

Women Transforming Peace Activism in a Fierce New World

South and Southeast Asia



Edited by: Kumudini Samuel

Development Alternatives
with Women for a New Era

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In 2009, DAWN began a process of exploring women's activism and agency in times of conflict and transition through a series of self-reflective case studies written by feminists in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Nepal and India. This Monograph is a culmination of that work. The project, which was conceptualized initially within DAWN under its Political Restructuring and Social Transformation (PRST) Research Program, was further developed with the generous support of several women collaborators of our network from the South and Southeast Asian regions.

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The case studies in this Monograph articulate a feminist methodology of engaging with conflict and peace building, as this was experienced and reflected upon by women/feminists across generations engage/d with the reality of conflict. They

are at times poignant, always reflective; they express courage and resilience and are shared here in a generosity of spirit, which DAWN acknowledges with deep appreciation. Sharing these personal journeys of feminist struggles and resistances are: Th. J. Erlijna, Andy Yentriyani, Meri Djami and Baihajar Tualeka from Indonesia; Sarvam Kailasapathy, Sherine Xavier and 'Maanavi' from Sri Lanka and Jyotsna Maskay, Binu Chaudhary and Dev Kumai Mahara from Nepal. We also wish to express a special thank you to Andy Yentriyani and Jyotsna Maskay for their unstinting effort in helping shape the Indonesian and Nepali case studies and have them translated to English for this Monograph; and translators in Nepal and Indonesia who did their work with sensitivity and empathy.

In the course of this collaborative and engaged journey, we had very interesting and creative contributions from a number of Indian feminist/activists spanning experiences from the North East of India, Kashmir and Azamgarh in Uttar Pradesh. The case studies from these regions expressed the complexities of their conflicts and were articulated in dynamic and creative forms, which included theatre, film and academic discourse. They were presented at the regional consultation held in Nepal in 2009. The form of the case studies unfortunately did not lend themselves to easy publication in this Monograph. DAWN therefore decided to follow through with the case studies from Nepal, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, which allowed for some uniformity of form and analysis. We wish therefore to acknowledge the valuable contributions made to this process and sincerely thank Risha Syed, Fausia Islam and Tulika Srivastava who shared their research among Muslim women in Azamgarh and the Shravasti District in Uttar Pradesh with a special thank you to AALI (Association for Advocacy and Legal Initiatives).

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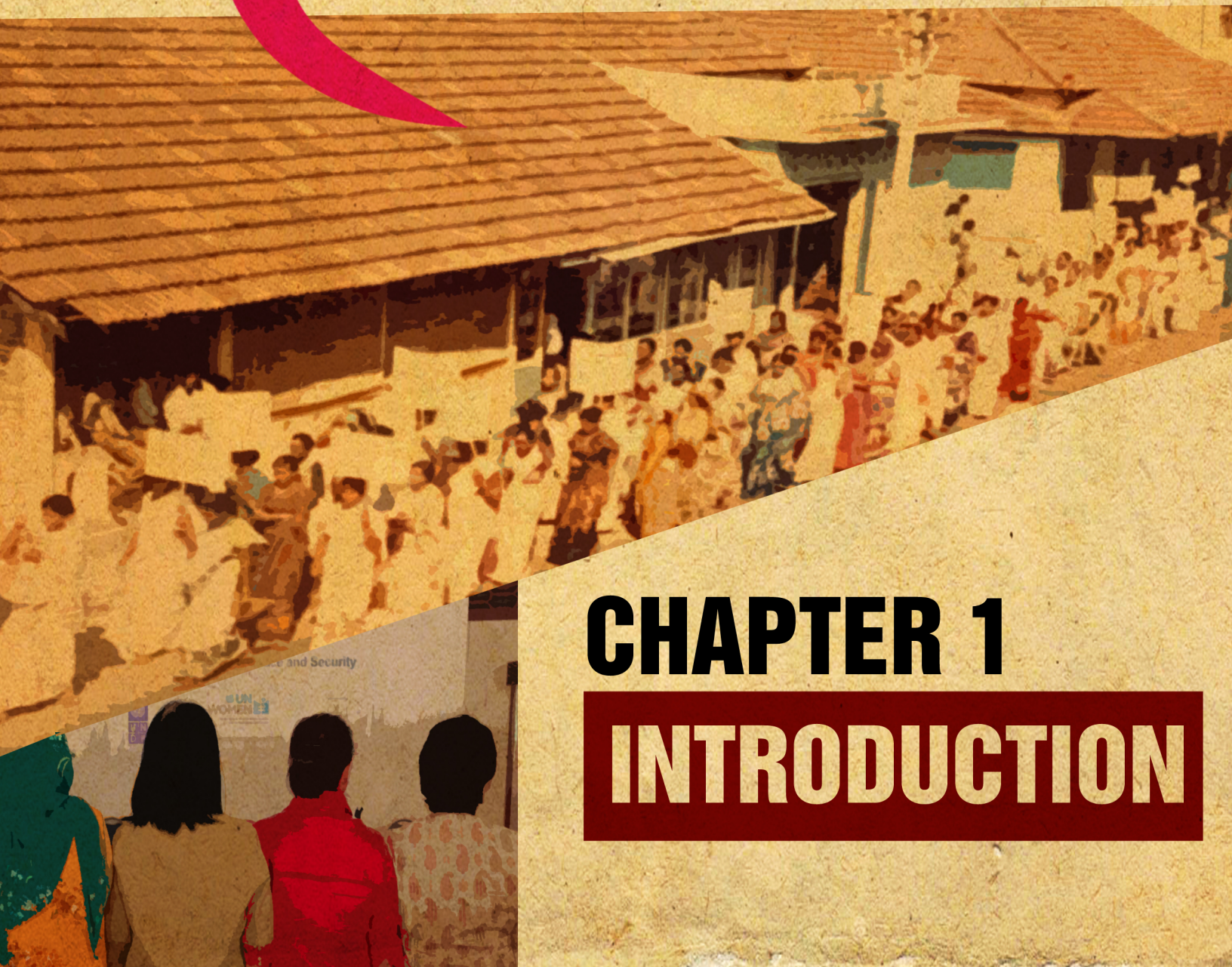
women from Kashmir who experience the impact of conflict on a daily basis in a myriad of ways.

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"The DAWN case studies, reflecting the many experiences of women living in conflict or in transitions to peace, surface in the brutalization of the body and impunity in the domain of violence—sexual, gender-based, military and existential"



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

Kumudini Samuel

The first decade of the 21st century has been marked by two unprecedented critical events: the 'war on terror' and the global financial crisis. In the wake of these two events, armed conflict, violence, terrorism, national security, mass displacement, nationalism and religious and political fundamentalisms on the one hand, and transnational capital, labor and economics on the other hand, now preoccupy international, regional and national politics. This has given rise to public policies that have had an immediate effect on the lives of ordinary citizens. Issues of livelihood, poverty, human rights, freedom of expression and mobility, identity and sexuality have been re-shaped and changed radically. As a consequence, gender power and control is manifest in multiple forms and have created new in/securities for women.

The crisis of human in/security has also intensified with the nature of conflict, shifting from inter-state to intra-state military engagement with its casualties being mainly women and children. It has exacerbated insecurity for women by subjecting them to a continuum of violence that spans periods of conflict, transition and spills into post conflict societies underpinned by an all-pervasive culture of impunity. Conflict and attendant militarization is also reinforced by juridical situations that suspend the normal rule of law with the introduction of emergency powers and repressive legislation. This creates a 'state of exception' in which citizens are reduced to 'bare life,' or stripped of the ordinary rights of citizenship (Agamben, G. 2005), impacting adversely in the long-term on democratic rights such as freedom of expression, association, and mobility, among others. In such militarized environments, law and order and accountable governance are suspended for military ends and a state of exception is instituted as the norm. Militarization is thus integrally linked to systemic violence. Together

with armed conflict and civil war, militarization has played a major role in shaping and changing women's lives.

Contemporary wars occur in the sites of the most severe social divisions, concomitantly generating multiple forms of crisis (Petchesky and Laurie 2007). They also bring about 'a crisis of masculinity' as men "can no longer maintain the myth of male breadwinner" (Truong, Wieringa and Chhachhi, 2006: xii).

Feminist scholarship on the effects of conflict on women has focused on the dual nature of this impact. It has interrogated the many drastic changes that take place in women's lives due to conflict which make them more liable to victimhood, but which at times serve to increase their agency, as women fight to survive and overcome the impediments of conflict and war. On the one hand, women in conflict situations find that the traditional barriers that restrict their participation in the public and political spheres often disappear. They have more opportunities to move into hitherto male-dominated areas of economic production, for example, as well as into political arenas. Women become community organizers and armed combatants, challenging existing stereotypes and creating new role models for themselves. On the other hand, as a conflict intensifies or becomes more militarized, women find themselves extremely vulnerable, both as women and as members of marginalized communities, to all forms of discrimination and violence, not only from external forces but also from within their own families and communities. Conversely too, post conflict transitions often seek to push women back into traditional and stereotyped roles and relationships and anticipated social transformation continues to elude them.

In 2009, DAWN began a process of exploring women's activism and agency in times of conflict and transition through a series of self-reflective case studies written by feminists in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Nepal and India. Articulating a feminist methodology of engaging with conflict and peace-building, these case studies reflect how women/feminists across generations engage with the reality

of conflict; how collective engagement and strategizing occurs in the face of intractable impunity; how women keep up a continuity of engagement despite not being acknowledged or recognized in formal attempts at peace-making; how a younger generation of women/feminists engage with conflict, among others. The case studies also enabled a conceptual discussion of how women engage with conflict and peace-building where women are subjectively located within these processes of engagement; the dilemmas they face and the choices they make. The studies also looked at how women engage with the state, with state-like entities and non-state entities such as family, society, militant groups, religious institutions, 'fundamentalisms' and cultural hegemonies, acknowledging that women challenge several structures of authority at once.

In the process of elaborating on the case studies, we also noted that there was very little space, if any, within the women's movements of the region to discuss the complex realities of feminist engagement with armed conflict, peace-building, peacemaking and transitions from conflict. We felt that much of the discussion was conducted in an ad hoc manner and located more at an international, national or regional level, rather than at the local level. However, very clearly the engagement with conflict and peace-building is an everyday reality for women within their local context and lived realities. These reflective case studies indicate clearly that we need to understand local context and ways of thinking and working where women in their everyday lives negotiate concerns that relate to both conflict and peace. We found, in particular, that we cannot assume that our notions of what constitute conflict resolution or peace are universally acceptable or relevant to women. The case studies also indicate the need to understand that the concept of peace might have different meanings for women across their various identities and locations. Clearly too, the many concepts we work with in relation to conflict - be it peace, reconciliation, impunity or justice - require nuanced understanding and must be brought down from the heights of abstract principle. We realized that these principles need to be situated within the

testimonies of daily life and within the constraints and relationships women have to mediate in their various cultures, communities and countries.

In this context we also noted with deep concern that increasingly at the global level, the discussion on conflict and peace is reduced to a simplistic framing around a narrow understanding of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security and the attendant resolutions that followed it.

Security/Insecurity

In these case studies, women's experience of security in everyday life is mediated through a range of constantly changing social structures that include culture, religion, family, identity and gender. The referent of security is also not merely the individual but the social relations that mediate human life (Truong, Wieringa and Chhachhi, 2006). Whether battling discrimination in Maluku, Indonesia; engaged in the freedom struggle in Aceh; mediating State repression in Jaffna, Sri Lanka or defending human rights of women in Sirhar, Nepal, the women in the case studies encounter and challenge this complex nexus as they try to deal with everyday life in conflict situations.

The case studies also reflect the many global/local processes that coalesce to create 'plural forms of gender power and control' over women, which also shape 'new risks and forms of insecurity for [them] and their communities' (Truong, Wieringa and Chhachhi, 2006: x). Further, women's expressions of agency, including economic agency, that defy existing norms of expected behavior put their lives at risk. Women experience this risk in a continuum through periods of transition into times of post-conflict. These gendered risks for women are also manifest in times of conflict and transition in the dislocation of everyday life and the increase in women's burden in the domain of care; in the brutalization of the body and impunity in the domain of violence; and women's exclusion from decision-making in the domain of political life.

Women's bodies and their sexuality are markers of culture, tradition and family and are constantly subject to institutional and interpersonal contestations of power, control, regulation and surveillance. In times of conflict, this contestation is overtly expressed as a part of the broader struggle where women's bodies and sometimes the bodies of men become virtual battlefields (Truong, Wieringa and Chhachhi, 2006). The Sri Lankan case studies trace a history of women's activism through three phases of its protracted conflict. Wartime sexual violence by both state and non-state actors feature in all of them while the common thread running through the experiences recounted from 1986 to 1995 and 2009 is impunity and fear, that made Tamil women the enemy 'other' whose rights were violated in myriad ways.

Other violent forms of human rights abuse are also meted out on women, particularly because of their role as frontline human rights defenders. In particular the manifestations of violence inherent in custodial torture, disappearances and extra judicial executions have specific gendered implications for women and can last beyond active conflict because of the continuing intractability of impunity. This was explained by women human rights defenders in Nepal working at the community level:

Impunity still [post conflict] presents a major challenge. The process of documentation brings about threats and intimidation from various ethnic groups, armed groups [and] has created an atmosphere of fear and terror. In addition, lack of appropriate and efficient mechanisms to deal with the past history of human rights violations, holding perpetrators accountable and reprimanded has created an environment of increasing human rights violations and crime (Case Study from Kathmandu, Nepal).

However, violence against women, particularly sexual violence, is not a war time aberration. It has been argued that institutionalized male dominance is itself a form of violence and such dominance is justified and perpetuated through the threat and use of violence against women at all times (Coomaraswamy and Fonseka, 2004). This is made possible by the subordination of women by hegemonic masculine and hetero-normative culture that articulates women's status as the property of men and condones such practices as incest, rape, female genital mutilation and other forms of coercive sexual violence as a means of controlling women's sexuality. Some feminists believe that there is a continuum of violence before, during and after war, and some of the studies in this monograph attest to this reality. However, there is also a perception that violence takes a distinct and different gendered form during war time and here again, identity conflicts which manifest in the form of ethnic and religious riots or state repression whether against the Gervani or Acehnese in Indonesia, or the Tamils in Sri Lanka or caste-based violence against the Madhesi in Nepal is illustrative. Yet the commonality that permeates different forms of conflict or all phases of it is the relation of violence against women¹ to sexual control, political control and the access to and control of resources (Meintjes, Pillay and Thurshen 2001).

Continued Impunity for Sexual Crimes

In periods of transition, it is imperative that sexual crimes committed during armed conflict are recognized and punished effectively. Feminist analysis of and concerted campaigning against conflict-related gender violence has focused attention on sexual violence and resulted in some forms of such violence being classified as war crimes and crimes against humanity (Rome Statute 1999-2002).

¹ The case studies in the Monograph, in some instances, reflected women's experience of violence and their resistance to it. However, none of the case studies looked at war time violence against men or persons of diverse sexual orientation or gender identities, which is also a war time reality.

The judgments of the Ad Hoc Tribunals set up for former Yugoslavia and Rwanda; the recognition of the struggle of the 'comfort women' in Korea and Japan, and the setting up of the International Criminal Court reflects the success of such efforts (Coomaraswamy 1999). International war crimes tribunals have made important inroads into dealing with impunity in relation to sexual crimes but only a few countries are covered by their jurisdiction. The International Criminal Court also sets in place fundamental standards recognizing sexual crimes as grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions, war crimes and crimes against humanity. These are expected to inform the standards of domestic jurisprudence. However, despite this recognition, sexual violence in times of war, often perceived as crimes against 'honour' continue to receive much less attention and are committed with impunity around the world. They also receive very little attention in times of transition and are not dealt with in mechanisms set up to facilitate transition. For example, the legislation creating the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa had no mention of rape, and when rape did surface in testimonies, it had to be dealt with under the heading 'severe ill-treatment.' (Krog 2001). There has been much critical discussion about how the TRC dealt with rape, sexual violence and what processes were put in place or indeed were overlooked to encourage women to come before it to testify on crimes of sexual violence. The Indonesian experience discussed here reinforces challenges encountered elsewhere, attesting to the difficulty of obtaining state accountability for sexual crimes committed in times of conflict. The experience of *Komnas Perempuan* in Indonesia offers an invaluable study of the evolution of a creative mechanism and process to redress violence against women in times of war, despite continuing impunity.

This intransigent issue of violence and impunity has led feminists to question the possible collusion between masculine institutions of law enforcement and justice and the patriarchal power politics that condone the control of women's sexuality. The links between dominant notions of masculinity, war and militarization

converge in both the control and the abuse of women's sexuality during wartime. Conventional wisdom defines war as a male affair that excludes women. In addition, militarization foregrounding war draws on the most violent and aggressive features of masculinity (Sideris, 2001). It provides men with a heroic identity and this, coupled with real experiences of courage and conviction gives soldiers and militants alike direction and a sense of meaning of playing a special role in society (Sideris, 2001:151). This construction of hero justifies or condones many infringements or abuses committed by men during war including killing, torture, rape, sexual slavery and enforced prostitution. The reluctance to prosecute crimes of rape and sexual torture is a direct result of this nexus.

States of Exception

Under the current conditions of militarized globalization, and in the context of the war on terror that has no limits in time or space, it has been argued that 'states of exception' [Agamben] are increasingly becoming the norm for thousands of people across the globe. Many governments in conflict, transition and post-conflict situations continue to avail themselves of extraordinary powers, as do governments in countries not in overt conflict situations. The use of such powers consequently allows for the suspension of checks and balances and the restriction of liberties foreclosing the possibility of some citizens enjoying, claiming or exercising rights. Agamben focuses on "the camp" as the typical site of such exception (Agamben 1998:169-71). Petchesky and Laurie apply this analysis to all sites of involuntary detention across the globe, and extend it to camps for refugees and internally displaced persons (2007:15). Reflecting the current state of geopolitics, 'The camp', they argue, following Agamben, is both 'a permanent and spatial arrangement...outside the normal order'. It is one where 'law and fact... have become indistinguishable'. Furthermore, those who reside in 'the camp' have in common their exclusion from the circle of persons recognized as citizens and they are reduced to 'bare life' without 'right to bear rights' (ibid.). In most

situations of protracted conflict, enforced displacement is a norm rather than an exception and this results in camp or camp-like life for many communities. Multiple displacement and camps also become long term fixtures bringing new sets of risks and in/securities to women.

I did not anticipate — a new life reality, such as living in an IDP camp with no privacy, public facilities, sleeping on the floor, a dirty and congested place. Depression and trauma were normally experienced (Case study from Maluku, Indonesia).

Petchesky and Laurie note that camps for the displaced, although expected to be temporary in nature, are never so and that most refugees stay an average of 17 years in camps. Calling these sites some of the most dangerous, demoralizing and dehumanizing places, they conclude that risks of maternal mortality and morbidity increase significantly and that those caught in the most dangerous stages of conflict are the least protected. They further remark that 'poor maternal and pregnancy outcomes may reflect a variety of factors. Child-bearing becomes a terrain of ethnic struggle in armed conflict and displacement sites...Child-bearing may become a weapon to replace children or adults lost to war' (2007:9).

Understanding Women's Agency

The DAWN case studies bring together women's myriad experiences in countries and societies in transition from conflict or war, such as Nepal, Aceh and Sri Lanka, as well as in communities in conflict, such as Maluku. In all of these cases, women express an agency that goes beyond the essentialist stereotyping of victimhood. In some instances, women become militant and use violence as a means to a common end. In others, they engage in conflict mitigation or resolution. They express an agency therefore that "attributes to the individual actor the capacity to process social experience and to devise ways of coping with life even under the

most extreme forms of coercion.[F]or women as much as men, the experiences of violent conflict and migration, as with all social life, are not built upon a single discourse. As social actors, they form multiple ways of formulating their objectives, however restricted their resources" (Moser and Clark 2001, 5).

They thus create new spaces for political engagement that often defy the formal and the conventional and offer emancipatory potential to post conflict and post war political restructuring and social transformation. Oftentimes, distinctions between public/private, politics/survival, mother/activist....collapse and become inseparable experiences (O'Kane 2006) resulting in shifts and transformations in women's identities. Similarly, some of the case studies show us how women challenge the public/ private boundaries as they dared to give voice to injustice and to call for redress following torture, rape, murder and the violence of war. Women also find innovative and politically challenging forms of protest such as the 'black protests' of Nepal, which sought to shame the nakedness of state inaction through the semi clothed bodies of women human rights defenders.

In Sri Lanka, the exigencies of protracted conflict, the traumatizing experience of being captive in a site of brutal battle have impelled women to cross public/private boundaries and dare to give voice to dissent and claim rights even in initial and minute ways. Women's voices from sites of political exclusion – the camps for the displaced or the limbo of transit - reflect this reality.

Through their recounting of everyday resistance to state and non-state authoritarianism, women also reflect the reality that, in wartime, many frontline human rights defenders are women, expressing political agency when it is dangerous and impossible for men to do so. From the Madres of the Plaza Del Mayo in Argentina to the Women in Black in Palestine to the Mothers' Fronts in Sri Lanka and the Women Human Rights Defenders in Nepal, women use diverse strategies to move from the margins of exclusion to political visibility.

These experiences suggest that women's agency is never completely muted. While women, like men, may not be allowed the right to 'bear rights' they continue to find ways and means to subvert their subjugation, defying conventional power relations to express a complex agency. Refusing to accept Agamben's 'rigid binary that divides humanity into political life (citizenship) and bare life (no rights, nonparticipation)', these women display a crucial spectrum of ambiguous and interstitial practices mounted by the abject—mediating between the two extreme ends of political and nonpolitical—that actually extends and reanimates the life of citizenship from the very margins of abjection' (Lee 2010:58).

