Amarawati from Monaragala also clearly places in context the nature of such inter family conflicts. On the day the inquest into the murder of her husband Ratne was being held, his mother screamed to the investigating police officers that Amarawati had got her lovers to kill her son. The police on the other hand who considered Ratne a hardened criminal and JVP activist were not particularly sympathetic to the complaints. But they nevertheless asked Ratne's mother to furnish any proof she may have had to substantiate her allegation. She was unable to do so. But that public allegation marked the split between Amarawati's nuclear family and the kin of her husband, particularly

members of his immediate family, including his mother, his brothers and their wives and children.

According to Amarawati's narrative the reason for the split was their urge to seize their property:

“After I offered alms to monks in memory of my husband seven days after his death, I decided to go and live for a while with my parents with my children. The land we had was the land given to my husband as the youngest in his family. When I was with my parents I heard that my husband’s relatives had broken the padlock in my house and had occupied it because they wanted to take over our land. My children often say that when they grow up they would beat them up get their land back . . . We did not have a license for that land . . . I had planted so many coconut trees and teak trees in that land . . . My husband’s relatives do not help us in any way . . . They do not even talk to us on their own . . . Once I asked my youngest son to go and talk to my husband’s elder brother and to pluck a coconut from our land, just to see what they would do. When he plucked the coconut, the elder brother’s son had scolded my son saying ‘it is true that you lived in this land. But it does not belong to you. Do not come back again.’ So he came back crying.”

Currently what used to be Amarawati's land has been divided between the two brothers of her husband. She lives in a small hut in a jungle plot that used to be a *chena* once cultivated by her younger brother. In these kinds of situations very few had actually fought back in any manner. One problem is the almost total lack of free or affordable legal aid. Due to the conditions of poverty prevalent in these areas, many people do not have the financial ability to engage in costly and time consuming litigation. The enormous time one has to spend on such litigation is another factor that discourages many people from opting for legal solutions. People who need to literally work all the time, merely to survive, cannot spend much time in courtrooms. As Amarawati observed in her narrative “we do not have the money to go to courts.” Many other people in the same condition share her plight.

The other problem is that much of the properties thus affected did not have clear titles, licenses or any other kind of official documentation indicating ownership. This was the case in many parts of Monaragala and Hambantota where people had settled in state land without state permission. Under those conditions one’s ability to hold on to such land or houses built on disputed land depended on the attitudes of regional bureaucrats, one’s ability influence them and also one’s survival capabilities. In yet other cases the husband's family had legal control over the property which they were unable to exert while the man was alive. In a sense what happened to Amarawati can also be placed within this context. While the land had no clear titles, convention held that it belonged to the husband’s family. Even though Amarawati had asked her husband many times to get legal rights for their land, he is supposed to have said, “no one will dare take this land from us even when I am dead.” But it took less than ten days for his kin to seize the land from his wife and her children. This kind of action has become a constantly emerging pattern in the post violence context.

In this context, a great majority of women we have encountered had to seek help from their own parents and other close kin. But even such networks were not as effective as one would have expected mostly as a result of the almost endemic poverty in the most seriously affected areas such as Hambantota and Monaragala. As a result many of the families concerned were unable to help their daughters whose husbands had either been killed or disappeared in any real sense in the most difficult of circumstances.

Problems have also cropped up within families. Many of these problems are linked to notions of justice and revenge on the part of children, particularly sons, and their mothers' efforts to pacify them. In a number of cases, the sons in the family who were very small at the time of their fathers' murder or abduction have grown up with a certain amount of hatred and also in a context where justice in the conventional legal sense does not appear to be forthcoming. There are also many cases where such children have been taunted in schools by both teachers and classmates as being fatherless, the son of a murdered JVP activist and so on. For many of them revenge seem to have become a primary pre-occupation which has also disrupted the family's efforts of re-building their lives by forcibly placing such efforts back in to a painful past. Some of these children have also joined the ranks of the newly re-emerging JVP in their areas.