Understanding the Complexity of Peace

The complexity of conflict and peace is reflected in the myriad experiences recounted in the DAWN case studies, suggesting there is no clearly defined post war moment. Rather, women's experience suggests a continuum of conflict, expressed now in armed force, now in economic sanctions or political pressure. A time of supposed peace may later come to be called the 'pre-war' period.... A time of post war reconstruction, later, may be re-designated as an inter-bellum – a mere pause between wars.' (Cockburn and Zarkov 2002:10).As critically, the significance of structural violence, long term oppression, discrimination and impoverishment which are often part and parcel of 'peacetime' cannot be ignored. As such, economic oppression continues the continuum of violence faced by women before during and after war, and the relation of violence against women to sexual control, political control and the allocation of resources (Mientjes, Pillay and Turshen 2001).

The DAWN case studies, reflecting the many experiences of women living in conflict or in transitions to peace, surface in the brutalization of the body and impunity in the domain of violence - sexual, gender-based, military and existential. However, the common experience is that while international feminist advocacy

has enabled the recognition of sexual violence during wartime as a crime against humanity, redress is mired in 'the complexity of the operation of power within and across categories of gender, ethnicity and generation' (Truong, Wieringa and Chhachhi, 2006:xiii) as well as in the nexus between militarism, patriarchy and hegemonic masculine and hetero-normative culture that controls women's sexuality and status in society.

More recently, in 2000, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 specifically to address the impact of war on women, and women's contributions to conflict resolution and sustainable peace. The Resolution, which is in effect international law, was expected to bring about a shift in global perception and a political framework for addressing issues of women, peace-making, peace-keeping and security in the context of conflict resolution. However, a series of reviews spanning the decade of its existence identifies significant gaps in its conceptual frame as well as in implementation. Only a mere 16% of peace agreements signed post-Resolution have any reference to women. Furthermore, much of the reference is substantively poor and unsystematic. The Resolution therefore has had only a slight impact on peace processes and peace agreements (Bell and O'Rourke 2010). This relative ineffectiveness of the Resolution requires a more nuanced understanding of peace and security itself. The barriers to the implementation of the Resolution have to be based on an understanding of 'where normative standards might make a difference, where their effect may be limited, and what the negative trade-offs for women may be.' (Ibid. 2)

During the peace process, I learned that nothing is without compromise. Nothing is perfect. Everything you engage in has its positive and negative aspects. In the end, it is a choice... I have no illusions. There is no legal justice when approximately only 2% of cases are sentenced in the country. Justice delayed is justice denied. I'm not sure what the opposite of impunity is, perhaps justice or accountability, but it can come in different forms. Legal punishment or legal action is not the only option.

Everyday actions like providing women the space to talk about or write something is also about challenging impunity and silence (Case study from Batticaloa, Sri Lanka).

The DAWN cases studies allude to the complexity of conflict and its transformation for women where peace would often be a nebulous and abstract category. The reality of changing gender roles for both men and women during conflict often does not translate into transformation of gender relations either during or post-conflict. Instead, there has to be an understanding of the complexity of conflict - the reality of states of exception; political marginalization and exclusion; and women's struggles on the ground to survive and recover from the many abuses of conflict.

Further, in the transition post-conflict, the absence of inclusivity, particularly of women in processes of political restructuring, often results in an unsatisfactory constitutionalism (Cockburn and Zarkov 2002:10) -In Nepal and Aceh, for example, women feel insecure, their rights not protected and vulnerable to many forms of discrimination.

Another vital consideration, implicit in all the case studies, is that the post-war period is too late for women to transform gender relations. Post-war rhetoric of democratization or political restructuring often masks the reconstruction of gender power relations and the reinstating of the gender status quo. However, 'social transformation is not just about conditions and structures, but also about internal processes of consciousness, of creating words and language' (Meintjes, Pillay and Thurshen 2001:8) that will ensure a transformation of patriarchal social relations which will challenge the old order and create 'new democratic institutions and practices' that will be sustained in the aftermath of conflict.

Feminism is about memory, about re-instating memory into history... It is about the conception and uses of power, about relationships... about who holds power over whom. It requires rethinking and reorganizing our notions of society and society itself, so that we all may make our unique contributions and participate to our fullest potential (Randall, 1992, 35).

In a politically nuanced and critical understanding of the need to remember the past and incorporate it into a holistic understanding of what sustainable peace has to be is the following narration:

Revealing the past is to know and understand the various phenomena that happen around me. I think all experience will always give birth to a question, why? Oftentimes, I can find the answers to these questions in the past. By knowing the roots, my generation and I can understand what we are facing and can think of ways to overcome it. In the effort to trace the past, I meet people, ideas, and work destroyed, buried, left behind and put aside by the New Order Regime. These ideas and work become more relevant in the present context. In many ways I can say that activists of my generation are not starting something new. The belief that all of these will be part of the national history as well as the history of women's movement makes these works more meaningful. (Case study from Jakarta, Indonesia)

In the writing of these histories across regions and cultures, we sought to highlight how feminist peace building for women is a process that is different and incorporates elements of empowerment, justice and social change, which, in itself is what a feminist approach, and scope is all about. The case studies also illustrated that advocacy can be re-imagined in many creative ways as feminist peace-building takes shape across diversity and difference and is engaged with both political restructuring and social transformation. Above all, these case studies provide an insight into how a younger generation of women/feminists engages

on a deep and personal level, with conflict and its aftermath on a daily basis. We believe that the case studies could be used to begin a discussion of a feminist methodology of engagements with conflict, conflict transformation and peace-making, and thereby fill a gap in the body of knowledge.



“The first and foremost agenda of this strategic alliance was clear and simple: to break women’s silence on their experiences of violence and discrimination in armed conflict situations”

CHAPTER 2

THE INDONESIAN CASE STUDIES



CHAPTER TWO - The Indonesian Case Studies

Foreword

We Chose Peace

Kamala Chandrakirana

Engagement with violence against women in armed conflict is an integral part of the feminist struggle in Indonesia as much as mass political violence has been an inseparable part of Indonesia's modern history. The women's movement and feminists in Indonesia have been shaped – directly and indirectly, at times strengthened and other times weakened – by these violent episodes in the life of the nation, particularly in the past four decades.

Thirteen years ago, the Indonesian people's capacity to deal with its legacy of mass political violence found new energy and grounding after major democratic reforms following the end of a 32-year old authoritarian regime in May 1998. A groundswell of efforts focused on demanding accountability for human rights violations under an authoritarian regime, including a huge array of state-sponsored violence. All this was done in the midst of new violence occurring around the country, thus forcing many to deal with both current and past violence simultaneously. It is in this context that this particular story of Indonesia's feminist engagement with conflict, conflict transformation and peace- building is located.

The new beginning for feminist engagement with various forms of mass political violence started when a broad cross-section of Indonesia's multi-faceted women's movement came together to take a stance against the rapes of Chinese-Indonesian women during the mass riots of May 1998. Everyone agreed that the attacks on the Chinese women were an attack against all women and must be accounted for as part of state responsibility to all women of Indonesia. This collective position, made by mainstream women's organizations and feminist

groups together, marked a new alliance that had not been seen since the first years of the all-women's congress in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

After strong public pressure and a protest meeting between women's rights advocates and the new reform-oriented president, it was agreed that a special mechanism to address all forms of violence against women would be established. This independent mechanism, called the National Commission on Violence Against Women, was given a human rights mandate, and was comprised of a broad spectrum of women's rights advocates, including feminists in its top leadership.

Established in 1998, this new state mechanism benefited from the achievements of the global women's movement at the 1993 Vienna Conference. Here historic global consensus was reached on violence against women as a human rights violation; a urgency was recognized regarding gender-based crimes against humanity; and a set of new standards and procedures was introduced within the international human rights system. In November 1998, in her fourth year as the first UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Radhika Coomaraswamy made an official visit to Indonesia – six months after the May rapes and one month after the National Commission on Violence Against Women (known in Indonesian as '*Komnas Perempuan*') began its work. She contributed to shaping the parameters of Indonesia's feminist engagement with armed conflict, through a national state mechanism on women's human rights. In its third year of operation, the national commission requested, received and incorporated input on its strategic role from two other Asian feminists, Sunila Abeysekera and Anisha Susanna.

In a post-authoritarian context where the prevailing political culture among state agencies is still one that is highly responsive to central authority, a national institution holding a presidential mandate on violence against women can obtain significant political leverage. For feminists working on the ground in conflict areas

like Aceh, West Timor, Maluku and Papua, *Komnas Perempuan* became an avenue to gain access to national authorities, a safe space to meet like-minded advocates dealing with similar issues and challenges, and an ally to negotiate for the fulfillment of state responsibility for women's human rights. The relationship between *Komnas Perempuan*, the feminists working to address gender-based violence in armed conflict situations and the women survivors of violence living in conflict-affected communities is one of creative tension. Demands from the ground do not always match capacity to deliver. It is nevertheless a relationship that stands on a relatively solid foundation of mutual trust. Few women's rights organizations at the national level give priority to armed conflict but *Komnas Perempuan* has a clear political mandate and a strong public profile. Ultimately, this commission became a means for many Indonesian women – working at the local and national levels to engage the state from within its own vast and multi-faceted space while occupying the sites at its outer margins.

The first and foremost agenda of this strategic alliance was clear and simple: to break women's silence on their experiences of violence and discrimination in armed conflict situations. This involved a series of documentation efforts in disparate parts of the country: from the western tip of the country in Aceh, the central islands of Java and Sulawesi, to the eastern-most border of the archipelago in Papua. The documentation work was at times carried out after the conflict had ended (like in Aceh) and at other times when the conflict was still ongoing at low levels of intensity (like in Poso and Papua). This work also included looking back to break 40 years of silence by women survivors of the 1965-1966 anti-communist persecution and massacres.

While documentation of women's experiences was the nature of the task, the overall process was about building an engagement for empowerment which included skill-building in human rights documentation, opening up personal healing spaces, collective analysis of findings and policy recommendations and

alliance-building for accountability and systemic change at local and national levels. Feminists involved in this collective endeavor depended on each other to develop a methodology and a conclusion that met a broader interest in processes of social transformation and political restructuring.

Although *Komnas Perempuan* saw itself as a human rights institution, it was not recognized as such by the mainstream human rights institutions at the national and international levels and thus, never received any training for human rights documentation. This made it possible for a more authentic women-centered approach to human rights documentation to emerge from an intensive process of learning and reflecting based on experiences of success and failure on the ground. This experience also constituted the first test of *Komnas Perempuan's* authority in the eyes of the state, as it had to ensure the physical security of all individuals involved in the documentation process. Despite the focus on state perpetrators of violence against women, no one associated with this commission's documentation work has ever been obstructed by national, local or military authorities. Thus the existence of *Komnas Perempuan* also provided the safe space that allowed this alliance of diverse women to break open a long-standing and deadening silence. This whole process, covering seven distinct conflict situations across the archipelago, took more than five years to complete.

Women survivors of sexual violence living in communities affected by conflict spoke not only of the violence they experienced but also of the stigma, ostracism and social sanctioning that they experienced as a result of the violation. Local religious leaders were at the forefront of women's re-victimization, providing the community with the language and moral legitimation for these acts. From this realization and insight, collaboration was initiated between *Komnas Perempuan* and feminists within religious organizations to develop a language of justice within their respective religious traditions based on a collective understanding on the role of religious leaders and communities in the re-victimization and healing of

women survivors of sexual violence. Feminist theologians – male and female – were encouraged to develop a framework on the notion of justice based on conversations with women survivors. Based on these theological constructs, negotiations were initiated by feminist theologians and members of the congregation with their political leadership to review their position on women survivors.

Once the silence was broken and reports from Aceh, Poso and Papua were made public and submitted to the government, the brick wall of power showed its face again. While women's groups continue to use the reports as the basis for on-going negotiations with the state – at local and national levels – there has been no satisfactory redress for any of the violence experienced by women in the various armed conflict situations. If impunity is defined by the UN as "the impossibility, de jure or de facto, of bringing the perpetrators of violations to account ... and making reparations to their victims", then all the efforts to break women's silence is still too far off from ending the cycle of impunity for women affected by conflict in Indonesia. Much work still needs to be done to transform a patriarchal and unaccountable legal system into a competent gender-responsive entity. Even when human rights defenders were pushing for a renewed *pro justitia* investigation of the mass violence in May 1998, feminist activists chose not to join in the demand against mass sexual violence. The failure to end impunity in Indonesia goes beyond gender-based violence, as there has been no satisfactory redress for any of the gross violations committed during and after the authoritarian regime up to this day, 13 years after intense reformation efforts.

As ending impunity on gross human rights violations (experienced by women and men) will take at least another generation of hard work, a choice was made to focus on how to maintain the political capital generated by the collective breaking of women's silence and influence in the public discourse. In the absence of justice, a new alliance of feminist historians, human rights documentation workers and

commissioners at *Komnas Perempuan* was established to produce a single coherent narrative from the multiple reports on women's experiences in distinct armed conflict situations throughout Indonesia during the previous four decades. This narrative links Indonesia's armed conflicts and their impacts on women with the political and economic regimes which created the underlying causes of widespread injustice and violence. The narrative, written for the public, was articulated within the framework of women's leadership in the pre-independence imagining of a sovereign nation and its re-imagining, sixty years later, in post-authoritarian Indonesia.

This narrative provides a gendered meaning to Indonesia's violent history and was published as a book entitled '*We Take a Stand: Four Decades of Violence against Women in a Nation's Journey*' as part of *Komnas Perempuan*'s mandate for public education on all forms of violence against women. It was presented to the President in a forum designed to give official and public recognition to the women in the room who were victimized by violence and discrimination in distinct armed conflict situations from Aceh to Papua, from 1965 to the present. The public event provided space for these women to speak of their demands and hopes as well as perform in front of the President in their professional capacity as did the women survivors of 1965. The alliance of feminists that formulated the narrative continues to push for the integration of this book into the teaching of history in schools and, eventually, into official renditions of history. This was a political choice to prioritize on the making of historical memory in the face of huge impediments to achieve legal justice for the survivors within the near future.

Ironically, a couple of days after the President gave public recognition to the rights of women survivors of past gross violations, the State Secretariat under the President announced its intentions to merge *Komnas Perempuan* into either the National Commission on Human Rights or the Ministry of Women's Empowerment. Although this has not happened so far, it points to the constant

fragility of feminist achievements and institutions wherever they are located. So, how do feminists sustain their activism in the face of the constant fragility of their achievements and the staying power of impunity? As individual activism which links the personal to the political can last whole lifetimes, each historical moment produces its own energy defining the collective force of activism. The length of a historical moment is partly determined by the effectiveness and impact of its activist forces. The links among activist feminists from one historical moment to the other are not automatic and require the conscious effort of feminists to seek out and engage others across the generations. The individual journeys of three young feminists whose lives are shaped by mass political violence are presented in this collection of writings as outcomes of this conscious effort to reach out to the next generation who will carry the struggle further.

2.1 In the Name of a Dream

Andy Yentriyani - Jakarta

"Today a decision is made, A. does not want to live as a person who gives in and is always in fear, just because of her slanting eyes and yellow skin, just because she is a woman. Everyone should live as someone who has the same rights as others, as a human being, as a rightful citizen of this country. Consequently, A. will fight, not only for A, but also for each of us who has ever felt the same fear and pain."

I wrote the above paragraph trembling and in tears – my bad habit when I am too emotional. That day a man who was a complete stranger to me attempted to grab my breast while I was standing waiting for public transport. I was so furious that I shouted at him and called him a scoundrel. He stopped and, as he glared, said, "Don't talk tough. I tell you I can rape you just like the other *amoys* during the past riot."

Yes, the incident occurred just about one month after riots swept Jakarta and some other major cities in the middle of May 1998. During the riots, gang rapes as well as other sexual assaults struck women, especially women of Chinese-ethnicity and those who resembled the Chinese. News of sexual violence was widespread and made the ethnic Chinese, targeted in the unrest, become increasingly frightened. Because of the news, some of my friends advised me not to walk by myself.

On the day of the unrest in Jakarta, i.e. 13-14 May of 1998, I was also asked to remain on the campus – University of Indonesia campus in Depok. In fact, I've always been with them in the demonstrations in the street and the Parliament building making the demands that led to the fall of Suharto's thirty-two-year New Order regime. Never once did any of my friends question my identity. Nothing,

until the day of the riots. Therefore their warnings were like a slap to my consciousness about my identity – as a woman and as a Chinese.

The Poignancy of Being Chinese in Indonesia

Actually, I have known the poignancy of being a Chinese in Indonesia ever since my childhood. Through policies and bureaucratic practices and ethnic-based discrimination instituted by the New Order regime. No less irritating is the attitude and behavior of the people who not only discriminate and marginalize, but also condescend. For example, Chinese success in the economic field is often suspected to be a result of dishonest work combined with a stingy nature. When involved in a fight, we will be yelled at, “You Chinese are communists!” – a stigma that is not only about communism which is banned by the government, but also about an allegation that the Chinese ethnic nationalism of Indonesia always deserves to be questioned.

Because of the pain toward the attitudes and behaviors, there were times when I rejected anything that was associated with China. Consequently, as the third child of four siblings who are all women, my skills in using chopsticks and Chinese language are the worst which is a real regret now because I wasted a chance to learn to speak fluent Mandarin.

My childhood experiences had also taught me that the attitude and behavior of some people will turn 360 degrees every time I introduce a more complex identity than just an ethnic Chinese. This statement – which shows that I am also a Muslim often “saves” me from every condition associated with ethnic-based prejudices that makes me feel cornered. However, this strategy also always leaves a deep pain. I would get better treatment when it was considered “she is evidently not only Chinese”. This is when my experience of being discriminated against is actually confirmed.

I had a different experience when I actively participated in a study group early in my university year. This study group consisted of interdisciplinary students. I myself studied at the department of international relations. We discussed a number of real problems in the society and were critical of the the New Order regime that was led by Suharto for more than 32 years. For me, developing a critical attitude is not easy. Previously, I was one of the main cadres at the provincial level campaigning for the ideology of the state and its unity, to hail the New Order regime. The turning point in my attitude occurred when I learned of the experiences of the women in East Timor (now Timor-Leste), which were full of violence due to the presence of the Indonesia military. I started to try to find out about the consequences of militarism to the community. Information that I gathered made me confident to participate in the student movement demanding Suharto's fall. In all my searches and in the student movement, never once was my identity questioned, let alone argued about - Never, until the day of the riots.

On the first day of rioting, 13 May 1998, I had to "rescue" my sister and a cousin who had just arrived in Jakarta the day before to prepare for university entrance tests. In a crowded train carriage, we passed the burning shops, the mass panic, people running out with the booty, locked gates that read "property of indigenous people" or "property of the hajj", and the absence of any security forces. A middle-aged man beside me said, "Kids, if you survive to the next station, the three of you should go straight home. Lock your doors tightly. I am afraid ... it is as before." I did not have the courage to ask what he meant by "as before" – whether it was the '65 period or even years before 1965 when the ethnic Chinese has always been the scapegoat and became the target of the mass who were angry against the rulers? I did not know. Yang kutangkap was a sense of dread, not only in me but also those around me.

The warning, also warning from my friends, I received with fear and anger. But they were never revealed because all was going too fast. Until the day when the man, who harassed me sexually, threatened me so lightly. So without thinking twice, I went to him. I gripped him tightly by his collars with both hands and pulled him close. As I looked into his eyes closely, I still remembered as if it happened just yesterday, I said, "Try me if you dare. I promise you will regret it because I'll pay you back without mercy." Perhaps surprised by my very serious manner, he struggled, broke away from my grip and ran away as he continued to shout, "Crazy amoy, you will die."

I stood still and saw him running away. When the transport came, I continued my journey home. The first thing I did was take a pen and a paper. I wrote a letter to my parents. A letter of apology for deciding to be involved in political activities so that I, my brothers, as well as other citizens could live with a sense of security and no longer have to feel pain due to discrimination on any ground. I had to apologize because my parents would not agree with this decision. Moreover, they always advised me to stay away from political activity. They were afraid I'd risk my life, things that commonly happen when we're dealing with authoritarian rule.

Soon after receiving my letter, my mother immediately called me. She became very worried that I would not only risk my life, but moreover would be mad because of the disappointment of not having friends in this idealistic struggle. But later she knew that she did not have to worry too much for the road is not as quiet as she imagined.

Unwilling to Testify

Two years after the May 1998 tragedy, I joined *Komnas Perempuan* (the National Commission for Women), an independent state agency that was born from the

tragedy. At that time, I was asked to assist the organization of a national workshop on the protection of witnesses and victims. The issue surfaced after the tragedy because there were no victims who were willing to appear to testify in public and go to the courts. This condition caused increasingly strong accusations that mass rape and sexual assault in the May 1998 riots were a mere thumb sucking and was undermining effort to unify Indonesia.

That accusation was glued to the stereotype that was developed in the New Order era that the Chinese, because of their cultural proximity with China, never really could be Indonesian. These accusations came out not only from the public but also from government officials. While the allegations continued, a young woman, Ita Martadinata, was killed. She was a daughter of a volunteer who helped the May 1998 riot victims. The killing occurred before their departure to America. According to news that developed, they were going to testify about the sexual violence in the riots of May 1998. The official information from the police denied that the killing was related to the planned departure but was a usual criminal case. A further development of the news said that it was Ita's sexual behaviour that ignited the murder. For the ethnic Chinese, the news had caused more discouragement that there would be a way for them to demand justice. Given such a political situation—let alone the legal definition of rape that potentially could nullify the victim's testimony—even if I was a victim, I might not testify.