### *Concerns about Rape and Sexual Harassment*

Concerns over rape and sexual harassment as well as issues of domestic violence against women in general have to be understood on the one hand in the context of the patriarchal cultural bias of Sinhala society. On the other hand, issues of violence of this nature are linked to notions of power men have been vested with in Sinhala society and the cultural norms which governs such conventions. However, large-scale situations of rape by security forces and their proxy agents or the JVP did not take place in southern Sri Lanka as in the northeast. Nevertheless, there have been a few reports of women who were beaten, raped and made to disappear while in custody such as the case of A.D. Swarnalatha and C.G.Muthuhetti who were arrested together in the southern town of Galle on 8 December 1988. Two other women who were subsequently released have stated that Swarnalatha and Muthuhetti had informed them that they had been beaten and raped (Amnesty International 1990: 33). On some occasions male detainees have said that they were forced by their captors to sexually abuse female detainees (Amnesty International 1990: 39). Another important possibility that should not be disregarded is the possibility of rapes during this period being under-reported. In patriarchal Sinhala society, a raped woman would secondarily be ostracised by society as well. Such an outcome would discourage many such women from reporting incidents of rape by security personnel or JVP.

In the south, concerns regarding sexual harassment emanate directly as a result of disappearances of men, particularly husbands of women who were married at the time of their disappearances. Many of the widows I have met in the south are in the age group between 21 and 40. As on going research clearly indicates, for many of the young widows in the interior villages the possibility of rape and other kinds of sexual violence is a constant worry that they have to deal with on a regular basis. In fact, directly resulting from the status of widowed women as single women, a growing tendency of sexual harassment has emerged in many parts of the country. Such harassment faced by these women emanate both from ordinary villagers as well as officials at the village and regional levels. Many men perceive these women as "easy prey." As one woman observed in Monaragala in the Uwa Province:

“Eternally at night men bang on the door demanding that I open it. There is no point in talking about those things. Then I go to my parents’ place because of fear. I would die of shivering with fear. We cant discuss these things. There is no end to these men’s perversion .”

The men she talks about here are not strangers. They are her neighbors, and in some cases her friends’ husbands and relatives. Some women I have met in both Anuradhapura and Kurunegala areas believe that some of the men who harass them were also responsible for their husbands’ and other male kin’s disappearances. Amarawati, a woman living in Moanaragala lost her abusive husband in the 1980s. Until about a year after her husband’s loss she experienced no such problems. Then, since about 1993 she has experienced harassment from a particularly persistent man whose family she knows well. In fact, when she was interviewed the man’s younger brother was also in the house. Observes Amarawati:

“Since about three years there are problems from an elder brother of this malli (younger brother). A lot of problems. He is about 26 years old. I do not want to marry because I have three children. He may marry me. But I have also a young daughter. he is also a young man. Who knows what will happen later? He says that he will never allow me to marry anyone else, or bring in a wife himself, but would continue to bother me until the day he dies. I am afraid to go to the police. He has said that he will kill me if I go to the police. So there is no one to talk about this. I have to put up with the pain all by myself . . . These mallila (younger brothers) are also afraid of him, to tell him anything. I complained to his mother. She told me to make sure of my own intentions. Then she told me to cut him to peaces. Not that I can’t do that. But I have to think about my children. Now she and her family also do not talk to me. He has already killed a man. People say that I have already married him. I get insulted by them also. But I haven’t even received five cents worth of help from him. . . My children tell me that I should not do anything, and that they would kill him when they grow up. I can live well. There are people who would like to marry me who will treat me and my children well. But this fellow will not allow that to happen. He says that if I marry he will kill both me and the man I marry. . . He is not already married. But he has affairs with women everywhere. He has put some women in trouble. As far as we know he has had affairs with about 28 women.”