Besides the related cases of May 1998, the meeting also discussed the need for protection of witnesses and victims of human rights violations where there were indications of involvement of government officials as perpetrators of the violence, such as in Aceh, Papua and East Timor (later named Timor Leste). Also, in the context of conflicts in various parts of Indonesia that occur between communities of different ethnic or religious backgrounds such as in Ambon, Poso, Sambas, and Sampit. It made me aware that there are many initiatives in the community that

emerged after the riots in May 1998 to support women victims of violence. From my companions who come from different backgrounds and various ages, I felt the warmth and strong solidarity to take a step at a time and seize the space for the disclosure of cases of human rights violations based on gender, and bring justice and restoration for women victims. This experience made me confident to join Komnas Perempuan, which I belong to to this day.

With every opportunity I get to meet and learn with more and more women counselors of victims of violence and counselors in post-conflict communities, I explore the complexity of the dynamics of the role and position of women in conflict. There are at least three things that became the focus of my attention. First, women do not only become the victims either directly or indirectly, or become the actors for peace during conflict; they may also have been involved in violence themselves. Their involvement in violence may not only be caused by the mobilization of groups by using the justification of revenge for relatives killed in the conflict, religion and group interests. There are also women who use engagement as a way of climbing the ladder in the social hierarchy in society, but usually not in the armed group themselves because they are more often placed in the rear with low command positions. Some female victim counselors who become actors for peace were once actually a part of armed groups. They changed course as they watched the misery caused by acts of violence and slowly began to question the justifications that were used to perpetuate conflict and violence and discrimination against women. These changes do not lead to essentialist justification that women are creatures of peace, but rather shows the process of awakening of critical awareness on social justice issues.

Secondly, peace efforts made by women are usually low profile, but at the same time are sustainable. The most important of these is the awareness effort to break the myth of the dichotomy between peace efforts and the elimination of

violence against women, there can be no peace when violence against women is tolerated and allowed. It is not separated from the actual experience of post-conflict women that shows they continue to deal with a variety of forms of discrimination and violence in their positions as daughters, wives, and female members of their communities, after the “peace treaty” is signed.

Thirdly, both female victim counselors and females in communities find it difficult to reveal the problems they face as women human rights defenders without feeling ashamed or guilty about the victims they counsel. In fact, many of them are burnt out by their tremendous never-ending workload, while at the same time they have to deal with various problems in their personal life. Indeed, they are strong women with patience, perseverance and creativity in seeking a breakthrough and whose independence is tested in their activisms. It is their commitment that makes them survive and continue to support each other. Their commitment also inspires many other people to work for women victims and communities in their areas and in various other areas. I was one of those many people who were inspired by them, then and now. They are the reason for my existence, the source of my strength when I feel tired, and my comrades in the struggle which I realize is a long one.

Time to Build Up a Sense of Security

By the ten-year anniversary of May 1998 riots, I was asked to become assistant to Mrs. Saparinah Sadli as a Special Rapporteur for *Komnas Perempuan* about sexual assault in May 1998. The mandate of the Special Rapporteur is to document the current condition of the victims and the May 1998 victim counselors and provide recommendations in an effort to support the recovery of the victims. At the organizational level, the decision for this documentation is important because during the past five years there have been no specific activities that relate directly

to the May 1998 unrest. Nevertheless, an understanding of the complexity of the May 1998 problems along with cases of sexual violence in the context of other conflicts has always been a point of departure and a compass for *Komnas Perempuan* to develop systemic intervention strategies for the realisation of the rights women victims.

I accepted the assignment with joy, although I understand that I have to deal with at least two major challenges. First, a possible threat to my safety due to the possibility of those who are not only reluctant to acknowledge but do not want the May 1998 case to be re-opened. Second, the possibility that the victims will reject the re-opening of these cases and refuse to recall the events and on-going processes concerning the May 1998 unrest which caused a profound trauma to them, their families and communities. In this situation, we begin the process of documenting by searching for information via the counselors.

It turned out that even obtaining information from the counselors was not easy. Information may not have even been collected if it were not for Mrs. Saparinah Sadli, one of the key figures of the Indonesian women's movement. Mrs. Saparinah is also a member of the Joint Fact Finding Team (Tim Gabungan Pencari Fakta/TGPF) of the 13-15 May 1998 unrest which was formed by the government of the Republic of Indonesia immediately after the riots. In this capacity, she had met a number of counselors in the verification process for sexual assault cases in May 1998. Her stance on the recovery of women victims and her commitment to the upholding of human rights made the counselors believe her and so they were willing to be interviewed.

The counselors' interview is the toughest part of the task. Most of the counselors are not professionals, although some of them have a background in social work. They are housewives, professors, teachers, clergy, human rights activists, doctors, volunteers and social workers who met with victims of sexual violence because they were trusted by the victim or the victim's family. During this time they were

silent, as requested by the victim or her family, although they were eager to stop any who denied the existence of the victims or the crime. This denial inflicted wounds in their hearts because they witnessed directly the victims and their families who bore the pain resulting from sexual violence, and felt the profound disappointment toward the nation they love, even to the point of losing hope for the country. The counselors' pain increased when they were accused of self interest, or of merely seeking popularity, because they were fighting for the people of the same ethnicity without thinking about other groups who were also victims of the unrest in May 1998, or of wanting to speak ill of Indonesia. A number of counselors internalized the pain and trauma of the victims in their counseling, so much so that this affected their personal relationships. Some are deciding to no longer relate themselves to issues of human rights violations that might cause them to again experience a similar disappointment.

Interviews with the counselors were difficult not only because I had to watch them "hurt once again" for recounting something that they kept closed over the years. Furthermore, every interview shook me because it brought back the tragedy into my life. As I heard the details of the violence suffered by the victims, I was thrown into the time path when I felt very scared on the day of the riots. Each victim's howling question about why she became a victim poured sourness on the pain that is rooted in my experience of growing up as a Chinese woman in Indonesia. Any request from a victim's family to the counselors not to disclose the victim's whereabouts reminded me of my own mom's anxiety in those days. Every request by the families of victims or by some of the counselors not to be contacted and be again reminded of the incident, echoed a feeling of emptiness that is indescribable. One counselor said that with every request came a sense of loss in her heart, because she was "kind of wanting to forget ..., but deep in her subconscious lies memories which cannot be closed."

Luckily I was able to discuss my experiences during this interview with Mrs. Saparinah and Nana, who is also Chairman of *Komnas Perempuan* with whom I often shared my feelings, every time I felt cornered by my identity-related issues. Through discussion of these experiences, I became aware that in the past eight years, I was actually still in the stages of processing the pain and sense of trauma that came from experiencing the discrimination and unrest in May 1998. Because there is no open recognition by the state or systemic efforts to end discrimination based on ethnicity, the process has staggered along, and each time, it's possible that the experience of discrimination deepens.

To tread on those experiences, I also understand the meaning of recovery as not a static condition but a process of ups and downs that occurs when there is trust space to understand the process. This process cannot begin with coercion to forget a painful event, but needs rather to be looked at, the pain inflicted acknowledged, and the reasons why it happened examined. From this point, we can rise up and grow, not just find a way to heal the pain, but also contribute to ensuring that similar incidents will not happen to others. Meanwhile, trust space should be provided by other parties in addition to the recognition of the existence of a painful event, understanding the process of ups and downs that will be experienced by the victim, and a way to help ensure similar incidents do not recur. Without the trust space, there can be no victims that can contemplate the pain to start the recovery process.

In the context of the tragedy in May 1998, the recovery process for the victims and also for the counselors was hindered because the point of departure to begin the recovery process of victims had not arrived. On the contrary, the victims were forced to remain silent and people were made doubtful and later forgot the incident that tore our humanity apart.

As a result, this condition only presents a false peace for ten years after the tragedy in May 1998. Within each of the victims keeps growing the solitude of a broken hope as they realize they will never obtain truth and justice. In the community of victims is also rooted a fear that similar incidents might recur, not only among the Chinese community, but women in general. In the other groups in society fears are nurtured that similar events could happen to other community groups as well.

Under this condition of apparent peace, with the principle of not re-victimizing victims because the main objective is precisely to establish the recovery process of victims, the report of the documentation was delivered to the public and the State on May 15, 2008. "*Saatnya Meneguhkan Rasa Aman*" (It is Time to Build Up a Sense of Security) was the title chosen by Mrs. Saparinah with a message for the government and the public to no longer require the testimony of the victims and immediately stop the controversies over the presence or absence of sexual violence in May 1998, because the fact is that there are victims. When the controversy continued, it is not only the victims that suffer but also the Indonesian people because they could not look at their past honestly.

We received varied responses to the report. There are two statements that specifically need to be addressed here. First, a Chinese woman who attended the launch of the report said that what *Komnas Perempuan* had shown was that they, as Chinese women, are no longer alone in facing the impact of the riots of May 1998. Previously, as a Chinese woman, she felt she had to wrestle alone with the problem and the memory of violence against women in the riots of May 1998. Second, a counselor separately said that the assertion made by the report had given him a new strength to rise from all the pain that had surfaced in the process of assisting the May 1998 case. Both statements reaffirmed the importance of a genuine recognition of the experience of violence for the recovery process of each person affected by the violence.

In addition to these statements, *Komnas Perempuan* received support to work together to continue efforts to consolidate the recovery of the victims, to ensure against forgetting at the community level, and to build an assurance that similar incidents are not repeated in the future. There remain parties who still doubt, who have not moved from positivistic thinking which demands the presence of victims in public, and who even intend to maintain impunity for perpetrators by intentionally burying the incident and removing it from the record of Indonesian history. A media worker who also supports the fight against forgetting it illustrates that this work must be done carefully, such as preparing for a marriage, he said:

"We make sure that the fire continued to burn to warm food. The fire is not too large so that food is not burnt because it was too hot; that the fire does not die out so that food is cold and becomes stale. All we have prepared, until the day of our wedding – in this case the victims – is that they are ready and willing to go into the room and eat a meal."

Politicization of Identity

Similar conditions for resolving cases of sexual assault in May 1998 to avoid such "false peace", the need to build a trust space for victim recovery efforts, and the exigencies of the struggle against forgetting actually also apply to various other contexts of human rights violations in Indonesia. The incidence of sexual violence seems to evaporate from the discourse of conflict resolution and human rights violations. For example, the court of human rights-related violence committed during the referendum on East Timor (now Timor Leste) did not pay attention to cases of rape and sexual slavery in East Timor. In Aceh, although the experiences of women victims of rape used to obtain the national and international public

sympathy — after the Helsinki peace agreement — was denied. Women victims of rape are not considered a priority of post-conflict reparation. Infact there is even an insistence that they should prove that they really had been raped. In Poso, the issue of rape in the attacks on the villages is not taken seriously by law enforcement officials when the issue is constantly used as a provocation to ignite inter-community clashes. In Ambon, Aceh and Poso, cases of sexual exploitation by security forces who court young women till they became pregnant and then abandon them has yet to receive serious attention from security institutions.

The conflict resolution approach to sexual violence is like the chaff that keeps the fire peaceful on the surface but hides the glowing embers underneath. There is no serious conflict resolution measure here that can restore the order of a society that is torn by conflict. On the contrary, ethnic or religious-based prejudice that emerges during the conflict is allowed to exist. For instance, witness how in Ambon and Poso zoning continues to divide Muslim and Christian communities. The meeting of both communities which is initiated by the government is never out of the momentarily symbolic framework while autonomous efforts initiated by society are continually resisted. In West Kalimantan, Madura ethnic communities who are in conflict with indigenous people such as the Dayak and Melayu are still not allowed to move into areas other than the provincial capital and relocation areas. In Papua, the indigenous versus immigrant sentiment continues to be nurtured. In Aceh, one answer to conflict resolution is the implementation of Islamic Sharia, as if the Aceh conflict is about religion and not an issue of governance, of natural resources exploitation that was the root cause of oppression in the region.

The same ember is brought to life by the practice of state administration in the era of regional autonomy. Introduced as a mechanism for democratizing Indonesia after the New Order's authoritarian regime, regional autonomy has now become a space to harden the politicization of identity. The problem is that

in direct election of regional heads, only native sons can lead an area. Various regions do not hesitate to issue regional policy that would institutionalize discrimination against internal minorities and against women. This policy is usually based on a single understanding of the majority religion, namely Islam, to build the image of the identity of the population in the region. Among other things, it regulates Muslim clothing (the hijab for women), reading and writing the Koran as a condition for promotion or to meet with public officials, the Arabic alphabet for public buildings, setting curfews on movement and the use of public space, and issues edicts on prostitution and alcohol. Such a policy marginalizes minority groups and instigates attacks against certain groups in the name of religious purity and respect for the religion of the majority. At the national level, the institutionalization of discrimination through laws such as the Pornography Act has led to widespread opposition, to the extent that some areas with non Islamic-majority seek to break away from Indonesia.

During the current political dynamics related to the election of legislative council members (April 2009) and presidential elections (July 2009), the issue of religious and ethnic-based identity became stronger. Allegations that candidates for president and vice president appeared less Islamic, were redressed by candidates by presenting a more Islamic image , including by using their respective spouses. This was an odd accusation, since Indonesia is not an Islamic state and therefore the president is not a religious symbol. What was most strange was the response, because it showed that political elites were opportunists, playing in the politicization of this identity without thinking of the implications for building the nation-state of Indonesia.

In such a situation, I and some friends who work with the community became alarmed. The crisis of national leadership shown by the attitude of the political elite at the top is like a dry season which dries up husk, namely the people at the grass root level. Dry husks burn easily, especially with increasing economic

pressure. Because the nurtured ember is based on ethnic and religious prejudices, then every time there is potential for this conflict to explode and spread widely.

In this situation, building just a trust space for the recovery of victims and against forgetting is not enough. We need a more powerful strategy for building political consciousness of society in order not to be consumed by the politicization of identity and not to give priority to violence in solving a problem. Without this awareness, then what is present would only be an artificial and fragile peace. We are still searching for a powerful strategy to achieve this. The strategy which we have established and are experimenting with is based on learning outcomes of cross-community and cross-experience across generations. Each of us brings strength, and we gain strength from each other. This is the only way we know to be efficacious for the process of building strategies and to continue making our dream come true, that someday we will be able to present a true peace, which is a condition when every person, whatever their background, can live free - free from a feeling of either fear of threat, free from acts of violence and discrimination, a freedom in which they can enjoy their human rights as equal human beings with other human being, without exception.

In these conditions, the fulfillment of the rights of victims to truth, justice and recovery is a necessity which is put forth by all parties, by both the state and the society. In this condition, each person will selflessly contribute to the strengthening of a sense of humanity and peace based on respect for human rights.

I'm sure there are many friends who also feel this dream is enough to become our living universe. We hold this dream as a vision we live it as a mission. We nurture this common dream and we transmit it to those who are willing to fight together and who will continue it. Because we believe, one day this dream will materialize.

Pontianak, 30 May 2009

2.2 Understanding the Journey

Th. J. Erlijna – Institut Sejarah Sosial Indonesia

Where should I begin the reflection on my life as a female activist? There are too many stories I want to share, mainly because I want to include my experience as part of the history of my nation, as well as the journey of its women. I also want to have my experience understood as part of the history of the national movements of Asia. Therefore, since my experience is part of a greater history, I believe that without explaining the whole context, the fragments I want to share will be easily misunderstood.

In 1995, when I first started to learn about the people outside my home, my campus and my church, I was faced with poverty. My family is not rich. My parents had to struggle to put their four children through schools which they believed would guarantee our future. I sometimes could not pay my tuition fee on time. One time, when I was in high school, a friend found white spots in my fingernails. She believed that I was malnourished, a poor people's disease. She was kind enough to bring me apples and bread for the next few days. I don't know whether her theory was right or not, but this made me believe that I was poor. What I didn't know was that until then, I had never actually seen real poverty; problems that I later learned as part of the everyday struggle of poor people. 'Dropping out of school' or 'eviction', did not have any meaning in my ears then. Taking care of my ID was for me, a regular administrative matter, not a struggle to gain acknowledgement as a legal resident of an area. I thought of government apparatus, from RT, RW to lurah as officers who took care of residences' administration, not officers that might change the course of life for my family. I also did not have any relative that had to deal with the Satpol PP (municipal security and order police), an extension of the regional government to clear public spaces of all types of unwanted communities and objects.

The Village under the Bridge

I had the chance to see poverty in an urban slum in my first year of university. My campus friends and I organized a social work activity. We cooperated with Jentera Muda Jakarta (JMJ), a youth organization that provided alternative education for children in Kampung Jembatan, and organized the youth. At that time, I realized that there was another standard of poverty, in the form of dirty little children living in a dirty populated area, on the banks of a river full of smelly garbage. One of the children was a boy, Yogi, who could draw well chose three colours: light brown, dark brown and black to draw the situation in his area: houses, people, carts and bicycles to collect scrap metals, and the highway that was visible. Those three colors actually dominated Kampung Jembatan. After that, I decided to join JMJ. It was almost 1995.

I believe my decision was not because I pitied the children. I did not agree with the description of poor children and people often portrayed in the mass media, especially on television. They were not freaks who lived in abject sadness and despair. The children were the same as other children: cheerful, sometimes fussy and naughty, always full of energy, and were agitated when they had to study for a quarter of an hour. This was why I felt I could help them study. Their problem was what caused their poverty, and this was never exposed by the mass media.

From my involvement with the children of Kampung Jembatan and their families, I understood that poverty was not based on how much a household earned. The average income of an adult scrap metal collector in Kampung Jembatan was almost as much as a middle level employee in the State Oil and Gas Company, like my father. However, if my father had family health insurance, soft-loans for housing, insurance and other benefits, the scrap metal collector – with higher risk of accident during work – must pay for these himself. In addition, he was always outside of the protection of the law. The people of Kampung Jembatan were

people displaced from their hometown in Indramayu and other places in Java and Madura Island due to the destruction of the village economy because of government policy, especially since the seventies. They came to Jakarta as people who were morally defeated. They were further defeated with the label of "illegal migrants," a social disease, of being disorderly people and violators of the security and beauty of the city. The Regional Government of DKI Jakarta, co-operating with the police and military, actively reinforced the labels.

The people of Kampung Jembatan could talk a lot about their rights to me and my friends. But they could not say any word in front of the state apparatus, from the RW to municipal officers. These people had the right to issue their ID card, which was evidence of acknowledgement of their existence and a guarantee for work security. The State apparatus was the authority that determined how long they could live on the riverbanks; when they had to move to other places; how to distribute the money from World Bank loans, distributed through a Social Security Network program or Employment Program and so on. These decisions were taken without involving the community. Meanwhile, the community felt that unemployment problems, the low bargaining power they had with the scrap metal factory owners and TBC that attacked many of the communities, were their problems, not those of the government or created by the government.

In many instances, when the community came face to face with the government apparatus, for example, during an eviction plan, my friends and I tried to get them to act as a group. However, there were many reasons why this was impossible. People living on the north of the river could not get along with the people on the south. The communities of Indramayu and Madura, who were the majority of Kampung Jembatan, were suspicious of each other. Yet nobody could explain a specific incident that gave rise to these suspicions. Even when we had a group, nobody wanted to be the spokesperson. The reason most often given was that they were not smart enough to talk. The community also thought that the

initiative to overcome the problems of the area, such as the annual flood and its impact, must come from the RW chief or from us. On the other hand, the RW chief was not considered part of the community, because he was the landlord of the land that the people rented, and he was of a different ethnicity. If there was any government program, the RW chief only discussed this with selected people that he personally chose from the community. The rest were only given instructions. In the past five years, after learning about the movement's history in Indonesia and its destruction in 1965, I realized why it was so difficult for the Kampung Jembatan community to organize themselves to fight for their own interests, not to mention negotiating with government apparatus. They did not have the experience because the state never allowed this to happen. It may be that the words organizing or negotiation made them afraid since this was associated with an act against the state.

One of JMJ's activities was to facilitate university students and other youths to be able to critically analyze the community situations and recruit new members. We then conducted social analysis training. My friends and I knew that engaging in that kind of activity could be considered subversive. There was always the risk of being disbanded and arrested. However, if you were careful, you could hold the program. One day, I made the error of photocopying the social analysis training documents in an army cooperative because I thought I could save on the printing cost. At that time, nothing happened, so we thought we were lucky. On the D-Day, we went to a house in the suburb where the training was to be conducted. The first two days went smoothly. But on the last day, Romo Sandyawan, Director of ISJ, called to warn us to immediately disband. He told us that some military personnel came to ISJ office looking for us. As a JMJ coordinator, I had to sign the invitations, so the soldiers were looking for me. Our ISJ friends who were facing these soldiers tried to cover for us. We decided to send the participants home. After moving to another location, we continued the event.

At the end of the nineties, the effort of the New Order to prevent young people from learning and analyzing the impact of their policy was felt to be futile. After participating in social analysis training conducted by a group of students in Yogyakarta, for three days a month I went there to learn more about society. Some of my JMJ friends went to Lampung to do the same activities. I saw that the activities and membership of (Solidaritas Mahasiswa Indonesia untuk Demokrasi) or SMID, a left wing student organ that became the seed for Partai Rakyat Demokratik or PRD, in Depok grew. I started to learn about the crimes of the New Order in Timor Leste and Papua, the sapping and repression of workers and their strict control over the media through discussions conducted by SMID. For JMJ, social analysis training at that time was a fighting tool that we liked to share with fellow young people. Therefore, up until the economic crisis of 1997-1998, we had organized trainings several times in the Depok area. My father even facilitated our activities for young people in church. But with the escalation of young people's activities, the repression of the New Order became even harsher until the 27 July, 1996 incident.