For this man, who is unemployed and has no real means of supporting a family, Amarawati is perhaps yet another feather in his cap. If she succumbs to his intimidations and eventually marries him, she would be victimised yet again. In her own words, such a marriage would be far more painful than the previous one. Moreover, as long as this man demands that Amarawati should not marry or see any other man other than himself, her prospects of re-marriage would also diminish. In her case, there are no legal impediments to another marriage since the death of her husband has been clearly established and a death certificate had been issued within a couple of weeks since his murder. However in the case of Amarawati, sexual harassment comes only from this man, and as a result of his reputation as a violent man and a murderer, other men in the village who are also capable of such harassment leave her alone. At the same time however, her hopes and possibilities of re-marriage also tend to get diminished while having no legal or social recourse.

In other cases the problems of sexual harassment came from village or local level government officials such as *Grama Sevakas* and Registrars of Deaths and Marriages and regional bureaucrats such as Assistant Divisional Secretaries and other bureaucrats in regional offices such as Divisional Secretariats.

In one instance, a young widow went to the local *Grama Sevaka* with her mother to get a recommendation from him to get her husband's death certificate. He demanded that the mother leave the daughter at his house and come back in the evening. After repeated demands from the official to leave the young widow with him on the pretext that it will take a long time to process the papers, the two women went away without the required letter. In post terror Sri Lanka death certificates of people who were killed or made to disappear have become an important document without which compensation cannot be obtained or the legal rights over property may be difficult to exert while legal re-marriage is also not possible.

Similarly on one occasion, a high ranking official in a Divisional Secretariat in the Monaragala District responsible for disbursing compensation on behalf of murdered or disappeared persons insisted that the recipient widow come on a Sunday evening to collect the compensation for the death of her husband. Knowing that all government offices are closed on Sundays she complained to a field worker of a non-government organisation (NGO) which operated in the district. The field worker accompanied the woman to the bureaucrat's office on a number of occasions until the money was paid. According to the field worker:

“When that happened she had hardly recovered from the shock of the murder of her husband. And then this man demands all these bad things from her. If not for our intervention she would never have got the compensation. On an official level, we were on friendly terms with that officer. That helped to get things done. But it was quite well known among the people and other officers that he was like this. But nothing was done, and nobody complained until he was transferred out of the district on a routine transfer.”

Such complaints are however not exceptional. In fact, in many ways they seem to constitute one emerging factor in post terror southern Sri Lanka where government officials are vested with enhanced power due to their ability to pay compensation to victims' families, not pay them or delay them. Consider the story of Wimalawathi from the Monaragala District whose husband disappeared in 1989. Before his disappearance he used to work in one of the Divisional Secretariats in the Monaragala District. She assumed that getting the necessary papers processed would be relatively easy given the fact that her husband once worked in the office that was vested with that responsibility where his friends still worked:

In this particular case, it became impossible for Wimalawathi to receive compensation from this particular office because payment was blocked and delayed by officials whose demands for sexual favors were turned down by her. In the end, the case had to be transferred to another Divisional Secretariat in the same District from where she eventually received the money. But the state or government bureaucrats never considered sexual harassment even under normal circumstances as a serious problem. Even under exceptional situations as in post terror circumstances when individuals are emotionally and psychologically seriously affected, issues of sexual harassment such as the cases above go undetected and also largely unreported.

### *Problems of Companionship and Concerns over Re-Marriage*

Closely linked with concerns over sexual harassment is a set of concerns over finding male companionship or exploring possibilities of re-marriage consequent to the murder or disappearance of a woman's partner or husband. As I noted earlier, many of the widowed women I have talked to in the south are relatively young persons. As such, over a period of time many of them had to face issues of male companionship as well as re-marriage. It is clear that such concerns do not arise merely from biological or sexual needs, but also as a result of economic, emotional and financial needs. Re-marriage in the legal sense becomes a problem unless a death certificate for the former husband has been obtained. That is a process that has been made relatively easy after the new government came to power in 1994. But even then, regional bureaucrats and local level officials exert considerable influence in delaying the issuance of such certificates for personal reasons as noted above.