Lessons from State Repression

I was still making the community of Kampung Jembatan learn to organize themselves when other incidents such as the July 27, the kidnapping and enforced disappearances, the murder in Trisaksi, the 1998 May Tragedy, Semanggi I and II, Timor Leste and Aceh overtook us.

My involvement with the Kampung Jembatan people had made me think about the relationship between the state and its citizens. The state was not able to systematically ignore and marginalize its citizens, and the subsequent incidents made me see that the marginalization of citizens by the state could be in the form of murder, forced disappearance, arson, rape, sexual attack and destruction of opposing organizations. I really wanted to know what happened to my country.

What authority the state had to inflict such violence towards its citizens? I started to divide my attention between my activities in Kampung Jembatan and the victims' advocacy activities organized by (Tim Relawan untuk Kemanusiaan) or TRuK.

One of the founders of TRuK was Institut Sosial Jakarta (ISJ), the organization that gave birth to JMJ in 1990. JMJ and TRuK had its secretariat in the ISJ office. In many cases, JMJ always cooperated with Child Advocacy Bureau of ISJ. It was maybe due to this closeness that when ISJ with some organizations and community figures established a team to investigate the July 27 incidents – the start of TRuK – my name was put in as a member. This was the first time I was involved in investigation activities, so I had no idea what I should do. Meanwhile, people were so busy that no one had the time to orient me on my new responsibilities. I always remember that incident and the days after that as the most confusing time in my experience as an activist.

It started on Saturday, July 27, 1996. That afternoon; my friends and I were walking home from Kampung Jembatan to the ISF office when we noticed that something was wrong. Buses were running outside their routes. A friend who lived nearby the headquarters of (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia or PDI, was called to come home immediately by his family. At first, I thought the family was angry with my friend's involvement with JMJ. Some of my friends' families disagreed with their involvement with JMJ because they considered it interfered with school and may affect their future. To save my friend from her family's wrath, I decided to accompany her home. She was welcomed with a shoe thrown by her father. Later, my friend's siblings explained that they had been worried that something bad had happened to my friend. From morning to afternoon, they were watching as stones were being thrown at the headquarters of PDI. My friend's family was sure somebody had died, but they ran home to avoid being victimized. Listening to this, we called ISJ to ask what we could do. Some of our ISJ friends were

actually already on the scene, only 150 meters away from our friend's home. A friend was ordered to go there to take pictures of the incident, whereas the rest, including myself, were instructed to go back to the ISJ office and wait for further instructions. On our way back, I remembered I saw some soldiers in front of Tugu Proklamasi. The situation was intimidating. However, only two or three kilometers away, in Jatinegara area, people were going about their regular activities, as if nothing had happened.

Several days later, a friend from ISJ told me that an investigation team had been established and my job was to set up a database of the victims. The next morning, I was told to bring a bunch of flyers to Central Jakarta State Court. I was ordered to give these flyers to an ISJ member who was already there. Afterwards, I decided to go with a friend to places that I knew were central points for activists to congregate so I could start collecting the victims' data. We went to LBH, then to PIJAR secretariat, and a house in Depok where SMID members often gathered. I did not know then that I was being followed by an intelligence agent until I returned to the SJ office. I calmly left the office, went to a friend's house, took a bath and returned to the office. When I arrived at the office, two of my ISJ friends yelled at me. I felt like a fool. This incident made me realize that the subversive label was not only affixed to activists and groups that went against government policies on the front lines, but also to those who tried to protect and defend the challengers. This experience also made me understand further what I should do in later tragedies and events.

The situation after July 27 was really depressing. Members of ISJ, who had been my discussion partners, often disappeared from the office. I went to Yogya to find other fellow activists, but they were so scared. The popular term among activists at that time was: lying low. All activists tried not to do activities in broad daylight that might incite further violence. Suspicions also escalated among the activists. A friend in Yogya suspected me to be a double agent from Jakarta. But my

experience was nothing compared to my friends who participated in the child worker congress in Medan. The room was surrounded by soldiers and participants ordered to squat down and not talk to each other. The military considered the meeting, which discussed children who worked on the streets, as dangerous to the stability of the state. Afterwards, our PRD friends were arrested and Romo Sandyawan, Director of ISJ and his brother, Mr. Benny, were taken to court for sheltering these people.

The Reformation Movement

Thankfully, the “lying low” period did not last long. As I remember, the ISJ office began to be re-populated after our PRD friends were arrested and brought to court. While still maintaining the routine work at Kampung Jembatan, JMJ was tasked to do transcripts of court proceedings as well as providing food for our friends in Central Jakarta court. For food, my friends and I requested our mothers to wake up early and take turns cooking with minimal funds provided by the ISJ secretariat. During the 1998 Reformation movement, mothers’ cooking by themselves or together to feed young people and university students who were demonstrating became a widespread activity. I think some historical research needs to be done covering the period from 27 July up to the point when the activists regained the power to re-group, gain strength, engage more in public participation and launch the Reformation movement.

The Reformation Movement made me understand how powerful people can be when they are aroused. However, today, ten years after the big bang of street democracy ended, I can see the flaws of the movement. The series of big street demonstrations that took place during the reformation were not accompanied by the extension or growth of social organizations. At that time, I could not see the connection of JMJ’s work at Kampung Jembatan with the demonstration initiated by the students. On the other hand, the people of Kampung Jembatan often told

me: we trust the students. They were happy about the toppling of Suharto, but felt that events were moving outside their control.

Revisiting History

When I started to learn about Indonesian history, I realized that from the fifties to mid-sixties, this was what the left wing movement was doing. They were increasing efforts to link the independence revolution with people in urban and rural areas. Until the 1945 Declaration of Independence, the notion of Indonesian Independence only circulated among a small group of middle to upper class people. And only after the independence revolution war did the awareness of being Indonesian grow among the young people and those who lived in the villages. However, the villagers were only being mobilized to provide logistics, headquarters and shelter for the guerrillas. Only after full sovereignty was acquired did the ex-guerrillas have the chance to form community organizations that worked in providing education and organizing communities. They wanted to engage the larger mass of people in the work of building the Indonesian nation. Therefore, the debate on 'What Is Indonesia' resounded loudly in the fifties till the sixties. The New Order arbitrarily labeled that period the liberal democracy era and taught my generation that it was not according to the Pancasila democracy. During the 1965 incident, the activists of the previous community organizations and their incomplete works were destroyed by Suharto's military.

Learning from the Women of the Past

My activities at JMJ and Kampung Jembatan began to lessen and just stopped in early 2000. After that, I was involved in managing the data on Aceh conflict victims in TRuK, taking care of networking with groups in Aceh and organizing campaigns on anti-military emergency in schools and other communities. My involvement in the Aceh issue brought me to the conclusion that the concept of

Indonesia was a waste of time. If indeed Indonesia was there only to negate its citizens, let it tumble down. At that time I did not realize that the Military and the New Order Regime did not represent the Indonesia that the nationalist movement dreamt of in the early 20th century. I rechecked my preliminary conclusion when at the end of 2003, Agung Ayu from Institut Sejarah Sosial Indonesia (ISSI) asked me to prepare the publication of a collection of essays on the experience of the victims of the 1965 Incident, titled *Tahun yang Tak Pernah Berakhir* (January 2004).

What made me interested in *Tahun yang Tak Pernah Berakhir* at the beginning was not the stories of the victims, but the oral historical method used by the writers. I had done this life history interview method when I wanted to track the origin of poverty in the Kampung Jembatan community. However, at that time I did not know that oral history could be a tool to create a speaking venue for people ignored in the writing of mainstream history. This method made it possible to see the flow of history from many sides. The 1945 revolution history, for example, became different when you saw it from the perspective of a Balinese girl whose duty was to raise funds for the guerrilla war by conducting Dutch language classes. Her story made me realize that the 1945 revolution was more than mere war stories. The potential of oral history made me immediately agree when several months afterwards my friends from ISSI supported me to formulate my own research project on the Gerwani (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia), a left wing women's organization destroyed by the Suharto military in the 1965-1966 incident.

I never had any suspicions against the Gerwani and other left wing organizations. I do not know why the history lessons in school or Arifin C. Noer's movie that discredited Gerwani did not have any influence on me. That is why in 2000, when I first read Saskia Wieringa's book, *Penghancuran Gerakan Perempuan di Indonesia* (1999), I did not suffer any knowledge conflict, moral conflict or any other

conflict. On the other hand, neither was I impressed by the Gerwani. What I know from the book is that the activists of Gerwani were the victims of state violence. The organization and its role in the first 15 years after Indonesia attained freedom missed my attention. Only after I assisted in editing the language in the *Tahun yang Tak Pernah Berakhir* draft, did I want to know more about this organization. Again, the story of that Balinese girl from the Gerwani attracted my attention. She said that one of the Gerwani's activities was to found Melati Kindergartens. This KG was destroyed with the destruction of Gerwani in 1965. This education theme was better understood by me compared to other themes of women organization. When I checked Wieringa's book, it was written that the Gerwani claimed to have more than 1,400 Melati KG. I was compelled to find out more.

In the beginning I wanted through my research to reveal what made the Gerwani able to build so many Kindergartens with a literally empty cash box. I was sure that Gerwani must have a sophisticated strategy. I could not imagine any organization today able to achieve that, even with support from donor organizations. However, after half a year of research, none of the women that I interviewed were able to confirm the existence of this sophisticated strategy. Every time, they gave the same answer: cooperation and struggle. These Kindergarten were built with cooperation between Gerwani and the village communities and other left wing organizations. They voluntarily collected the equipment and facilities needed to build Kindergartens. The teachers were not paid, or if given a salary, it was minimal. These teachers taught without pay because they believed that this work was part of the fight to develop the nation. They believed in the words of Sukarno: The revolution is not over. It was as simple as that.

From these women activists of the past, I just knew that the terms cooperation, struggle, nation, had had deep meaning; whereas for me, and for people of my generation, these terms are empty words of the New Order. From this simple fact,

I felt that there was another Indonesia, the Indonesia that I never knew. And I want to know it from the perspective of these women. At that point, I decided to extend the theme of my research, not only on Melati KG, but to all parts of the Gerwani: on their ideas that lived within and were formulated through their organizational works in the field.

The women I interviewed were mostly regular members of Gerwani. Their stories on Gerwani were simple. They could talk more about Melati KG, communal savings and skills courses compared to the involvement of Gerwani in formal state politics, which Wieringa's book covered. Their stories on Gerwani's activities made people think that it was a regular women's organization, like the present PKK. However, Gerwani was different from the PKK. Gerwani was an autonomous mass organization; its membership was voluntary; and the leadership was not decided on the basis of the status of their husbands. Many of the women that I interviewed could not explain the political demands of Gerwani, but they could readily talk about the rights of women to have work, to develop themselves and take care of the welfare of their village. Again, a fleeting observation would make them seem ordinary. But put this awareness in the context of Indonesia in the 1950s and 1960s: village women, whose highest education was only elementary school, who could just assert themselves as part of the free country, who were bound with the cultural view that they belonged to their parents and husbands. Could we not see it as a great leap? Only 50-60 years ago Kartini screamed in her letters on the rights of women as humans and members of a nation. For me, this was actually the contribution of Gerwani; which was making these women believe that if they organized themselves, they would have the power to develop themselves and their communities. Through all of these, Gerwani tried to get these women to learn how to think about Indonesia: Indonesia that started from the villages.

In this context, I found that Melati KG had more meaning than just a kindergarten institution. Melati KG was also an educational institution for the women. The women learned how to organize village people to achieve the goals they determined, namely to build a kindergarten. Then, some of them participated in courses conducted by Gerwani to be teachers in these KGs. One of the priorities of Indonesia that had just become independent was to be equal to and acknowledged by other nations. Therefore, the Indonesian nation must prove that it was an advanced nation. This advancement could only be achieved through education. Thus, education became the important program of the government and educators were considered members of a respectable profession. Participation of these women in the national education program increased their importance in the eyes of the government and society. For the women themselves, their success in supporting the government's educational program increased their confidence. How these successes assisted negotiations with other powers in the community and the state to push for other interests of women needs to be further researched. What is clear is that these women activists, with their ideas and work, were later labeled whores and cold-blooded murderers by Suharto and his military. They were hunted, arrested, murdered, made to disappear, tortured and raped by the Suharto military in 1965-1966. After being arrested and exiled for scores of years by the New Order regime, they are still being prosecuted even now.

The research on Gerwani compelled me to study the history of the women's movement during the early half of the 20th century. There are many things about them – the people, the organizations, the ideas and the work – that I just knew in the past years. All of them seem to have disappeared from the records of history and collective memory. Even when I read the letters of Kartini – the first feminist in the national history record – as well as reading other writings about her, it was like finding a different figure than the one celebrated every April 21st. The most common activities every April 21st is the kebaya and hairdo pageant. But in one of

the books I read, I recall a letter of Roekmini – the sister of Kartini – to Mrs. Abendanon, in which it was said that Kartini was too busy thinking, reading, writing, making batik or arranging carving orders that she forgot about her appearance. She often wore patched clothing. What I learned was that Kartini not only demanded women's emancipation, she also demanded women's emancipation for other purposes, namely, the emancipation of the nation. During Kartini's period, there were no local organizations. Four years after the death of Kartini, Boedi Oetomo, the first local organization, was born. Four years later, women's organizations started to spring up inspiring the holding of the first women's congress in 1928. The rich dynamic of the women's movement in the 1930s and later years also disappeared from public discussion.

What I learned in the past five years made me aware that the New Order had destroyed and robbed the memories of the community. In exchange, they built the Lubang Buaya Monument and instilled their conception of an ideal woman: a woman that serves militaristic masochism. Therefore, it was on top of these women's bodies, the history of shaming the Gerwani, and invisibilising the contribution of the women movement, that the New Order built its regime. As long as this monument stands, the idea of women's subservience will remain justified. And all of these shaming practices, the robbing, the crimes, will be everlasting. After Suharto, governments continue to follow the tradition of holding an annual ceremony at Lubang Buaya, and now they have beautified the monument with a stone gateway, decorated with reliefs.

The New Order regime never prohibited women from accessing education and the professions they wanted. It was during the Suharto era that the number of educated and working women increased. The problem was that the New Order regime did not want these educated women to be critical of any kind of state injustice and arbitrariness that sacrificed communities. The same as in 1965-1966, the women that directly dealt with the community and the victims of violations

were the most vulnerable to violence. In the early 1990s, the New Order regime tortured and murdered Marsinah, a labor activist who fought for her and her friend's rights. At the end of the 1990s, they murdered Ita Martadinata, a high school student who was going to Geneva to give testimony on the mass rape of Chinese women in the 1998 May Tragedy. Till today, violence against women activists is ongoing. The perpetrators are not only the state, but also civilian groups. In a cross generation women activists' meeting conducted by *Komnas Perempuan* three years ago, some young women who were working in community organizing told of how they were terrorized, and accused of being 'Gerwani' – which meant being whores or practitioners of free sex -and had even suffered physical violence. In Bandung, some of my friends who held a reunion for women who were victims of the 1965 Incident were arrested and interrogated by police, after they let paramilitary groups attack and disrupt the event.

The state organizers nowadays are controlled by right wing movements, both Islam and free market, producing regulations and legislation that impoverish and tighten control on all citizens. History has taught us that in these situations, it is women who are most vulnerable and sacrificed first. Agung Ayu Ratih, in a cultural speech that she read for the anniversary of Jakarta Cultural Board last year, approximately said this: women will be victimized twice with the pro-free market economic policy and Anti-Pornography Law. After being impoverished, they would be force to sell their bodies to survive. And then they would be victimized again in the name of morality. The experience of the previous women activists taught me that the efforts to subdue women were the beginning of a greater object, to change the state system. I believe that this is what the right wing Islamic groups are doing. They are taking the preliminary steps to fight for a syariah based Islamic state concept, a concept that was rejected in the preliminary agreement on the founding of this nation-state. In their efforts, they work with the supporters of free market, a similar happening during the enactment of Anti-Pornography Law in the Parliament and in the 1965-1966 incident. Therefore, I

believe that this is the most appropriate time to recheck the preliminary agreement that gave birth to this nation, and to learn from the work of community organizing that has been done by the previous activists.

History and the Present Time

The Suharto military destroyed Gerwani and left wing social groups in 1965-1966, when they were promoting the involvement of community in national development. The New Order regime then closed the space for people in the community to organize themselves, and suppressed all efforts to debate about Indonesia. That is why the community of Kampung Jembatan, even students who moved Reformation, are all in limbo in doing organizing work and in formulating the nation and state. The Indonesia of the New Order Regime was a territorial matter, and the nationalist spirit they promoted was built on the negation of various civil groups: first the left wing groups, then Islamic groups, political parties outside of Golkar, students and activists that organized the masses, women who were involved in politics through channels not approved by the regime. The list would be longer if it was continued. With such great power, the New Order Regime did not meet many challenges when they sold state assets, destroyed the village economy, divided its citizens, attacked activists, organized mass riots and rapes. The same negation politics is preserved until now. Evictions of poor urban communities and farmers and neglecting the welfare of laborers and teachers are only two examples.

In my opinion, the Reformation Movement has recouped the space of the community and exposed the flaws of the 'truth' built by the New Order. The problem is, anti-national powers are often more aggressive and militant in utilizing this space to organize themselves and build new truths, both based on religion, beliefs on the efficacy of free market, or a marriage between the two. Evaluation of the structure of truth that we believed to be important is important

both to counter the developing negating politics as well as formulating new directions for this nation. However, outside of the efforts conducted by *Komnas HAM*, the state has actually closed the opportunity to examine the past. In the past decade, civil community was more diligent in revealing the truth. However, the impact of this revelation effort needs to be examined. From some interviews with non-victim communities that I conducted in Solo and in Jakarta on their memories of the 1965-1966 Incident, as well as from other activities with young people, I found an aversion to learning from the past. There are some people who protect themselves in the much-flawed New Order Regime's building of 'truth' because they are too lazy to access the findings of the new truth or do not have any interest in the past. However, there are also other people who intentionally close their eyes and ears to other facts that do not support their old beliefs. In some others, I actually find the attitude of 'as long as it is against' the truth of the New Order Regime. They could not give straight answers when I asked: so what do you think of as the truth?

For me, revealing the past is mainly not to prove the lies of the New Order Regime. Revealing the past is to know and to understand the various phenomena that happen around me. I think all experience will always give birth to a question why. Why are the Kampung Jembatan people poor? Why aren't they organized? Why does the state kill its citizens? Why is organizing the community considered to be dangerous? Why are the memories of the victims different from what history teachers taught us? Why the history of the women's movement was never explained in history lessons? - And so many other Whys. Oftentimes, I can find the answers to these questions in the past. By knowing the roots, my generation and I can understand what we are facing and can think of ways to overcome this. In an effort to track the past, I meet with people, ideas, and works destroyed, buried, left behind, and put aside by the New Order Regime. These ideas and works become more relevant within the present context. In many things I can say that activists of my generation and I are not starting something new. The belief that all

of these will be part of national history as well as the history of the women's movement makes this work more meaningful.

2.3 Transforming Suffering into Strength

Meri Djami – West Timor

There are no changes without revolution of the heart which touches the sense of humanity in a creative way. At the end of this process we will realize why we're still standing here. As a process to BECOME, this is probably a life-long one, which permeates time and space, and once again in a creative way. Thank God.

Becoming a Volunteer

After graduating from Senior High School in 1999, I did not immediately go to university. I joined a volunteer organization which had been established by the Indonesian Christian Varsity Student Movement (GMKI) and the Indonesian Christian Youth Movement (GAMKI). The name of the organization was the Center for Internally Displaced People's Service of the Christian Varsity Student Movement and the Indonesian Christian Youth Movement, abbreviated as CIS GAMKI-GMKI. CIS was established on September 09, 1999 to assist the people of East Timor seeking refuge after the announcement of the result of referendum.

At the time I was the youngest volunteer among 35 volunteers in the CIS and had the duty to assist refugees in North Kupang, Manulai Village, Matakte and Oematmunu. My duty involved attaining general data and information on the situation of refugees, such as the aid received, health, residence, security, welfare, and acceptance by local communities. In that location I did not work alone, I was working with three other friends. We worked together as a team. Our team visited the refugees almost every day and quickly became very friendly with them.

In Batakte village there were 12 families of refugees placed in an unoccupied private house. The house was called *RSS* (Highly Economical Housing), a housing project which had been a cooperation between the regional government and the private sector. Five of the families were headed by widows. From the widows I attained information that their lives were highly unsafe. Almost every night they could not sleep comfortably because there were always people keeping surveillance of their houses. A woman said, "Every night I hear the sound of people walking circling the house, sometimes they knock on the door or on the window. Always like that, without saying anything. In daylight we feel safe". Another woman expressed her hopes: "If there is any ship that can bring people home we want to go home to Timor, it is unsafe here."

I was assigned in North Kupang for only three months. I was transferred to Tuapukan camp, one of the densely populated refugee camps in West Timor. Two months after I had been transferred to Tuapukan, I went to *RSS* Batakte to visit refugees there. However, when I arrived at *RSS*, I only saw one family staying there and a man who was a member of the family did not know when or where the other 11 families had moved. I asked when was the last time he was with the 11 families, he simply answered: "long time". I tried pursuing the answer with a number of other questions, but the man gave the impression he resented the questions. After expressing gratitude, I left the man and tried finding information from the village office. From the village secretary I attained the information that the refugees in Batakte had been pro-Independence people of East Timor. Mr. Secretary did not provide any definite information, only presented a possibility, "Maybe they were picked up by the military, I saw a military truck coming out of *RSS* some time ago". Throughout 1999-2002, the military was always seen going to and fro while bearing arms in refugee areas. Also within this year conflicts between the refugees and local communities often occurred in the village areas where there was a concentration of refugees. A fellow CIS volunteer was in Tuapukan camp when a conflict erupted between the populace. They threw rocks

at each other, shooting with generic weapons, and women as well as children screaming hysterically, in fear. He took pictures of the situation and in the photographs it was visible some soldiers were standing by, watching the situation.

Tuapukan Camp was the camp with the largest refugee population in the District of Kupang. In 2002 there were 7000 refugees still living there. This number exceeded that of the village's local populace, which at that time was 1,000 people. The location of the camp initially had been designated for a salt mine by a company owned by the Cendana (former President Suharto's) family. A two-storey building had been built at this location before the refugees came, it was planned to be the office. The building was called "salt factory" by the local populace. When the refugees came, the building was utilized to be a health aid centre and the front yard was used as the place for the military to do briefing and the refugees to gather and hear announcements.

The condition of the Tuapukan camp was a source of concern, thousands of tarp tents and small rooms made of thin processed wood were erected side by side to create an elongated barrack, there was no special designated space for sleeping quarters, and the same was the case with the tents. In small, crowded spaces members of refugee families gathered, slept, cooked, prayed, and engaged in other activities. The crowded barracks did not have any floor, and the soil was damp because at that time it was rainy season. I saw many people, children, women and men sleeping on thin mats on damp soil. At the time many of them suffered from flu, diarrhoea, respiratory infections, skin diseases and other illnesses. Almost every day there would be a child dying because of diarrhoea and respiratory infection. Women and men looked older than their years, perhaps because of the pressures of life they had to bear. They had been separated from their motherland, and it was difficult to ascertain what would come next in life for them. The CIS volunteers provided general and specific health care for mothers and children under five years old, but the capacity of the service was limited

because it could not fulfill everyone's needs, not to mention the medical practitioners from Betesda Hospital-Jogjakarta, which was a partner of CIS, amounted to not even 10 people.

One day a man was cleaning a mat with the rain that was pouring hard. His wife had just had a baby son that morning and was lying on a dry mat, her arms curved to protect the baby from the cold. "This is our tenth child. God has given us too many" said the wife to me. We both exchanged stories throughout that day, sometimes one of her children would beg her to buy snacks sold at many places in the camp location while others were waiting for the response of the mother or maybe of the mother's new friend.

The refugees tried to survive in limited situations, long lines to draw clean water, waiting for their names to be called to get aid and sometimes fighting each other for aid; this was a sight that one often found. There were children naked, without shoes, with watery noses, playing freely as if they had no burden in life. It was as if God had created the world with children as its only inhabitants. Adults found it hard to enter that world. The women worked hard every day, trading in front of their barracks, taking care of all the needs of the family, did all the housework, while binding strings and weaving materials. During spare times women would sit together, talking while seeking ticks on each other's head. The men would often be found together playing billiard, playing cards, or caring for their cocks. Only a small number of men would be carrying firewood, drawing water, or carrying children.

For six months CIS volunteers visited refugee camps providing health mission, food and clothes as well as information. I carried out my duties as a volunteer to gain experience, nothing more! At one point, in the year 2000, all CIS volunteers wrote what they thought about the East Timorese refugees through a game called *flower petals*. Various negative identifications were expressed on the white board

within the flower petals we drew ourselves: dirty, lazy, dependent on aid, evil, harsh, have killed before, lived in an inadequate place and other negative comments expressed in black markers by the hands of the volunteers who at that time had been working for six months for the cause of humanity in the refugee camps. After being satisfied with drawing the flower petals for the refugees, we drew our own flower petals, within which there was no negative petal, we were varsity students, part of a clan, lovers of music, members of youth organization etc. Not one volunteer suspected the objective of the game. The facilitator then criticized the image of refugees that each volunteer had. We came to realizing this for ourselves when we compared the flower petals for the refugees and our own.

Basically we forgot that the refugees were also humans just as we were, who of course had human identities in general. Just like an amnesia patient who just recovered her/his memory, we were surprised with our own perceptions of the refugees we had adopted previously. Myra Diarsi from The National Commission on Violence against Women and Nani Buntarian facilitated this activity with the objective of strengthening the volunteers. Both assisted us with enlightenment on the concepts of humanitarianism and inter-human relations, including power relations existing within the spaces of class, gender, race, etc. I can ascertain that there was not one CIS volunteer who felt the same as before they had experienced this activity. I myself felt that this was the first step for me in initiating change.

Childhood

My childhood was beautiful, I had many friends. Every Sunday, after Sunday school, my friends would gather in my house and we would play to our heart's satisfaction. We would build sand houses beside our houses. I would plant grass in the yard of our sand houses. This drew compliments from my friend, and it made me proud. My father was hospitalized because he had liver problems and skin

cancer. A year later he died. I was still in kindergarten at the time. After father passed away, mother had to work by herself to support us.

I was born in Kupang on May 31st, 1981 and was the fourth child of five. Father left us a house and a monthly pension of thirty thousand Rupiahs. The money was not enough to raise the five of us, thus mother had to work hard. She would wake up early, making snacks to be sold from door to door. The five of us would help in selling the snacks every day, morning and afternoon. I remember one time mother spoke to us, saying that she suspected she would not be able to afford putting us to school if we only depended on her. She said by studying hard, we would get good marks and would be eligible for scholarships and therefore she would not have to bear the burden of school fees by herself. What she said was true. We did so and earned scholarships. I was on scholarship until I graduated from Senior High School and my older siblings also had been granted scholarships. The only one who did not was our younger sibling.

Mother stood in front of the bathroom, calling her daughter's name in panic. A young girl ran to her and stood in front of her with tears running down her face, making no sound, and with heart beating fast. She hugged the girl and cried. Her body shook; in her hands she held a blue underpants with blood spots. She hugged her daughter who was not even five years old. 23 years ago I did not know how I could soundlessly weep at the time. But I could feel the pain of a mother for a daughter.

I was raped when I was five years old by a distant relative. He was my uncle. Some weeks later after the incident mother and I often went to the police station and general hospital. During one visit to the hospital, I told mother that I was very tired. She only hugged me and kissed my head. That time she did not cry anymore. I remembered one of the examinations I had to go through made me very scared. A woman doctor put on a white latex glove and inserted her finger

into my vagina. I screamed loudly and violently cried. She tried to calm me down and said "this doesn't hurt..." but I closed my eyes and continued crying. At that moment mother went into the room and hugged me. With me in her arms the doctor continued her task. I remembered mother hugged me while praying. I did not open my eyes until I woke up and found myself already in a public minibus. I fell asleep in her embrace so she had to carry me home. Since then I often feel uncomfortable when passing a police station or brought to a general hospital.

As a Woman

In 2000 I enlisted myself in one university in Kupang city, I was 19 then. I had never imagined that it was going to be the bitterest experience in my life. One of the prerequisites to enlist myself to the university was to submit a Letter of Good Behaviour (SKKB) to be issued by the local police, something that I had to take care of myself. I went to the police station to have the SKKB issued; some of the rooms there triggered memories of 14 years ago. The process to issue SKKB took almost one hour, because there were many varsity students in line. When I was about to leave the station, I passed the door of a room and a police said hello to me. I stopped for a bit to chitchat. But I was surprised when I saw my scanned photo in the computer in the room. I strained my neck through the door to ascertain the photo in the computer. It was a photograph of a little girl with shoulder length hair wearing a white shirt with a red vest with black lines. *That was me!* I quickly ceased our conversation and left the station with slight tremors all over my body. I went home walking, it was approximately 3 km. I felt like I was floating but it was a way to calm myself.

I was one of the smart students in school, independent, courageous, and full of confidence. I had never felt shy or afraid in expressing my opinion. When I was nine years old I was asked to lead a prayer in a prayer group attended by many adults. My mother was so proud of me then. Some months later the leader of the

prayer group asked me to lead the sermon and I did it well. But all of those achievements felt like nothing when I was walking home from the police station that afternoon. Since then I had an additional phobia, namely when I had to face a computer, That experience of violence made me felt powerless and not confident, shy, alone and useless. *I am just a female rape victim.*

As an Agent of Change: A Beginner

The CIS organization held a weekly meeting every Saturday. We called this meeting Volunteer Reflection. In a volunteer reflection in 2002, I had the special task to provide a chronological account of a rape case in Tuapukan village. I took up the task half-heartedly, because I immediately felt that it was a hard task. At the time I thought, "Who would want to tell about the incident to other people", as I knew I would rather hide my experience of sexual violence from others. I thought the task would definitely be unsuccessful.

Being in Tuapukan camp made me feel comfortable; every day I could meet new friends, playing and singing with children and listening to various interesting life stories that sometimes left me with mixed feelings. It was not rare for me to spend the night with a family of refugees, staying up until the middle of the night to hear their stories and songs. My fellow volunteer and I even sometimes went to the campus from the camp. This is an experience that I will never forget.

But this special task on rape made me feel very reluctant to go to the camp. I had delayed two days with various excuses to not do the task, hoping that the other volunteers would take over the task. But there was no one. So that day I went to the camp to confirm several pieces of preliminary information related to the rape case. *A nine year old girl was raped by her uncle when they were off looking for firewood. The location of the incident was not too far from the house. The*

perpetrator had already been arrested and was in the Sectoral Police Station of Babau.

I met with a woman who was willing to give me the chronology of the case. The woman was the wife of the perpetrator, who happened to also be the aunt of the victim. She was 8 months pregnant at that time and was shocked at the crime committed by her husband. At that time the victim's mother prohibited everyone from seeing the victim and the child was not allowed to leave the room. The aunt of the victim gave all the information needed. After saying thank you, I bid my farewell, and went back to the CIS post to write the report. That afternoon there was to be a discussion on the case report and I chose not to attend.

That night I could not sleep imagining that incident that also had happened to me 17 years previously. I cried and prayed the whole night. And I was surprised by an idea that emerged in my head. *You were not the only girl who was subjected to a rape. A little girl at the corner of that camp also had gone through that and may be thousands of other children had gone through that. "You are not alone in the world. This afternoon you went to the camp and you only thought of yourself, you actually did not care at all about the incident. You only wrote the chronology and that was it! And that would mean nothing for anyone.* I cried my heart out, realizing that the suppressed depression and trauma in me had turned me into an egotistical woman who did not take the side of the little girl. I was reminded of Ms. Myra's words in the previous volunteer empowerment meeting: *trauma has to be pulled out and brought onto the table.* Ms. Myra affirmed these words several times. For me the sentence became, *the trauma has to be placed on top, Media!* [Media is my nickname which is taken from the syllable of my first and last names] That night I really rediscovered myself and a feeling of care for a little girl emerged although I had never met her. My heart yearned to meet that girl.

The next day I went to the camp earlier than usual - I passed in front of the little girl's house, let us call her Shintia. I saw Shintia's mother pounding corn and her aunt sweeping the house. "Good morning mother, can I sit here?" I called out to Shintia's mother. She permitted me and I sat, helping her peel corn. We grew friendlier to one another. She offered me corn to eat and asked me not to immediately leave her house. We cooked corn in her kitchen and it was then that I saw a little girl sleeping deeply. Some minutes passed and she roused from her sleep. The mother looked her way and then at me, as if trying to say something she was holding back. I felt another feeling that made my heart beat faster.

Shintia came down from the *bale-bale* (mattress-less bed) and joined us in front of the stove. I tried hard to calm myself by expelling my breath softly. "Good morning, little sister" I said hello to Shintia. Then the mother started to tell me about what had happened to her daughter. Not long after Shintia's father came in and we all gathered in front of the stove as if we were one family. The mother wiped her tears and the father could only bow his head. Shintia was their firstborn out of four children, and the only daughter they had. She was still in the third grade of elementary school, in a tent school nearby her house.

I started talking, telling them that Shintia was not the only child who had experienced such an incident. I introduced more of myself and told them the incident that had happened to me and my mother. Shintia started to tell her story and I kneeled in front of her so I could look into her eyes. I told Shintia that she was not alone; we could still go to school and pursue our dreams. Shintia smiled and we held each other tightly. Shintia's parents seemed very touched. And then we started talking about the punishment for the rape perpetrator.

Shintia's father felt very sad because he had to put his own brother to jail. He wanted to bring him out so he could be processed in accordance with tribal customs. But Shintia's mother and I disagreed. Despite this, Shintia's father was

adamant. He said "He is my brother by blood, he has a pregnant wife, who will feed them when he is in jail, and he has three children!" Shintia's father prioritized the family rather than pursuing judicial justice for his daughter. I tried to offer some considerations but it did not alter the decision of the head of the family. Tribal customary law could not bring about the deterrent effect because the only form of punishment was a fine. And if the perpetrator could not pay it yet, then it would be considered as a debt without any definite time limit for the payment. Moreover, their customary law really put the burden on the family of the victim. The family of the victim had to prepare everything for the tribal leader to process the case in their house. Food, drink, beetle nut, *sirih* leaves, etc. has to be prepared, whereas the accused perpetrator only had to wait for a material decision and the amount of the fine.

I could only hope that police would refuse to let this case be resolved by tribal custom, because rape was a crime. But it was an unfulfilled hope. Shintia's uncle was fined one hog, 5 pieces of *tais* (the traditional weaving of Timor), 50 kg of rice and money to the amount of Rp. 5 millions. Until now the items have not been delivered, yet the case has been considered resolved.

Shintia received medical care in a general hospital. The father took her for each examination, whereas the mother could not accompany her because she was unaccustomed to the roads in a large city. Since then Shintia and I have become good friends. Both of us really care about other women subjected to sexual violence.

There were two more rape incidents in the camp after Shintia's case. A 48 year old woman was subjected to attempted rape by an unknown man when she was on the way home from her small plantation and a teenage girl with mental limitation, aged 15 years old, was raped by an old man who was her neighbour. In those instances I did not only try to strengthen the victims and their families... I

started talking about this in community meetings. I did not hesitate to talk in front of the tribal leader, community coordinator, the camp youth leaders, the church figures and the fathers about the protection of women and girls. I also talked about the customary tribal law that in reality placed light responsibility on the perpetrators of violence against women and girls. Some women responded positively to the effort. They asked one another to accompany each other when going to plantation or seeking firewood. Some women started to share their suffering as a result of the domestic violence they were subjected to by their husbands, and the suffering of other women.

They started to trust one another and tried to empower one another. Not only that, they also tried to find a collective solution by studying the husbands' pattern of violence; how often it happened, what triggered it, what were the triggers, what was the situation of the husband, etc. Domestic violence was no longer considered a shame that had to be kept secret as had been believed thus far. We dismantled this notion, pulled it out and placed it on the table. And we felt like we had found freedom. This experience really strengthened me privately and was passed onto several other women who were suffering. I was not ashamed to say that I was one of the rape victims. I had grown into a woman who loved her body and was proud of the Creator. Humans can take anything visible, even when it is adherent on the body, but no one could take what is in the heart. And in time I believe that we can return our world to what it is meant to be.

Meeting with Perpetrators; Reflection on Peace

I could never elaborate in detail the trauma due to rape. But I feel that the crime of rape involves the manipulation of power in a way that dismantles and destroys the victim's humanity, just like a tree that falls down after the woodcutter chopped it with his machete. It is a condition that should not be inflicted on anyone nor engaged in by anyone. After that restless night, not only did I

understand the dismantling of humanity that I needed to reassemble, but I also realized that I felt deep hatred against the perpetrator. This was a feeling I needed to resolve to perfect humanity itself. I thought of meeting the perpetrator to tell him how I hated him. And I did see him several days later at the house of one of my relatives. I picked up my courage and looked him in the eyes and said that I had a vengeful feeling. He bowed his head and started crying, begging for forgiveness. He expressed his deep regret not only in words and tears but also with a trembling body when facing a young woman, until that young woman could see that he was an ordinary, fragile human. We made peace then. I forgave the perpetrator without pressure and I gave that as my right to give. This is where I have to emphasize, that forgiveness is the right of the victims to give or not. I have explored this process, and it is not an easy one, it is not just saying sorry and expressing forgiveness, but is a process of struggle. A struggle for real justice; a justice for the future of the victims and a justice for the perpetrator's future. I really realized that hatred towards the perpetrator would entrap me in a cycle of violence, because I would always be seeking revenge. Of course I did not want the perpetrator to victimize others. For me the struggle for justice was not a struggle for revenge but an act of life; to regain right holistically, not for revenge, but as a pledge to renounce power relations from the position of a defender of peace.

I learned that the experience was a correlative experience; that seeking truth, justice and forgiveness is a peace struggle itself. If there is no revelation of truth and enforcement of justice there shall be no forgiveness, the peace would be empty and meaningless. Revelation of truth is a prerequisite for reconciliation and enables the creation of peace. Currently millions women and men in this state live in post conflict situations where the perpetrators and the victims are together entangled in a history of conflict with hidden roots. Many women remain victimized and the ambiguous role of the state as the trigger as well as the protector is still hidden in silence. How can one admit to a crime, when the crime is

considered as a good deed? How can a crime be forgiven when there is no acknowledgment of the crime itself?

The power relation that causes injustice is nothing but the perpetuation of oppression in a nicer package and merely a delay until the next conflict. It seems that this is what has been happening in a number of communal conflicts in our nation: the conflict shall cease but not because justice has been enforced and peace created amongst the conflicting parties, but rather because there is an interest to maintain the past conflicts. Throughout the new order era, the history of truth had been suppressed by various repressive means, and until now there has never been a national level revelation of truth, and efforts to establish a Truth Commission for Indonesia have failed. I think I am one of the women who are developing and have realized the importance of change.

Like the women of previous generations, I still live in an Indonesia that is dominated by patriarchy and that rejects diversity. But we are starting to realize our dream to be empowered through the power to think freely and to make our own decisions, the power that gradually gives us confidence and pride in ourselves, the power that we shall use collectively to fight injustice to realize meaningful social change.

2.4 A Struggle to Liberate

Baihajar Tualeka – Ambon, Maluku

I am one of those who experienced violence and discrimination, caught up in the confusion of conflict. Initially, what can I do? I can only remain silent and confused by a situation that is too tense: become a witness of a murder, arson and looting, my ear is scourged of appeal of radical groups, indoctrinated and pressed, these steps are restricted not to be able to interact with the 'across' community. Not once or twice we were stuck in the middle of mass unrest, were almost killed by a radical women's group, local jihad groups, and military. Really bad. Really, really wrong, really hurts! I met some women who were not only grieving, they looked very emotional, even involved in the conflict directly, because the village and their houses burned, property destroyed, husbands, children or relatives were disappeared.

There was an old saying that all Ambon people "feeling in the heart stabbed (*tatusuk*) in the flesh" (*ale* (you) feel *beta* (I) feel or we will both feel the pain). In the past, there was traditional ties of *adat pela* and *gandong* where Muslim and Christian countries always work together, both collating the stones for the house of worship, and come together for other customary rituals. Our countries lie along the coastal areas, which we call a "peninsula" or land of the kings. First, its name was Almuluk, then converted into Molucas, we now know it as Maluku. In this country, in January 1999 a conflict of two youth gangs so quickly spread into a series of mosques and churches burning, inter-religious groups attacking each other, as if we never had a memory and a sense of *pela gandong* bonding. Yes, my first Ambon Manise was once a beautiful and sweet city, but now it was merely displaying an endless circle of revenge, killing each other, into the debris of life of the oppressed.

I am Ashamed to Tell It...

I really never thought that I would be confronted with this new reality. Living in refugee camps with no privacy, no public facilities, a slum neighborhood, crowded and forced to sleep on the floor. Faces of depression and trauma are everywhere. There are men who are always forcing their wives to have sex, as if they did not want to know the conditions. Sometimes the lights in the camp shut down at certain times, a sign of ongoing marital relationship. But the kids always cry because of fear of the dark. One time, when children did not sleep, the lights were turned off. The next day they told me about what was done by adults or their parents in the dark.

How should I describe my life during those days at the camp? That sometimes I and the other women do not wear underwear? That the situation will be worse during menstruation? That there are times when I and some friends tore towels to be used as sanitary napkins? It was that bad that one day I began to often pray that it was better for me not to have my menstrual periods. Not to mention the problem of long queues in the bathroom, which sometimes made me not to take a bath. It was very uncomfortable if you want to change your clothes in a not insulated camp where everyone could see each other. There was also a time when I was with another family which ran out of food so that we fought each other for food, although it was only instant noodles and foul anchovies that should be washed before you ate them. Sometimes I borrowed my friends' washed clothes when I no longer had any supplies of clean clothes.

Life in the camps seemed inhuman, issues always came and went as if with no ends. There were times when I think and reflect, with questions overwhelming my consciousness, 'Can I live in this situation? Can I adapt? Until when? What about the future of these children? How could I learn? Then, what will become of my future?' Living in a topsy-turvy situation, that's the reality which is not

inconceivable, and in fact really unbearable. With the same confusions that I experienced, finally many people were dragged into conflicts, and became perpetrators of violence.

At that time religion was used to justify violence. When watching a house of worship burn, everyone was very emotional. As easy as burning houses of worship, it was also easy to mobilize the masses to take revenge, and not infrequently end up with a sadistic murder. People were recruited for 'jihad', voluntarily or forced. Conflict renders all legal apparatus non-functioning; sided with the religious Christians, Muslims and vice versa. At such times, the law was ignored. So how can one talk about truth and justice?

Not to forget, a lot of women got up in droves joined the jihad without fear, without estimating the danger. Some women led jihadist groups. Sometimes I myself saw several were shot dead. There were women who assembled bombs, women who carried the fuel to burn the settlement, women who participated by bringing food for the men. At that time, I myself thought that death through jihad was something which was more meaningful because it would make me go to heaven. Yes, I was incited by calls by the radicals. There is no other choice but to resort to violence or be involved in conflict. Without realizing it, sometimes I also become a shield of protection for men, such as dealing with the military, to rally in support of radical groups. I felt as if my mind was blind, really did not know what to do, did not see any other options. I felt my energy ... all-out sucked into the vortex of confusion. I knew it was really dangerous, that I might lose my life at any time. But I was hopeless. In such situation, I kept called for jihad. People were promised they would go to heaven if they died a martyr.