However, the majority of women we have talked to did not consider re-marriage as an option. Most of them, particularly those who had children thought that it would disrupt the lives of their children. The dominant answer from others who did not have children also seemed to indicate their unwillingness to re-marry as opposed to their interest in finding some kind of stable employment. At least that seemed to be a standard response from many women. However, in interpreting such information one also needs to understand that in Sinhala society there are also serious social pressures not to re-marry. These restrictions have to be understood in the context of how female sexuality and gender roles are culturally and socially constructed. Moreover, one also needs to pay attention to the dynamics of vesting power, authority and meaning in relationships between men and women.

The cultural and social construction of female sexuality and gender roles in Sinhala society is intimately linked with dominant notions of morality and honour. Moreover, most notions and perceptions that have played a part in the socio-cultural construction of female sexuality are influenced by what Sinhalese generally perceive and claim as their ancient and authentic past. In other words, there are numerous sexual scripts (Gagnon and Simon 1973, quoted in Laws & Schwartz 1977) that formulate and inform female sexuality and gender roles. In general, many of "these sexual scripts are based on, justified, and legitimised on the basis of perceived continuity from the distant past in the form of traditions or conventions" (Perera 1996b). The violation of such traditions and conventions would carry serious social censure (Perera 1996b). In this regard I would suggest that Sinhala society, taken as a whole tends to invest a great deal of cultural and moral capital in justifying restrictive behavioural practices and expectations—particularly concerning women (Perera 1996b). Among these expectations and ideal roles are the woman as the primary socialiser of society, the nurturer of children, the cultural archives of the society, the eternal and devout partner of her husband and so on.

As an extension of such cultural expectations and sexual scripts, the ideal Sinhala woman is also a woman who remains unmarried after the death of her husband. She is supposed to look after her children, and keep the memory of her late husband alive. If she does not have children she is still supposed to remain unmarried and keep the memory of her dead husband alive. These conventional

notions governing re-marriage of women are vestiges of the Sita Devi model re-articulated consequent to Sinhala Buddhist cultural revivalism of late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, as is evident from the writings of foreign observers such as Robert Knox who was living in Sri Lanka during the Kandyan period as well as from Sinhala folklore, at least by the time of the Kandyan period these kinds of restrictive behaviour patterns were not generally binding on women.

But such restrictions do not apply to men who have lost their wives. On the other hand, there is also a certain degree of ostracisation of women who are widows and who remain as such. They are considered to be symbolic of bad luck. Thus as far as women are concerned, re-marriage as well as being widows are both unenviable situations to be in. Some women however have opted to re-marry despite societal pressures while others have simply decided to seek a male partner without going through the legal procedures of marriage both for economic reasons as well as for purposes of companionship. One woman in Anuradhapura who had legally married another man after she received a death certificate for her former husband who had disappeared made the following observation:

“People used to say all kinds of things when I decided to marry again. The children’s father’s family was very strongly opposed to this. After he disappeared they hardly came here, not even to see the children. But when I decided to marry again, they wanted to take my children away from me. But I think there should be a man around the house who can provide for my children and me. He is quite fond of the children too. He works hard. I have put some of the money I received as compensation in the bank in two accounts for my two children. The rest was used to build a new room for this house. Now people do not say bad things as much as they used to.”

On the other hand, given the fact that many of these women received compensation for the death or disappearance of their husbands, there has been a tendency for certain men to seek their companionship as a means of gaining access to money. On many occasions they have moved out after the money ran out, often after making the woman pregnant again. One non-government organisation operating in the Monaragala District claims that its field-workers are seeing this phenomenon occurring quite often. Stories about such incidents also often emerge from the narratives of the people interviewed in Monaragala, Hambantota and elsewhere in the island. For example, the story of 30 year old Padmini typifies many of these stories and unfolds like a successive cycle of bad luck. Her parents forced her to marry a man much older than her when she was still a teenager. She had one son by him, and he died when the son was only three years old. Then she married another man who was closer to her age, and had three children by him. He was killed by the JVP in 1989 for allegedly having contacts with the military. She received compensation for his death, and soon afterwards another man in the vicinity moved in with her. According to Padmini:

“It was difficult for me to earn a living to support my family all by myself. All I earned as a laborer was fifty rupees a day. I could not even send my children to school. So when he moved in and promised to help bring up the children I accepted him. The compensation I received for my earlier husband’s death was partly used to build this house. Most of it was used by my new husband to start a business. I have lost all that money now, and I have a three-month year old baby by him now. But he has left me now. I do not know where he is.”