Throughout the day, sacred texts echoed. Then came the call from the radicals for the women to veil and other restrictions. If not veiled, women are always being scolded on the street by a man, because he said women who did not close their private parts made men who strive lose the war. Some friends and I were once

shouted at and cursed for not wearing the veil. I remembered the condition. I felt bored and discouraged by the fear which always haunted me. There are no religious figures who can be role models for enlightenment, which would call for the word "PEACE". New radical figures also continued to emerge, more extreme, very opportunistic, who always spoke for a particular community. I'm afraid, the law was not siding with justice. The worst was always possible. Every time I had a desire to do something, I would whisper to my friend. Radical groups' spies were everywhere, even the slightest suspicion could cause people to be killed or whipped. Meanwhile, the whip law came into effect. Women's movements were increasingly restricted, we became more helpless.

On certain days I liked to spend time hanging out in one house of worship. Sometimes I came asking for food, drugs, or used clothing. Usually I sat in the corner of one of these houses of worship. I once watched a group of children carrying Molotov cocktails. That day I felt scared, uncomfortable, because the day before I had seen a bomb explode, destroying the bodies of some people. Upon returning home, I could not sleep. I was traumatized. So, when I saw these kids, I worried about them. However, I did not dare to forbid them because I would be seen as an infidel, inhibiting people in the jihad. I'm confused. What should I do? Finally I dared to ask them with a careful voice, in order to not be known by others, "Do you know of the situation?" The children innocently replied, "Yes, we want to do Jihad. We want martyrdom!" "Ooooh...," taking a deep breath and involuntarily I prevented them, "No, that's dangerous." But, they did not care. Soon, they were taken away by an adult male in a jeep. After a while, I saw an ambulance coming. All I know, every time you heard an ambulance sirene, there were victims. I tried to follow the ambulance to one private hospital. Who was the victim this time? A friend? Or a family? I was surprised, they were the five children who were shot in the chest, they died. When the mothers of these children came, they cried, saying that the kids will go to heaven for martyrdom. At the moment

concerns about the future of the children came into my mind to save the children from the dangers of conflict.

Many international NGOs began one after another to come with a variety of flags flying in their cars, in and out of camps. They were looking for information, handing out aid. Some were concentrating on health issues, some others distributed food rations. The emergency nature of the international NGOs activities created dependency among the people. I saw the international NGOs' work as industrial, not humanitarian, targeting only material acquisition and status. They made communities helpless, created dependency, and even undermined potential and dedication. They created jealousy in the community that gave rise to internal conflicts within the camp. Quarrels occurred between refugees because of the uneven distribution of aid; the camp coordinator speculated and manipulated data, while women continued to be victims and to be discriminated, especially widows.

One thing about the armed conflict is that it did not take long for us to begin to be able to distinguish between guns or homemade bombs and military bombs or military organic weapons just by their sounds. Every day there were flames everywhere, the sound of gun fire, the sound of snipers and bombs, the killings. Every day victims continued to grow. Sometimes at nights I could not close my eyes. When there was a barrage of bombs or gun fire, I wondered what the condition was in the colonial era. Was it more sadistic than the life that I'm feeling right now?

There were moments where I screamed to myself, "What kind of world is this? Why do we become individuals who are confined here?" I began to feel the rebellion within me, but at the time I could do nothing. The fear was too much. My strength seemed to drain as I cried. I felt weak and helpless. I did not dare to rebel because I could be killed and accused of being an infidel. Even chicks were more

precious than people because human life is so easy to kill. Thus, vigilance was a must to avoid being killed. Local jihad groups were increasingly predominant. They had mobs and were able to act brutally because they considered themselves strong. They could kill anyone caught engaging in transactions or interacting with other communities. In my family, I'm still treated like a child whose room to maneuver is always restricted. My family asked me to leave the city of Ambon, leave the confusion behind and have a new life, one which was more secure and comfortable. It was the day when I had to make a decision; it was also the day when I got yelled at by my family. However, I decided to continue living in the camp together with others to start something new. As days passed, everyone in the camp became more confused. The economic situation became more and more difficult; most of the people in the camp had lost their jobs. Children dropped out of school, suffered from diarrhea, malnutrition and were infected with TB. Meanwhile, the men were busy making explosives and assembling weapons and did not care about their families. The mothers sold (*papalele*) in order to meet the financial needs of the family. In the end, due to a lack of interaction area, they did not know where they could sell their wares

Clearly, life had not changed much. Sometimes I prayed all day for the situation to return to normal. There was also a time when I asked with a sense of guilt, "God, what is this ordeal You placed before me? Why do I have to be a victim of this situation, while officials and officers continue to get promotions?" There are moments when I asked for the "PEACE" of God, for God to grant us a safe, comfortable and happy situation, just like in the old days. Then I thought that prayer alone would not change the situation. A dream perhaps. I began to recognize that I and the others are not strong, not influential people. . At that time I wished and longed for my earlier days when I could live a peaceful and safe life. If only possible, I wanted to turn back the clock.

I must always be alert at all times. I made sure my backpack was always there for me. Its contents were modest: two shirts, a pair of jeans, and one pillow to sleep, because that's all I would save when my house was burned. Life was more important than anything else. If someone wanted to flee the town or return home, he had to have a lot of money to pay for security. Then came the crucial moment when my family and I finally decided to leave. I saw the conditions in Ambon city were increasingly getting worse and decided to return to my hometown. Apparently, the situation in villages was also very disturbing because the conflict had also spread there. I felt more confused. The rumors, flyers, and the issue of murder worried me. Hence, I soon decided to return to the city of Ambon with TNI hitchhikers. For me, there was no other choice.

Building from Wreckage

During the conflict, all activities in Ambon automatically ceased. Public facilities such as offices, schools and banks were not operating. Not much could be done, but one had to always think about how to survive. At that time I had a motto: 'The mind, thought and effort that we have must be used.' I tried to create a variety of activities so as not to slip into boredom and despair.

When I returned to the city of Ambon, I met some friends. Initially, I began to share my thoughts to start voluntary small-scale movements. Then I had an idea to sell. I began selling black rice porridge and hawking on ships. I chose to be a hawker in order to motivate others to act. I saw in some communities, some women who had no activities for self-actualization. I realized then that everyone was still scared, emotional, irritable and easily offended. People were grieving; the atmosphere could change easily.

Selling on ships was not easy. It was a dangerous job. There was always the possibility of being hit by stray bullets coming from the sea, possibly by a sniper.

Some of my friends had been shot, seriously injured and and somead even died. There was also another story. Once, I was busy selling aboard a ship named Pelni. Then, I realized the ship had sailed. I panicked when I heard that it had sailed for an hour. Then I did a demonstration with other traders until the captain was willing to let us out of the ship. An hour later, the ship turned around and we finally got off.

The condition was confusing, with issues coming one after the other. There was a heated issue that "the world will sink" and everyone would die on the ninth month ninth year 99. Some people were scared of leaving their house. On the same day, a Pelni ship came to Ambon from East Timor carrying refugees and victims of the East Timor riots. On that day, at 6 AM, I went to the harbor with my hawker friends.

I tried to mingle with the mothers while looking for new friends. Initially, most mothers were pessimistic about the situation. They still could not forget their lost properties. Some felt sad and unable to do anything. Sometimes they just needed my presence to vent their frustrations. I tried to share my ideas on selling or hawking on board. I tried to lift up their spirits so that they could awake and start living. Apparently the effort paid off. They began to think of giving it a try. They started selling on board and invited their friends to join them. It was nice to see them happy earning money. For the first time, I became a friend of the community. When they earned money from hawking, I slowly pulled away. I had no intention of competing with them. Then I switched to another plan: to build a place for young people who took the initiative for peace.

What I did was just to distract people from the bad conditions. Then I started to talk about caring and getting people to move despite the difficulty of the situation. I wanted to show everyone that the conflict should not break one's morale. I used the money I earned from hawking and the stall as initial operating

capital. The effort paid off and soon, the joint-business group's members reached approximately 400 people.

At that time, the war between the communities was over, but it could not be called peace. There was no law, justice had not been enforced and violence including sexual violence still occurred everywhere. My steps were small and slow. People were still sensitive and easily angered by provocative issues, even those that did not make sense. There were occasions when we were sometimes confused. At that time, the term „reconciliation“ was introduced. However, who actually owned the reconciliation? Why were there still areas for Islamic and Christian communities? Did peace mean placing military outposts on the border? Or the presence of vigilance by the community? Should not the state be responsible for pushing for inter-community reconciliation? There were many unanswered questions.

During this time, I went with some of my friends to revive the traditional market, doing vegetable transactions with other communities. There were some groups that started to become *papalele* (local fish and vegetable traders). If there was trouble, the transactions were moved to in military areas that were considered very safe. Hence, the natural peace process began, a process driven by economic activities of women in the lowest rung. We continued to communicate, build trust with other communities and began to talk about the education of children. The women did these out of a sincere desire to help improve their situation. However, these efforts to initiate peace were not fully appreciated by the government.

Every Friday, the women and I met to support each other. We sat under a tree lined with grass. We talked about the actions and strategies we could do to change the situation. Sometimes we cried, when we thought of our situation. Tears just flowed incessantly. The tears were not of sadness but of the spirit that gave us the courage to fight to change the situation of panic, confusion, fear and

change this to creativity. Each time, we felt the strength to rise with our different colors.

Then, I summoned my courage to invite and involve the Christian community. Every Sunday at 15.00 East Indonesian Time, we sat and talked in a secure area of the border. During the time, we, coming from women of two warring groups, shared our stories. It was apparent that we had both suffered, felt unsafe, scared, and were unable to meet our basic needs. Then, there were these women who said, "Let's make a group, SANUSA (Saniri (association) Satu Rasa) to foster the values of "LOVE" and to share "SORROW". All those present agreed. SANUSA would have the slogan "YOUR SORROW-MY SORROW, YOUR PAIN-MY PAIN"; when you cried tears, I cried with you. We made this slogan to encourage ourselves to start sharing our feelings. This spirit gave us new life. Together we fought and learned about the meaning of self-care. We wanted to be free to share our joys and sorrows.

That day, I felt strengthened. The women who attended the discussion were strong, survivors and optimistic people. They were able to look at the conflict from a positive side. They encouraged me to look ahead as this was more useful than thinking about the past. They strengthened my spirit to continue to raise awareness among others, build solidarity, and prepare to use the energy we had left for a future full of new challenges.

Flashback of a Personal Portrait

I was born in a small coastal village called Desa Pelauw, Haruku Island, a sub-district of Central Maluku, on February 4, 1974. I'm the fifth child of nine children. My childhood was spent in Papua. I kept on changing schools in the eastern province of Indonesia.

As a kid, I clearly remember being disciplined by Mama. She said I was the most stubborn child, weird and headstrong.. Mama was once irritated because I went to play marbles with my brother from 7 in the morning until 7 at night. That day, I came home with 200 marbles. Mama took the marbles and placed them on a plate. She told me to eat the marbles as she was annoyed with me,.

After finishing elementary school, I went to the public junior high school, SMP Negeri n Wamena. Although I did not yet know the word discrimination I could see the injustice imposed on the natives of Wamena. In junior high, the immigrant kids mingled only with immigrant kids, while the natives of Wamena mingled with other natives. I, on the contrary, always wanted to be friends with the native people of Wamena. I was interested in the lives of indigenous peoples in Wamena. I chose to sit with a friend who was from Wamena. Her name was Ep and she came from Wailes region. Ep always told me about her life. I really wanted to pay a visit to her *honai*, a house made of reed grass.

One time, when we came home from school, I was invited to come to her home. Our school was about five kilometers away from her home. We walked because there was no public transportation. Once inside the *honai*, my friend changed her school uniform and came back with Sali – indigenous women’s traditional clothing in Wamena which only covered the genitals while her breasts were left uncovered. I was surprised and asked, “Where’s my friend?” Ep laughed and said, “Here I am, Ep. This is my daily life at home.” After that, Ep invited me to go climb Mulberry and Red fruit. She was very skilled in climbing trees. I went climbing, but could not get down from the Mulberry tree.

After returning from Ep’s house, I headed straight home, with my white uniform shirt stained. I got home at 6 pm accompanied by the chief and a group of people who supplied me with two pigs, rabbits, chickens and three sacks of *ipere*, sweet potato/*petatas*. It was the tradition of Wamena people when they had

guests. Again, Mama's scolded me for coming home late. She was worried about me. But after that Ep and I became closer until we graduated from high school. Ep sometimes stayed at my house.

In 1992, I went to college at the University of Pattimura, Poka-Ambon. I enrolled in the Agricultural Cultivation of Geology Study Program. I joined an organization called Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam (Islamic Students Association (HMI-Kohati)) on campus. I also joined the LDK (Latihan Dasar Kepemimpinan/Leadership Basic Training). In VII semester, I became a member of an extremist Islamic organization that taught about Islam but forbade any interaction with others. I became a member for seven months. There were times, when I was a member of that organization that I was preaching to people at home. I always said that the behavior of everyone in my house was paganistic and forbidden by Islam. Sometimes I was pious and pretentious, always advising people, spending many hours in solitude, alone in a room for worship. My life had been just with the *mirobiah* community. Throughout the day, I kept a distance from everyone, including good/close friends, even my family. At first, my parents were worried about my behavior. Over time, they got used to it. They thought I was strange, purposeless, being extreme and had an identity crisis.

On the 5th month, I was told to wear jilbab by my *mirobiah*/mentor/foster mom. The jilbab that I was going to wear was a long and loose-fitting robe. I told my *mirobiah* that I should ask my parents' permission first. As I stated my intention to wear the large jilbab, my father was very angry and firmly said, "No!" My father said that if I continued to learn such very extreme teachings, it hampered and restricted my own movement and potential. I did not know how to explain to *mirobiah* that my parents did not support and did not give permit my request.

Within the group, *mirobiah* used to make matches between members which later ended up in marriage. When it came my turn for an arranged marriage, I was

shocked. Suddenly I began to feel strange and questioned why I should be matched. I could not get married. I was in college and was still depending on my parents for support. Moreover, I did not know the man, I did not love him. That's when I decided to leave without saying goodbye. I went to see a close friend and told her about this match-making. My friend just laughed and advised me not to be involved with the organization anymore. I finally decided to run away from that group. After I left the group, my father started explaining about the meaning of Islam, the Islam which accepts diversity. He assumed I was searching for my identity. Henceforth, I understood that God is one for all mankind.

One day, my father told me that I needed to graduate from college because I still had four younger sisters. He told me to stop my involvement in any organization's activities on campus. If I did not stop, then he will stop my monthly allowance, including the money for my tuition fee. That day, I started thinking about how to be independent so as not to burden my parents. I began to sell onions and vegetables with my friends. I started to use the yard to plant vegetables and papaya. I usually brought the harvest to Citra Supermarket in the city of Ambon.

In 1997, I finished college. Most people in Eastern Indonesia were interested in being a civil servant. But I was not interested and preferred to be self-employed or work directly with the public. I immediately sent my application when there was an announcement from a company that needed workers to stay on the island of Seriholo (Seram Island) assisting groups of farmers. Once accepted, I stayed there with farmer groups. In this village, bathing and washing were done in the river. There was no electricity, clean water was five kilometers away from the residential areas and it was yellow. Access to the city was very difficult.

In 1998, with some good friends who had the same idea, we founded an agricultural company. The company aims to provide reinforcement and counselling to farmers on the island of Seram. At that time, the monetary crisis started to hit

Indonesia. At the same time, cocoa prices increased. I wanted to establish a marketing network in order to release farmers from the loan sharks who always squeezed the farmers by buying crops cheaply. I discussed with the farmers to help distribute the harvest and facilitate transactions of the farmers with the banks. That year all went well, but in the sixth month, in early January 1999, the conflict spread to all corners of the Moluccas and the foster village (*desa binaan*) was no exception. It was burned and destroyed.

During the time of conflict, I was going out with a man who was with the army of Jihad. Initially, he was diligent to come and bring new readings for me and a few others in the camp. Because I loved to read, he always lent me his book. One day, he and I sat down to discuss the books I read. From lending books, discussing books, we then started dating. On the second month of courtship, he expressed his intention to marry me. I was confused and did not know what to say. Then, he decided to meet my parents. When he came to see my father, even before he expressed his intention, my father, in the local language (Pelauw) told me to immediately break the relationship and I was no longer allowed to communicate with him. He said that he did not like to see the man's outfit, which was identical with the way the extremist groups dressed, bearded and wearing high-water pants. My father suggested that I should not marry or go out with a man of extreme and different teachings.

I also once dated a man who came from the same kampong. In 2006, he came to propose to my family while I was busy working in Yogyakarta. I never expected him to propose without my knowledge and approval. "Why was I not informed about this proposal?" I asked him. He answered that it was the tradition in the village that men decided and dominated because men were the heirs of the family. Upon hearing his words, I was instantly upset and angry. I was very upset with this one-sided proposal decision. But I could not do anything because my parents had already accepted the proposal. They thought the proposal was our

mutual decision. Finally, I asked to decide on the marriage date. He agreed, as well as the traditional leaders (chief soa) from both sides. In August, 2007, when the marriage invitations were ready to be distributed, at that critical point, I cancelled the wedding. It was all because he asked me to quit my 'such' work. All he wanted was that I concentrate on caring for him as soon as I became his wife. I realized that the cancellation of the marriage would hurt many people, families on both sides would be disappointed. However, it was my choice, my life. I could not imagine my life outside my chosen path.

Continuing with the Struggle

My story is characterized by pain, happiness and confusion. But I learnt the meaning of self-integrity, and how to strengthen and develop it to continue to survive. When a lot of people have given up staying on the road I chose, I recommitted myself to make changes, to open the barriers to injustice that I felt. I wanted to go on. When I was hit again and fell on my knees by the trials of life and realized that I could not 'save' those people closest to me, I kept getting up. I want to be an agent of peace. I want to continue to motivate and encourage people who have the potential to do something more meaningful for themselves, and to help make communities strong, empowered and more humane.

I learnt a lot from my predecessors in this movement. They became a source of inspiration, opening the way for me and for the next generation. They continue to struggle. The older generation are tireless, optimistic, passionate, fully dedicated and who think critically. They are the generation who have concern and empathy, as could be seen from the look on their faces as they defend the oppressed. They are a historical reference for future generations.

Events and people continue to inspire and encourage me. I continue to believe that gradually, there will be a new generation which will be inspired by the

movement that I am starting. They will continue to learn about a change that will provide a fair space for the community. The fair space is my aspiration and those of others who are oppressed. To actualize it, I need to engage more people, to inspire, build awareness and concern for others.

Life is a battle arena. Do not dream that change will come if you do not start from within yourself. I must be optimistic, hold hands with my brothers, stomp my feet, and speak about seeking justice and truth. I know the light will come slowly to illuminate our steps and shine for the people. We will not continue to live in darkness. We will continue to rise again in solidarity, with the power we have.

The movements built have their own pace; it is a fact of a reality with the dynamics of natural life. Precisely because of this struggle and this battle, I have learned to see conflict as an opportunity to build a sustainable community-based movement. I continue to invite other people to engage in the movement, spend time, energy and thought to make for the movement a cadre to sustain its life. I know that change is everyone's expectation. Therefore, all components in the community should be invited to be involved in encouraging the process of peace-building, and to fight for the rights of victims. Movement changes should continue to be stimulated, conducted jointly by looking at the potential of self, commitment, creativity, innovation and local knowledge in order to survive. This movement begins from a critical awareness that encourages each person to continue to learn, to fight for rights and justice and create the space for freedom of expression without any threats, pressures and constraints.

Contemplating the Struggle Ahead

It has been ten years since I started the struggle to build strength in a community devastated by conflict, particularly by encouraging the children and women. Some of the children who had studied in the alternative school that I built with my

friends, are now growing up. They grow as individuals who are critical, creative and love diversity. Staring at them is like contemplating a bright future. I feel a sense of pride for them. At that moment, I am confident that they will join the meaningful struggle, not only for themselves but also for the environment.

My own struggle is not yet over. I have some -recurring questions: what needs to be done to change the situation to be what we dreamed, a world free of violence and pressure? What kind of strategies can be found to encourage the search for truth and justice for the oppressed and marginalized? If the answer to all these changes can be found not only in ourselves, but how we interpret it positively when it collides with a different viewpoint?

In this struggle, I would like to appeal to all my friends to continue to fight for whatever you want to achieve. We are together in a diverse world, but we have the same desire, to continue to seek justice and truth. Hopefully, this struggle will strengthen the solidarity among us and enable us to achieve change.

All that is written here is my inner voice that I dedicate to all my friends in this movement. Let us keep fighting to achieve justice for the oppressed. There will be a wonderful day for us after the struggle. May we keep the spirit alive!

CHAPTER 3

THE SRI LANKAN CASE STUDIES

“Women still face considerable resistance from family members and the community who discourage them from becoming community activists”



CHAPTER THREE - The Sri Lanka Case Studies

Foreword

Resilience and Creativity in Re-claiming Rights

Ambika Satkunanathan

The three Sri Lankan case studies in this Monograph span the life time of the armed conflict in Sri Lanka, from the early 1980s to the present. Through these personal narratives, three women set out to engage with a myriad complex issues faced by communities towards the end of the war in 2009. The personal stories of the writers place in the public domain a counter-hegemonic history of the armed conflict. While doing so, they draw our attention to the fact that while some concerns remain unchanged, the landscape continues to change at a rapid pace following the end of the war, particularly where inter and intra community dynamics are concerned. We are reminded that these changes impact, sometimes adversely, on the strategies used by women to cope with the fall-out of conflict, violence and displacement. At the same time, what remains with the reader is the resilience and creativity of women who, when faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles, find alternative means to re-claim their rights and the space to articulate and fight for them.

The first paper by Sarvam Kilasapathy, set in the early 1980s, traces the life of the Mother's Front in Jaffna and speaks of women's activism through the use of their identity as mothers to protect the lives of their sons. It also provides a glimpse of the genesis and evolution of the Tamil armed groups from the perspective of a member of the community living in the North at the time. While discussing strategies used by women to challenge the state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which following internecine violence emerged as the dominant Tamil armed group and the self-appointed spokesperson for the rights of the Tamil people, Sarvam highlights the social and economic challenges women

faced in doing so. It is interesting to note that currently, women in the North encounter the same obstacles Sarvam mentions, when they attempt to form and function as collectives and mobilize communities. For instance, women still face considerable resistance from family members and the community who discourage them from becoming community activists for reasons ranging from security to conservative mores that dictate appropriate behavior for Tamil women. While the strategies of the state in dealing with armed conflict have for the large part remained the same- the round-ups that are described in the paper continued to be practiced until the end of the war- the determination of women to show the community that 'they could do it' holds true even today, particularly in the areas most affected by the armed conflict, such as the Vanni. The fact that the Tamil community continues to vote for Tamil political parties since they are viewed as the only means through which the rights of the community could be protected, although they lack faith in them, illustrates the complex and fraught relationship it has with its purported political representatives who have actually not held out any hope for any possible political restructuring to ensure the rights of the Tamils.

Sarvam's paper holds many lessons for women activists who presently work within a very restrictive environment. It tells them that the problems they face are not new, nor are they insurmountable. The difficulty with which the Mother's Front maintained the political and activist nature of the group while tackling internal struggles that pushed them towards provision of services to those in need echoes the dilemmas women's groups face at present. The simple strategies used twenty years ago by women who leveraged their identities, even restrictive identities, to their advantage to organize in controlled and even dangerous environments, have the potential to strengthen initiatives undertaken by women today. A poignant statement made by Sarvam that she regretted not possessing even a single notice the Mother's Front had circulated, calling women to the march to protest against the arrest and detention of young boys who were taken from Jaffna to Boossa detention camp in the South, is as simple as it is powerful since it drives home the

enormity of loss experienced as a result of the conflict that extended beyond the personal to the loss of a broader magnitude at the level of the community, in terms of history and heritage.

The second paper in the volume by Sherine charts her experience working on human rights issues in Sri Lanka as a woman with a “hyphenated identity” (Tamil-Canadian); her personal experiences colour her strategies and engagement with the different communities with which she works. Her narrative spans many phases in both the armed conflict and her life. Through them, we see the ways in which her views and strategies morph in response to political and socio-cultural changes. For instance, she says that she was not attuned to the socio-cultural barriers that existed within communities in Jaffna in the early 1990s. Yet in 2011; she recognizes them, or rather has been forced to recognize them and is responding to them at multiple levels. While realization about the manner in which socio-cultural and caste identities restrict the ability of women, including herself, to be active within their communities and mobilize has led Sherine to formulate means of navigating around these barriers, often via informal means, she has also become acutely aware of the need to preserve aspects of the culture and heritage of the community. She attempts to do this through formal means such as the establishment of a research centre. She also sees this as a means through which historical linkages between different ethnic and religious communities can be unearthed and used to build and strengthen intra-community relations.

Sherine’s identity as an insider-outsider in relation to the Tamil community and the larger human rights community, places her in disadvantaged and privileged positions simultaneously. Yet, rather than taking a head-on confrontational approach, recognizing her subject position enables her to use creative and unconventional work strategies. Further, Sherine’s narration stresses various factors of which women activists who are presently working within their communities should take note of, like the interdependence of communities, such

as Tamils and Muslims, which has been forgotten but could be used by women in their peace-building initiatives at the community level.

More importantly, her paper contains a snapshot of the working methods of the human rights community; methods which have resulted in both successes and failures. For example, her description of mobilizing people to come together to lobby the state to take action in the Krishanthi Kumaraswamy case illustrates both the largely informal advocacy strategies, the success of which depends on individuals rather than the strength of coalitions or approaches. At the same time, the value of her narrative about the process through which people were mobilized also points to the need to take note of simple factors, such as inclusivity, that determine the success of advocacy strategies.

The final paper in the volume by Manavi focuses on her work as an 'outsider' with an organization in the Eastern Province. Once again, she uses her perceived identity to her advantage. For instance, as she was not from the province she was unaware of intra-organizational politics and therefore was able to reach out to all groups working on women's rights, rather than restrict her engagement to the 'usual suspects'. Like Sherine, Manavi discusses the difficulties faced when working in a complex post-war environment where standards, boundaries and lines are blurred - the questions she raises regarding providing support to women who engage in sex-work highlights the fact that solutions to problems communities face cannot be found in a black and white realm but rather require a far more considered, nuanced approach that sometimes eschews publicity, which it could be argued is necessary to raise awareness about the problem and advocate on the issue at a national or global level, for the sake of the well-being of the individual concerned. Manavi's paper critiques donor funded top-down approaches and programs which often tend to be artificial. Reconciliation programs that ignore realities and the opinions of communities and enforce a 'happily ever after' ending are examples of such approach.

All three studies provide an alternate version of the armed conflict and initiatives undertaken by various actors, ranging from the state to the LTTE, civil society and donors, to deal with its impact. The importance of these accounts lies in the success of the three writers in capturing the voices of women affected but whose stories have not been heard, and place their experiences in the public domain through their own personal narratives. If there is one point that all three women make, it is the undeniable need to record the voices and histories of women and their experience of armed conflict and its aftermath and create space for them to be heard.

3.1 Women's Activism in Jaffna, Sri Lanka: Defiant Mother Politics

Sarvam Kailasapathy

The Time of Innocence....

The first phase of activism we were involved in the 1980s in Jaffna was an innocent one. We were innocent, we did not know what dangers lay in store for us and so we dared to do the unthinkable. After the ethnic riots and violence of 1983, we all went back to Jaffna. In a few months, we noticed that the young boys who congregated at street corners and junctions in their sarongs, chatting, indulging in everyday pastimes, suddenly went missing. The junctions were empty, and I used to say 'hey, where are these fellows?' Then the stories started that they had left notes at home saying they had gone to the jungle. As we picked up this information, some of us, close friends, all with left leanings, used to discuss this phenomenon and we were troubled. We felt that the grievances of the youth such as standardization of education, language rights, etc. could be resolved through negotiations by both sides meeting half way. We thought, it very extreme to take up arms to fight something that could be resolved differently. So likewise women, we shook our heads and were concerned about what was to come because we all knew they were not going for political classes, but they were going for arms training. Then six months later, we saw these people slowly, slowly coming back.

There were sixteen odd militant groups at the time and you saw boys in bright Indian sarongs hanging about and when you passed by in a car, you noticed they quickly turned their faces away. That was another indication that these were not ordinary boys. Meanwhile, the army intelligence must have known that these "boys" have come back and slowly the cordon and search operations started. Then we heard, for the first time, that the army had surrounded Valvetithurai

(VVT) village in Lorries and asked mothers to bring their children to check their identity cards. The mothers had very innocently taken the children to a specified open space where the Lorries were parked. The whole day, the military checked the IDs. At around 5.00 PM, they had about 390 boys loaded into the Lorries and took them away. The anxious mothers started screaming and wailing, unable to stop the Lorries. We learned about this the next morning. I met with a few women friends to discuss the matter. We said the boys are gone; we have to do something about this. People had seen the Lorries, about six or seven going to the KKS Harbour. The word was that the boys were taken by ship to Galle, in the South, the other end of the Island, to the Boossa detention camp. They had taken boys between the ages of 12 and 25, as well as some boys who were mentally handicapped. They appeared to have looked at their ages and build, which they presumed indicated capacity for arms training.

The Mobilization

Four of us women decided we had to do something to get the children/boys back home and to prevent this from happening elsewhere. Though most people were terrified by what had happened, many of our colleagues and friends were quite pessimistic and felt that we could do nothing. Most women told us 'Are you mad, they will come and take you away as well. How long will it take them to take you away?' However, we were determined to do something to show our protest. If we did not do anything, they will do it to every village. Later, when I analyzed what happened, it struck me that it was mainly about ten of us who ran around, spent all our time mobilizing the women. We didn't even cook properly in that one week. Our families helped so much with the domestic work. As did a widow, who didn't have a husband to stop me; Nirmala, whose husband was in Colombo; Ganesh, whose husband was a leftist and her children were abroad and Sitralega, who was a progressive thinker and independent. So we didn't have the impediments of husbands and patriarchs preventing us. Many husbands actually

began to say I was mad and that I must think of my daughters: what will they do if anything happened to me?

There were also some teachers like Bavani, Themba, Rani who were in the larger committee we formed. I remember that some committee members were terrified of the situation due to pressures at home from male members. Some wanted to help but would never come to a march or to mobilize. But they would help organize meetings in their home and would give us tea. There were actually many women who would help us secretly but were scared of being recognised.

Now all the mothers at VVT resorted to prayer and rituals in the kovils, fasting, wailing, and waiting for their sons to come back. VVT was conservative, and the women were more protected and home-bound than some other villages. So we went there and said "come, for your sake and everyone's sake, let's do something about this". The women in VVT were completely helpless, so when we proposed the march, some progressive elements in VVT volunteered to organize and bring the mothers to Jaffna. We mobilized through notices. None of us had any money. We were all living on shoestring budgets. I remember Ganesh's Bala coming and putting 500 rupees on the table when we were discussing what to do. He too, had borrowed the money from a shop. We were happy that it was enough for us to print the notices. Then we had to find a name for us. We discussed many names – women's front, women's coalition. But the one thing we wanted was a simple name that people could say easily and identify as their own. We didn't want a classical name. We brainstormed on it for a week. Then we unanimously decided on a name: "Mothers Front" and we wrote the notice. No one wanted to get caught with a notice in those days. It was not safe. So we distributed them rapidly, in case the printer got caught. We sent the notice to various villages. I regret today that I do not have a single copy – but then we left Jaffna in such a hurry later. We lost a lot of history and documents. Such was the reality of danger and flight.

Defying the State

Then the morning of the march dawned. There are various interpretations of how the march happened. Many people said they were instrumental in organizing it. Gamini Navaratne of *Saturday Review*, also claimed he helped. We were not affiliated to any party, and remained as such till the end. But there were sixteen militant groups and they had their political wings and their women's wings. We didn't have a partisan agenda. We were an autonomous group, but we knew that some of the militant women cadres may attempt to join the march. So we took care that no one else hijacked our cause. We had to check carefully that all the banners reflected what we wanted to say. All we were saying to the State was – you can't do this, this is a democratic country, you can't take away children just because they belong to a different ethnic group. Please release the children. If there were banners saying anything else we reserved the right to pull them out of the march. As we feared, some young girls joined the mothers. Our guess was that they could be EPRLF² girls who were seen selling books. You could see them in the march, first there were the mothers and then there were a lot of young people. They did bring their own banners but we made sure they had no aggressive language.

So the march started from Chinnakade, it was a hot day and we were surprised by the unexpected presence of Catholic nuns who stood by the road side with buckets of water and drinks for the marchers. We heard that army Lorries had circled the Kachcheri (the Government Agent's³ office) twice and gone away. We were marching to the Kachcheri to meet the Government Agent. The Army

² EPRLF – Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front, one of the many Tamil militant groups active in Jaffna at the time.

³ The Government Agent (GA) is an officer from the Sri Lanka civil service appointed by the central government to govern each district in the country. The GA is the administrative head of public services in the District.

Commander at that time was supposed to be a good guy, and well respected by the people. He probably knew about the mothers' march from their own intelligence but the army was nowhere in town which was unusual because army trucks come to town in the morning to buy provisions. The mothers, whose children were taken, led the march, visibly grieving. The march was like a funeral procession. We got to the Kachcheri after about two hours. Those at the Kachcheri knew we were coming and they had closed all the doors and gates. At first, they said a few of us could come in but we said no, we must all come in. There were some men there who knew us and they let the women enter. Everybody went in. It was hot and we all wanted to get indoors. I think we were about 5000 at least, I couldn't guess the number because I was in front. All I remember was that there were many of us. The *Hindu* newspaper reported the next day that there were 10,000. My daughters and their friends were cycling up and down the route and reported that there were many women joining at the different bus stops. They were coming in from the villages in regular CTB buses (Ceylon Transport Board, run by the Government) and joined the march. We realized then how terrified all the women were that the army would come to their village at some point and get their sons. We said we are citizens of this country and citizens don't get treated like this. Some of us then went up the stairs to the GA's room. I thought the stairs would collapse, the women were climbing them, screaming, crying, wailing, banging their heads, we had to keep telling them, be patient, we have to talk now, you have to be quiet. The GA, Mr. Panchalingam, was worried by the large noisy crowd of women. He was there with the AGAs (Assistant Government Agents). I remember the red telephone on his table, the direct link to the Minister of Defence, we later learned. He said *alaathengo, alaathengo*, meaning don't cry, and let's talk. But we couldn't stop the women, so finally some of us climbed onto his conference table because we couldn't hear anything. We told him why we were there and why he couldn't allow it to happen as chief civil administrator of Jaffna. They can't come to a village and trick the people, saying they are checking ID cards and then take their children away. Why

did you take the children to Boossa, which is where criminals are taken? Can you imagine the children's trauma, we asked him.

We had a list of all those who were taken and pointed out that five of those children were mentally handicapped: what do you plan to do with them? So the GA said, ok I will call the Minister of Defence and you talk to him. We said no, you talk to him, because all of us have different things to tell you. And then he spoke on the phone 'sir, I can't do anything; we have come to a standstill. No sir, no sir, there are about 10,000 women. We are surrounded'. The man was excited and shouting to be heard above the din. Then he said 'yes sir, yes sir' and turned to us and said the Minister of Defence is sending a helicopter and he wants your committee to go to Colombo and talk to him and he will send you back.

We told him, "Is this a joke? You asked the children to come and you took them away, now do you want to send us away too? There is nothing to talk about, this is what we have said, there is nothing to negotiate, you can't do this, and you can't pick up children and hold them at Boossa. You have to send them home. If you have a issue with them, then this is not the way to deal with the problem." He spoke on the phone and said "Sir, they will not come", listened a bit and said "Sir they are all here and they will not go away, we can't function." So finally, we were told that Minister said, give us two days and we will send them back, if we have any suspicions about anyone we will deal with that and send them back in a week. The press were all there at the Kachcheri but we requested them not to take any close ups of anyone, just the crowds and they co-operated. Even the GA, if he was asked would probably have said he did not know any of us because everyone knew the need to be anonymous. Almost all people wanted to prevent anything untoward happening to the community. Everyone knew when to talk and when not to talk. So we said to him, give us the assurance because these mothers have to go back. More importantly, this must not happen again. The children must come home.

By the evening of the following day, all the boys were brought back by ship except for about 20. There was so much joy and relief that night. This was something we achieved. We were able to prove ourselves to the conservative community of Jaffna and they had to accept that women were able to do it. I think they were all waiting, the conservative men in particular, expecting that the police would come and mow the women down, and they could say in hindsight that the women should have stayed home minding their business and their children. Saraswathy, who was one of our strong mothers, said that morning her husband had asked her "where are you going. You haven't cooked lunch for me?" and Saraswathy said she gave him the vegetable knife and said "Here, today it is your turn to cook" and left for the march. A lot of women found a new confidence that day.

We then went out and told everyone this is what we have been promised and if there are other problems we should be able to mobilize again. Then many villages had requests: "can we form a Mothers Front branch in our village?" and we said yes, but keep us informed that at say Point Pedro, so and so is the committee and this is what you have decided to do. Nirmala and I went to many villages when their branches were opened. About two days after the march, the *Hindu* carried a full page article about how the ordinary women of Jaffna had challenged the might of the State for their democratic rights. A few weeks later, Sarath Muttetuwegama, an MP of the Communist Party, made a statement in Parliament about us – ordinary mothers and what we did.

Looking back, none of the women had any faith in our elected Tamil MPs. Even the local women who would have voted for the TULF had absolutely no faith in the MPs. The MPs were not in Jaffna, they were all comfortably in Colombo. They had abandoned us and nobody wanted to go to Colombo to talk to them. When our statement came out after the first Mothers Front march, there was a comment in the local *Eelanadu* newspaper made by TULF MP Sivasithamparam

who was living in India saying I am so glad our women have done this, almost implying that he was also behind the effort. We replied through the local papers a few days later, strongly saying that we have nothing to do with Sivasithamparam, and that none of us had even seen him. We refuted him. This manipulation and lack of sincerity was why people had lost faith in the mainstream Tamil political leadership.

The Community under Threat

As the months went by, whenever there was some violent incident by the militants, there was a reprisal by the military. The army and the navy must have known that the young people were coming back from training in India. As a result, the military and navy imposed a security zone around the coast so they could prevent these comings and goings by banning fishermen from going out to sea. It was the most awful blow for the livelihood of the people. The fishing communities in the north have a tradition of living for the day. They lived well and ate well. They have a high protein diet and the men ate and drank well and then went back to sea at night. The women in the community wore jewelry. . They are unlike the frugal farming community, who save every cent, eating vegetables from their gardens and accumulate their savings for their children's education and marriage. This frugal tradition was absent in the fisher communities. When the security zone was declared, the fisher communities were devastated as they had no savings to fall back on. They couldn't deal with a restricted lifestyle; they couldn't deal with near starvation. After two, three months we began receiving reports of suicides in the community. Then the women started coming to us to ask that something be done. They had pawned all their jewelry, they were destitute and they wanted some help. So we alerted the authorities and aid agencies and asked if they could intervene to get the fishing community back to sea for at least part of the day. To respond to this immediate need, the Mothers Front rallied to support the fishing communities' families. The women in the branches were very

active and they began collecting food and other requirements for the people living within the security cordon. Interestingly, the Jaffna society was also changing for the better. Earlier, people thought only of themselves and their families. They were hospitable but they did not go out of their way to help. Now they were coming forward to help with bags of rice, clothes - to help the larger community.

In May 1985, some people got into the Kumuthini Ferry, sailing from the island of Delft to the island of Pungudutivu and hacked to death most of the passengers. The bodies and the injured were brought to the Jaffna hospital. I remember a Doctor called and said it is chaos here, we are trying to deal with the injured but the women are wailing and obstructing us, they don't know what they are doing and everyone is so scared. So we got together and went to the hospital to deal with the families and the mothers. It was the first time I saw this number of people cut, hacked and dying. It was a terrible sight and I could understand why everyone was devastated and traumatized and scared. The women and families were filled with grief and fear.

The Mothers Front, in particular the core group, was very conscious that we were an activist group. We knew that if we started collecting rice and dhal and dealing with logistics of distribution and so on, we would be straying from our mandate. Any service organisation can do that. This was not what we were supposed to do. But there was always tension with the general committee that was very emotional and we wanted to help the affected communities. Despite these contradictions within, we survived to take our political purpose further. One of the successes of the march to the GA's office was that cordon and search operations in the villages stopped for a while but by the middle of 1985, they started again in the Karaveddy area. What surprised me was that the military with all their intelligence resources resorted to these tactics. We all knew that the militants were never in their villages. They had mastered the art of evading capture. You saw one person

this minute but you won't see him again for months but he was there somewhere. What you knew for sure was that he did not go back home to see his family, as he was not supposed to. However, the cordon and search operations commenced again and we organized a march against this. This time we discovered that only a few women from VVT came and it was a learning process for us. When it is a burning issue people come, but when it's not directly their issue, they drop out. So the women from Karaveddy came and we managed to get most of the children released. By now, they were being held in Palaly in Jaffna and were not taken south.

The Mothers Front under Threat

With regard to publicity, the Saturday Review and all the papers were careful not to reveal the names of the organizers of the Mothers Front. However, one day, someone came from the New York Times and wanted to talk to the Mothers Front. All the others backed out and I was left to meet him. We sent a message to the journalist, saying he would have to come alone. But he came to meet me in a cab from town. He came to my office and the cab driver hovered around. We knew the driver was very suspicious. So I refused to speak to him and told him he had to think of our security. People didn't know that for us to keep on working, we had to be anonymous. I told him to go to an ice cream parlour and order some lunch or something and I would meet him there. None of us were interested in publicity.

Nirmala would come to Colombo quite often and she was able to mobilize the support of women in the South. She knew that we needed the support of our sisters in Colombo. We needed to tell them what was happening and they had to help sustain us, which they did.

I was President of the Mothers Front until 1986. This was also because none of the women from the core group wanted to take on this role as they were scared and their husbands would not let them. This had its own contradictions too. . I remember, sometimes I would do things because of the expediency of the situation but they would say to me that I should not have done it and I would have to say, but if you don't take on the responsibility, someone has to do it and you really can't keep finding fault after the fact. If you take on the Presidency on a rotating basis every three months, then you can also take the risks and know what it is like.

In 1986, we were able to start the Jaipur Foot workshop for the Mothers Front with the support of the Norwegian Aid Program. We had been sending a number of people who lost limbs due to bombings and shelling or in massacres like that on the Kumuthini Ferry to Colombo for artificial limbs. Therefore, it was a real need to have such a facility that could produce artificial limbs in Jaffna through the Friends in Need Society. The numbers of those injured were high and traveling to Colombo was not easy at the time. We had two doctors who helped start the Jaipur Foot Workshop and the professional women of the Mothers Front with no political interests were comfortable with that. However, the core group were engaged in comments and critiques all the time, especially about our subordinate role as women, our position in society, how the militant movement was becoming authoritarian, the patriarchal structures in Tamil society and violations of civilian rights by the State.