On the other hand, contrary to the wide-spread societal disapproval of re-marriage of widows and the pressure to keep the memories of their dead husbands alive, there are also numerous cases where the murder or the disappearance of the husband had in fact been clearly beneficial to women in both economic and emotional terms. This is particularly so in situations where the lives of women had been severely marked by domestic violence.

In so far as re-marriage is concerned, the story of 27-year-old Lalitha is also a story of relative success. Her husband was killed in an extremely violent fashion by the JVP for the alleged reason of having contact with the armed forces and the police. While he did not subject her to violence, neither she nor her family in general prospered in economic terms during that time. That was a situation that has changed somewhat after her present partner moved in with her. Even though they are not legally married, she referred to him as her husband:

“I decided to marry again because it was not possible for me to maintain my children and myself all alone. I met him when I was staying with my parents after the murder of my husband. He saw how much I was suffering to bring up my children. Then he came to see my parents and told them ‘I am a married man. I have two children. But I am separated from my wife because she is not a good woman. I would like to marry your daughter.’ --- When I was living with my former husband, we were hungry most of the time. We hardly had anything to wear. We hardly had a place to live. Even our clothes were bought by my elder sister and my mother. But this one (the present husband) looks after my children and me very well. He cultivates the land, and even buys us meat and fish. He has grown oranges in the garden and I also help him with that work sometimes. Now we have food for all three meals.”

The point I want to make here is that despite the violent nature of the killings of these women’s husbands or partners, such deaths have not always been detrimental to these women in real terms irrespective of societal concerns. While in many cases the deaths of husbands have impacted seriously upon family life, in other cases, such deaths have helped these women reorganise their lives, and in some cases experience enhanced economic success as well irrespective of continuing legal and societal biases.

### *Problems of Dealing with Trauma of Children*

The discussion thus far would have indicated that women have had to reap some of the most severe consequences of their male kin’s deaths or disappearances. They also have to face a similar situation in dealing with the consequences and repercussions of trauma of torture victims living in their households, including brothers and sons, and sometimes husbands. They also have to deal with similar problems of their children who were emotionally disturbed during the period of terror, particularly in a context where other members of the family have been murdered or disappeared. As Desjarlais and others have observed, violence which leads to deaths, break up of families, displacement of populations, and the disruption of socio-economic institutions in a society also leads to a range of trauma (Desjarlais 1995: 116). According to them, problems resulting from trauma include “fear, pain, loss, grief, guilt, anxiety, hatred, sadness, and the dissolution of everyday forms of sociality, language and experience” (Desjarlais 1995: 116).

Many of the physical conditions in victims of political violence that have been reported from the south are linked to their direct experience with violence. For instance, in one incident a woman's husband was abducted by unknown persons, during which the abductors had a torch (flash light) flashed on a her face to make sure she did not recognise them. She said:

“I screamed, and I could not see anything during that time. They had the torch focused on my face all the time. After that for over two weeks I lost my sight.”

In her case the physical ailments were temporary while in the case of many others the resulting physical as well as psychological conditions have been more long-lasting. Many children who saw their fathers being murdered or abducted complained of back aches and pains in their feet. Others complained of losing concentration in school. It is clear from the narratives from the south that, among the most seriously affected by trauma are children, who either saw their fathers or other kin being arrested, beaten up or killed. The impact political violence has made on the general well-being of children is less clear as opposed to the often clearer manifestation of violence related trauma among adults. A study by J.E. Acuna has reported that children of victims of detention and torture in the Philippines have displayed a number of psychological symptoms regardless of the fact whether they were born during or after a parent's detention or torture (Acuna 1989, also quoted in Desjarlais et al. 1995). Cohn et al. have also presented similar findings in studies of Chilean children living in Denmark whose parents had been tortured (quoted in Desjarlais 1995: 125). According to other studies clinical disturbances among children in areas where low intensity conflict has been endemic have become a constant socio-medical threat (Desjarlais et al. 1995: 125). As reported by Melville and Lykes (1992) the most persistent emotion seen in Guatemalan Mayan children living in re-settlement camps in Mexico was “fear.” Similarly, many of the Khmer children living in refugee camps along the Cambodia-Thailand border suffered from emotional distress, nightmares, and fear (Desjarlais et al. 1995: 125). Compared to such studies of children in violence affected areas in other parts of Asia as well as South and Central America and South Africa, comparable research on the states of Sri Lankan children affected by war is marked by their absence. Even then, what emerge from the narratives of parents, kin and friends as well as NGO workers in Monaragala, Hambantota and elsewhere is that many children living in households affected by violence did, and sometimes continue to exhibit some or many of the symptoms identified by researchers in other parts of the world.

It is then in such a context that I would place the story of 11 year old Lasanthi. Her case is more typical of the many people suffering from psychological conditions directly resulting from the violence due to the following reasons: though such conditions are quite prevalent, they have seldom been documented. Nor have many such people ever or seldom received the attention of experts due to unavailability and inaccessibility of such services as well as due to the ignorance of the people around them. Lasanthi's mother explains her daughter's condition in the following words:

“It started happening about three months after her father was killed. First day it happened, my elder sister and I were pounding rice, and my son walked pass my daughter dragging a broom, and she started screaming. So we left the rice pounders and ran to see what was happening. My son was dragging the broom away and my daughter

was screaming and trying to tear her frock and pull her hair out like this. At first we did not know what this disease was. --- Even now, if we wake her up when she is fast asleep it happens again. She wakes up and touches whoever is around and tries to bite them. Sometimes she takes the broom and throws it out of the house, and if the door is open she walks out. Or else she cries. When we ask what the problem is she says ‘someone is coming to take me away. I cannot stay here at all.’ Sometimes if there are no people at home it becomes worse. Because there is no one to talk to. She does a lot of things now in a very stubborn way. --- Earlier this happened three or four times a day. It still happens but not so often. If someone, drags a stick, broom, or rope past her or pushes a bicycle past her she gets frightened and starts to scream.”

When a question was posed to Lasanthi’s mother as to whether she had taken her daughter to hospital or received any other kind of help, her answer was simple: “We do not know how to explain this disease at the hospital.” The other reality is that in the entire district of Monaragala as well as in the province of Uwa there are no state or recognised private sector psychologists or psychiatrists who can offer the kind s of services Lasanthi may need. Lasanthi's case typifies the monumental failure of the Sri Lankan psychological and psychiatric community as well as the mental health establishment in general to at least attempt to deal with such problems in the violence-affected regional areas where such cases are most likely to be prevalent. As commentators have noted, children who have access to adequate support systems in the family or community are unlikely to “exhibit serious clinical disturbances beyond the short-term acute reactions to particular stress events (Desjarlais et al. 1995: 125). But the problem is, given the extent of disruption of community and the endemic nature of poverty in areas such as Hambantota and Monaragala, such support systems have ceased to exist or are also under severe stress.

In the case of Lasanthi, whatever the textbook classification of her condition may be, the reasons for her state of mind is clearly located in the social history of the period of terror. That violence intimately touched this child as it did many others. Lasanthi’s father was killed in a very violent fashion by the JVP. According to Lasanthi’s mother, her husband was removed from their home one night in February 1989 at about 9.00 o’clock by six men. His mutilated body was found the next morning near their home. According to kin and neighbours he was shot in the chest, and there were seven stab wounds in his back. His intestines had been squashed in such a way that the rice and the tomatoes he had eaten the previous night had come out. The day the body was discovered various people had been looking after Lasanthi, but on one occasion when she was left alone, she ran down the street and discovered her father’s body. According to her mother:

“She had picked up some jak leaves and had wiped off some blood clots from her father’s wounds. She had told him ‘wake up father, do not sleep in the street people are coming, a cart is coming. He is hurt. Bring the little bottle.’<sup>2</sup> . . . She had also got blood on her hands while trying to wipe the blood off his wounds. She was taken away from there only when a policeman saw her and asked people to take her away.”

According to the emerging narratives of her mother and other kin, the memory of her father and the nature of his death clearly lingered on in Lasanthi’s mind. For a long time she believed that he had gone

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<sup>2</sup> The reference to a bottle here is to a bottle of medicinal oil that was kept at her home. According to Lasanthi’s mother she was used to rubbing it on her father after he had returned from work.

to Colombo and would be back. Lasanthi's mother and her kin had some inclination that Lasanthi's problems may have been caused by her exposure to her father's violent death, and the threats of the JVP later on. Sometime after her father was killed, JVP activists came to the house they were living at that time, and warned that they should have nothing to do with the security forces. If they disobeyed, the JVP threatened to turn their house in to a "pool of blood." Even with that inclination they had no social compulsion to seek professional help due to lack of availability as well as due to lack of advice. More importantly, any notions of mental illness in Sinhala society has negative cultural value. As a matter of fact, at the level of general perception Sinhala make no distinctions between categories of mental illness. In popular perception and discourse, real and perceived states of mental illness are merely explained under the term *pisnu* or simply mad. Under such conditions Lasanthi's kin merely performed a minor ritual hoping that if *yakku* (demons) were bothering her they would leave her afterwards. Possibilities of spirit possession or affliction at the level of popular culture had no negative cultural value, particularly if people were believed to be possessed by powerful gods, deities or even powerful malevolent beings such as *yakku*. Moreover, expertise to remedy such situations was generally available and accessible. But *yakku*, PTSD or whatever the condition Lasanthi has, did not leave her.

### *In Place of a Conclusion*

Thus far, I have attempted to place in context some of the consequences of political violence in the south as they impacted on women by presenting to you some of their own narratives and some of my intrusive thoughts. As I noted at the beginning however, at best this has been a largely incomplete exercise. Clearly, these are not the only concerns that women have. They have concerns over employment, food, justice, lack of access to mental health expertise, lack of state intervention to alleviate their problems in general and so on. Many of these concerns manifest themselves in their narratives that you have not yet heard. Nevertheless, to get a sense of the dynamics of post terror realities, it is important to pay attention to what emerge from peoples' narratives of their day to day concerns and their perceptions of the future.

I would like to conclude with a couple of observations. In the end, whatever knowledge about the insurrection and the resultant violence we may compile, and whatever recommendations and policies that may be initiated, will be of any use only in a context where the people who have suffered seriously believe that some kind of justice has been offered to right the wrongs done to them. That justice merely cannot be calculated and perceived in terms of improved economic or other facilities. It must also include retributive justice to at least the worst offenders that should seem like justice to the affected people. But both parties to the violence in the late 1980s the JVP and the UNP currently suffer a strange case of what sociologists would impersonally call structural amnesia. Despite being in the so called democratic main stream of politics in the country, non of them have accepted any responsibility or indicated any sense of institutional remorse for what they have done. Neither has the governing coalition made any long lasting attempts to remove political violence from routine politics. Currently, the state as well as the major players in politics are merely interested in what Langer has called "defusing

alarm by deflecting atrocity” (Langer 1996). But that would mean the absence of recognition of the source of pain. As Ramphela has observed:

“Full knowledge of the source of one’s pain does make the suffering bearable. It puts one in a position to exercise one’s right to make claims for historical wrongs done. These claims need not be exclusively material; they are, more importantly, claims for the acknowledgement of one’s pain, and thus for its transformation into the arena of suffering worthy of social attention. Exposing one’s wounds and having them acknowledged creates the possibility for the healing process to start from the base” (Ramphela 1996: 109).

Given the nature of current politics in Sri Lanka, it is unlikely that the kind of sentiments expressed by Ramphela would have any space in Sri Lankan politics, and decision making except in rhetoric of elections. In the end, more often than not, the communities and individuals themselves will have to find ways to deal with their own pain and the past as some of them already have.

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