Defying the Tigers

There was a notice on the walls of Jaffna at the time depicting a beautiful Tamil woman with all the traditional ethnic markers of pottu, long hair, flowers and saree saying, "I don't agree with (The President's) sterilization programmes", or something to that effect. (Tamil mothers should have more Tamil babies' sort of

message). By then there was a sterilization program in the plantations and the doctors in Jaffna were told, if women wanted sterilizations you can offer them Tubectomies and an incentive of 500 Rupees was given to the mother. We found out that the notice originated from the Tigers (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam). We made a press statement and put up a counter notice saying that women's bodies were their own and if they wanted to opt for sterilization after the second child they could do so. We said we don't think anyone should tell us when and when not to sterilize ourselves. Apparently, the Tigers were furious with our response. The broader group of women in the Mothers Front was not comfortable with these things. We had to challenge both the state and the militants and we were at risk from both. Then there were the Ten Commandments for women by the LTTE – dress this way, behave this way, act this way, etc. We issued a press statement against that too. We said a few backward looking people are writing this and confusing society, this shouldn't be. We were educated and must move forward. This was published in the press. Afterwards, we discovered that someone had been scrutinizing our Meeting Minutes book and it went missing. We found it was someone from our office and the information had gone to Jaffna area political leader of LTTE. Then the Minutes book was returned to its place mysteriously after two weeks. It was also about this time, around 1987 that the LTTE began killing the leadership and cadre of all the other main militant groups. At that time the Mothers Front made a statement against the killings. I recall a whole roomful of EPRLF medical students were killed near the campus with a machine gun. TELO (Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization) cadres were shot down, running along the roads. Jaffna civilians saw the ruthlessness of their own "boys" killing their own brothers just because they belonged to another group and not the LTTE. Then of course, there were less people meeting and talking and not all women would come to meetings. We realized sadly that we had lost the space we had before. When the 16 militant groups were in Jaffna, people were okay as there was a kind of balance, and there was space for civil society. However, when it changed slowly into only one

authoritarian armed group, the fear increased and the space for independent work disappeared.

The Tiger Takeover

One day, we had a message that the Tiger area leader wanted to see us and we would be taken to him. We discussed the summons and realized that we had to go, so we all went. The messenger was on a cycle and we were walking a distance from him. I was asking myself, why am I doing this? What if it was a school boy's prank? What happens if I walk back home now? When I said this aloud, the other three said they will shoot us. We have to go, you can't disobey. These were young fanatics, it was all about power. We walked into some house in bad shape. There was a lady there, possibly the mother of one of them. Then there was this person who was seated there. He looked at us unsmilingly and asked us to sit. He said, you see in the papers, down south, the Sinhalese women are helping their soldiers – visiting them in the hospitals, giving them mattresses, sheets, supplying what they need, and what is happening in our part of the country? – And he looked at us sternly; you are writing things in the papers against us. Isn't something wrong here? Don't you have any Tamil feelings? How can you criticize us? We have given our lives to the cause. You are mothers, you should be bandaging our injured, you should be collecting supplies for us, you should be writing about the wonderful sacrifices your children are making to the cause, that's how great mothers should be, not like you people. You are not doing any of this. So we have decided that we are taking over Mothers Front. We heard this harangue and tried to explain to him -but he said, you can be on the Committee but you must take orders from us. You do what we tell you to do. So we said this arrangement will be difficult as we stood for peace and we will quit. When we walked silently home, we were quite depressed. From that point onwards, Mothers Front meant the Jaipur Foot Workshop only. Themba, who succeeded me as President of the Mothers Front, went to Colombo and left for the US. Nirmala and I were left behind. Sitralega

went abroad for her studies while Ganesh left for Canada. Later, Nirmala, due to ill health, moved to Colombo. We could not make a statement about what had happened and could only inform our branches informally about the closure. Then the LTTE started a Mothers Front in Batticalao and carried out some activities.

The Resumption of War

When the IPKF (Indian Peace Keeping Force)⁴ came in August 1997, the LTTE was completely in control of Jaffna. We would often hear revolver shots; we sometimes saw a dead body here and there. One morning, on my way to work, I saw some little school children in their uniforms crowded around something on the roadside. So I got out of the car and asked them what the matter was and they moved to show me the body of a boy shot in the back. He was in a white shirt and blue pants, rubber slippers fallen off, blood all over his white shirt. Some farmers came by and asked me what had happened and I showed them the dead boy. The children were looking at the body. So they chased away the children to school and said they will contact the authorities and I went on my way. It disturbed me so much because he looked like an ordinary boy and was so young. His mother would have washed his clothes, (Jaffna mothers spoil their sons) and she would have been waiting for him to come home at night, but here he was. I was bristling with anger and wrote a poem that night – the whole poem in one sitting– it was written in Tamil, translated into English and published as “A Mothers Lament”. I published it under a pen name because it was critical of politicians and others. My anger was towards the futility of violence and the price being paid by women and mothers in particular.

⁴ The IPKF was the Indian Military contingent mandated to perform peacekeeping operations in the North and East of Sri Lanka under the Indo-Lanka Accord signed in 1987 between India and Sri Lanka. The IPKF remained in Sri Lanka till March 1990.

A Mothers Lament

*"Never seen him before," I lie,
denied the right to mourn.
My first born, seventeen next month, lies in white dust at the road side,
blood on his back, covered in flies.
He came to me for food at midnight.
I gave the morning rice gladly.
Mouth full of dust, now he lies.*

*Our leaders have fled to Madras or London.
Safe, well fed. You returned to fight
for our right to our own land and language.
Now he's dead.*

*My son, what have you done.
I worked on the land with my hands
to feed you, to clothe and keep.
Thought when I was old, you grown,
I could sleep safe. You would keep
me in my turn.*

*My hands ache to touch, arms to embrace.
I must not. Must leave you here,
on the road, covered in blood.
If I take you home the soldiers will come
seize your brothers,
burn my hut, take my cow in their lorry
to their camps.*

*I long to take you in my arms,
carry you down the paths
between tobacco fields to Chemmani,
build your pyre and set light.*

*Night comes. I must go home.
Kindle the fire under the pot of rice
for my other sons.*

*Forgive me son. I must hide
the flaming rage in my heart.
I must depart, leave you unacknowledged
at the road side.
- Sanmarga -*

The army was now confined to the barracks and the LTTE held sway in Jaffna. They would tell the people, see we have given you freedom, we have confined the army to the barracks, you have nothing to worry about, you have your freedom. For this we want your absolute loyalty.

Actually just before the IPKF came, we were really scared because the army was advancing into Jaffna from Point Pedro. Our house was along the way to the town. People would say the army has advanced to Neerveli. I was living along this route and was ready to move the children somewhere else. I was alone in a fairly isolated rural area of Thirunelvely. My late husband loved the rural area and we lived there but after he died, I had to cope alone with the children with few neighbours. I felt very scared in the evenings with no street lights. When we moved into our home, he was not to know that the whole landscape would change and place would become very lonely. Many people living in the outskirts like us moved into town and locked up their houses. However, I didn't want to do this, because where would we go for rent? My father-in-law moved next door. He was an 80 year old man, what could he have done to help? But at least somebody was there and it was a comfort to know that. When I heard that the army was advancing, I was not sure what to do. There was heavy shelling in the distance and it was quite terrifying. Stories were spreading wildly. The Tigers were good at spreading stories such as - women were being raped on the way. We were there when the Indian helicopters flew in, dropped food and took off. We know people who picked up the parcels and showed it to us. You can see how India showed they can come in anytime, if the need arose. This was their message to the President of Sri Lanka. Then the military advance abruptly stopped. We heard of the negotiations in India and the signing of the Indo-Lanka Accord in Colombo.

Then the Indian planes started coming in and landing one after the other at the Palaly Airport. We saw it all since our place was south of Palaly. We wondered how these huge planes landed and heard that some even overran the runway.

People started rejoicing that the fighting was over and the Tigers watched and as usual, started manipulating the people. The newspapers had pictures of women greeting the IPKF soldiers. Later we heard that the Tiger leader thought that it was a disgrace to greet the Indians. Two months later, just before the fighting started between the IPKF and the Tigers, the Civil Society Groups made a last attempt to talk to the Tigers to negotiate, saying we don't want war. We want peace. They did not listen to the people's voice. What happened after that is history.

3.2 Women are Not Powerless All the Time Sherine Xavier

Return to Sri Lanka 1995

In 1995, I came back to Sri Lanka from Canada. I had left the island when I was 17, and I returned to work with Home for Human Rights (HHR). I was about 30 then, a young Canadian-Tamil feminist. I had a hyphenated identity. My relationship to virtually everything was different to what it is now. In particular, my engagement with both human rights work and work in relation to the conflict was quite different.

Firstly, I was not from Colombo, although I was living in Colombo, capital of Sri Lanka. It was not my place. It was not Jaffna. Today, I work in Jaffna and everything that happens in Jaffna – its politics, its culture, its social relationships, its personal relationships affect me and I can't separate myself from these as I was able to in 1995, in Colombo, during the time of the Krishanthi Kumaraswamy case.

I was doing immigration/employment work in Canada before I came to Sri Lanka. I was not really involved in the politics of conflict in Sri Lanka then. My father had started the HHR in Colombo and was deeply engaged in human rights work in Sri Lanka and by virtue of the context in which these violations were taking place; he was also enmeshed in the politics of conflict. However, I had little direct interest in the conflict in 1995. I came back on holiday and decided to come back with a friend, Sharmini Fernando and my daughter Katy who was just three years old. Sharmini worked with a women's rights organization and I worked at HHR and we took turns caring for Katy.

Gendering Human Rights

I wanted to apply a gender lens to the work at HHR, so I started a women's desk. This was because a lot of the people who were using the services at HHR were women. They were coming because their husbands and sons and fathers had either disappeared or were detained under Emergency Regulations (ER) or the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). HHR was handling many of these ER and PTA cases but HHR was not aware of what these women were going through, their needs, their wants and their rights. So we started hiring women lawyers, we talked and listened to the women. In due course, we were able to establish within the organization that women were both direct and indirect victims of human rights violations.

After a while we also began tracking cases of sexual violence against women in the conflict-affected areas. At the time even at HHR, which was mostly comprised of male lawyers handling PTA and ER cases, the perceptions of sexual violence, of the women victims, was so stereotypical - the way the male lawyers talked about them and focused negatively on the women.

In the East at that time, we did not have any branch offices, only liaison officers who were mostly older men. They prioritized the cases that came to them and focused on the cases that could have shock value to attract attention to PTA and ER as points of reference. When we, at the Women's Desk at HHR began monitoring the press and reading about sexual violence against women, we discovered that none of these cases were coming to us at HHR through our liaison officers.

Jaffna was out of bounds then and I was also a bit hesitant to go there because of my young daughter. There was no easy access to the Peninsula so, we decided to go East. One of my first visits to the East was to Akkaraipattu, where I met Vani Simon of the Affected Women's Forum (AWF) and some of the women working there. They were trying to set up a space for female heads of households and women whose spouses/ family members had disappeared.

Our practice at HHR then, was to have people come to us at the Colombo office for legal assistance. We didn't go to the field. It was like the case system that people came to you and you didn't go to them. This was something I was able to change through these visits to the East. Through this process, I began building contacts and understood the complexities of the conflict through first-hand experience. So for instance in Akkaraipattu, we went on field visits with Vani and others at AWF and started asking women about their problems. It was then that issues of widowhood, remarriage and other concerns began to surface.

I learnt of the inter-dependence between Tamils and Muslims before the war, through the stories people recounted. For instance, the Tamils in the area would make the clay pots; the Muslims would make the curd. I learnt how this inter-relationship and the social fabric broke down due to the war. We experienced the stark reality of how the road changed after 6 PM. One side of the road was the Muslim settlement and the other side was the Tamil's. There was no electricity in

the Tamil part of town and no one went on the streets. Life went on differently on the Muslim side. On Vani's side of town, where we stayed, there was no electricity. We would sit in the gardens under the moonlight and talk about various issues affecting women. When the dogs started barking in a particular way, we would run inside and shut the door. People in the region knew who was walking around and the dogs became their watchmen as they could differentiate between the types of men who patrolled the area in the night. The tension and underlying fear was marked. We saw all of this and we would never have understood its impact on the people if we did not stay with the communities.

Following these visits, we began a program of trainings on violence against women. While these were needed and useful to the community, they also let us get to know the women's groups in the East and this gave us an entry point in the East. We were able to use our time and the presence in the East to track some cases of sexual violence, sexual torture and murder of women that no one else appeared to be doing. We also understood the politics of sexual favors and how women negotiated space creatively.

The Krishanthi Kumaraswamy Case

We first became aware of the disappearance, rape and murder of Krishanthi Kumaraswamy and the subsequent disappearance of her mother, brother and neighbor and their murders through reports in the media. The Krishanthi case was raised in Parliament and reported in the press. I recall the late MP Joseph Pararajasigham raised it in Parliament. Krishanthi's sister was in Colombo and she had spoken to Pararajasigham. Soon after this information appeared in the press, Sharmini, a close friend Indrakanthi, (who is affectionately called Ball) and I went to a dance performance at the Lionel Wendt where Ball's daughter Venuri was performing. Venuri was sixteen. During the performance, I told Sharmini that I was feeling very guilty. Here was I at a dance performance in Colombo while

people in Jaffna were experiencing a completely different reality. Here was Krishanthi, sixteen years like Venuri, going for her exams and she is stopped at a checkpoint, raped and murdered. When I expressed this sense of discomfort and guilt, Ball and Sharmini said "Why don't we do something about it?" and we decided to meet the next morning at HHR. We called all whom we knew to come to a meeting at HHR. At that time we were also working closely with the Socio-Economic Development Centre (SEDEC), specifically with Malini Disanayake. After much discussion we decided to do something public and the idea of a vigil was born. We decided to call many of our friends, those in Wellawatte, some Tamil friends. I also went to meet Neelan Tiruchelvam, who was then a Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) MP. Neelan agreed to come. Then I went to Kumar Ponnambalam's (leader of the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) house and spoke to him and I went to invite Kethesh Loganathan who was in the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF). These were all my father's friends. They knew me but they were skeptical, they had doubts on how we would put this off. Kumar laughed and said 'You Canadian kids have come here to try something, I'll support you.'

The Vigils

We decided to hold the first vigil at Independence Square. We told friends and then we went to a communication centre and faxed all sorts of organizations and contacts. Ball spoke to the Human Rights organisations such as the Movement for Defence of Democratic Rights (MDDR) and the Movement for Inter Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE) while Sharmini and Malini spoke to the Women's organizations. I spoke to Tamil politicians and public figures. We made phone calls. Then we were told the police had to be informed. So I drove the car to the Cinnamon Gardens Police Station and waited while Sharmini and Ball went in with a letter informing the police that we were to hold a vigil down the road from them! It was written in English and only said "Vigil".

I don't think the term 'Vigil' had been used before in Sri Lanka. The reason we chose the word vigil was because Sharmini and I were familiar with it from our activist days in Canada. I was writing my Chemistry exam in Montreal when the 'Montréal Massacre' of 14 women students at the École Polytechnique happened in 1989. We had been part of the vigil at the University on December 6th. This was an annual commemoration, and that is how the name 'Vigil for Krishanthi' and later 'Vigil Coalition' came to be. Some people couldn't figure out the name and were against it since it was something we were introducing from Canada. However, many people came to the first vigil. We had a mix of people from Wellawatte Tamils to politicians to NGO activists. It was probably the only public event that saw key Tamil political figures, all of whom were assassinated in subsequent years: Neelan, Kumar and Kethes, in close proximity to each other. After the success of the first vigil, many people declared their willingness to continue the vigils and be part of organizing them systematically. Our immediate objective was to get the government to agree to a court hearing. So we said let's have vigils every Wednesday till we receive confirmation from the government that a case will be filed and the vigils began.

As support grew, we had intense discussions about who would attend. Right from the beginning, we wanted to do things a little differently. So for instance, we chose to have the vigils at Hyde Park instead of the usual Lipton Circus. As different organizations joined with their constituencies, we decided to distribute information about Krishanthi Kumaraswamy and other victims of custodial violence. We distributed leaflets. Many of the organizations who joined the Vigil Coalition brought their own banners and leaflets and these were in Tamil and Sinhalese while a few were in English. We had discussions about content, language, representation. We tried to be as inclusive as possible. We also had a division of labor among the organizations to sustain the vigils. The mainstream media gave us some coverage, but most of the coverage came from the Tamil

media while most of those at the vigils were actually Sinhalese. Somehow after that information went out. We were not too many Northern Tamil women; the majority were Southern Sinhala women and some men. This was not an agitation in the North; this was a concerted agitation in the South. This issue was picked up by Southern civil society groups, human rights groups and church groups, among others.

Meanwhile, we had discussed the case with a woman from the Attorney General's office, who was a friend from our Colombo social circuit. She was subsequently appointed to handle the case when it was brought to a Trial at Bar. Her diligence was critical to the case and she ensured that it went forward to a conclusion.

So we held vigils continuously every Wednesday at Hyde Park corner,. Once the vigils got underway, there was broad-based ownership. There was so much support that it took a life of its own. Some were human rights groups like MIRJE and others. We also had support from Tamil political parties. We got some press coverage, especially from the alternative press like the *Yukthiya*, which gave us continuous coverage while *Virakesari* followed developments closely. There were times when the leftist groups stood with us. We also did things a little differently. Our placards were in all three languages; the banners were written in English, Tamil and Sinhala, instead of the other way around.

Different people came for the vigils. Tamil women came, wearing their pottus, sometimes passersby joined in the vigil. There was criticism that we were highlighting Krishanthi because she was from a middle class background, but there was always a discussion. We took up her case because of the gravity of the rape and killings. However we also always highlighted the lack of accountability for violations by the military.

President Kumaratunge responded to the vigil. I remember we had a letter delivered to us during the vigil, when we were standing on the road, from the President's office saying that the case will be heard in Colombo. Our demands were justice for Krishanthi through a proper hearing. Many people came to the courts; once the case was taken up in courts, many organizations got involved in the process, watching the case, analyzing it, such as local and international human rights organizations, the media, and scholars. We had done our work as the Vigil Coalition. We wanted to get the case to courts and we succeeded. Then, many people watched the proceedings of the case and we faded away: we had done our bit.

It was also important that through the Krishanthi Case, there was the unexpected disclosure of the mass graves in Chenmuni by one of the accused soldiers. I had left Sri Lanka by the time the final verdict was given in 1998.

The Vigil Coalition

We continued as the Vigil Coalition because we wanted to highlight not merely the Krishanthi case but also others such as Koneshwari and other rapes and murders. The Vigil Coalition was not an isolated piece of activism. We linked the Krishanthi case to the whole issue of sexual violence in war time, particularly the concerns of custodial violence against women. We were the ones who went and investigated some of the reported cases. For instance no one was willing to go to the Central Camp, Amparai. When Koneshwari was killed, we went to the scene of the crime and we saw skin hanging on the roof. Koneshwari had only complained to the Camp that some STF personnel had come and cut down the Neem tree in her compound. Later, a grenade was put into her vagina and exploded. We saw the remnants of her body.

At that time, we used to do all sorts of things. We would drive from the East to different places from which we received complaints of atrocities, particularly against women. We didn't have drivers and we did everything. We went in our private car. Getting off at the check points, giving the id numbers and so on.... We went wherever we heard of sexual assault cases, since no one wanted to take up these cases. This was because I wanted to take on these cases at HHR. So we drove, often just Sharmini, Little Katie and I. We used to be stopped by the military and questioned. Sometimes we were stopped and asked to walk with our hands over our heads. It needed a particular type of courage but we were young and angry enough to do it. Since I mostly traveled with Sharmini, I had this sense that as she was a Sinhalese, somehow I will be protected. Both of us had Canadian passports and this gave us some leverage at that time.

Work at Home for Human Rights

In Canada, I was involved in minority rights and women's issues, as a Canadian woman of color. I was not really involved in Sri Lankan politics. I was the first ever non-Indian woman to work as staff of the South Asian Women's Centre in Toronto where I lasted only four months. It was called South Asian but all its office bearers were Indian women, and they were working for OTHER South Asian sisters! So these were the things I was fighting for in Canada. For me, the prerogative was women's rights, not Tamil women's rights and not Tamil rights. The only thing I did, if at all, was some immigration work that related to Tamils in my regular job. I came from a women's rights perspective. I was a strong feminist to the point of being a radical or separatist feminist. I did ridiculous things like refuse to read books that were written by men. Then I came to Colombo and I lost some of my fanatic feminism.

Returning to Jaffna in 2009

It is so different now, compared to the time in the mid-1990s. I now work much more directly in the North and East through HHR. I feel I am expected to prove myself constantly. All my life, whenever people asked me if I minded being a woman, I always answered, never, until I went back to work more regularly in Jaffna after the fighting in Vanni ended in 2009. I am amazed at the struggle to be a woman occupying political space in the peninsula. I am being scrutinized all the time about the way I am, the way I behave, the way I dress, the work I do. I am constantly being pushed to prove something.

I feel that if I were a man, I would be more readily and easily accepted. I think as women, who are different, we are perceived as a threat. The men in Jaffna society do not want to accept you as an equal. Take the Mayor, for instance. She sometimes works in unconventional ways but if her position were held by a man with the same skill set, he would be accepted more freely. It is the same with the female Government Agent of Jaffna. I am in an insecure position. In Jaffna today, I feel that I have to prove myself, that I am considered guilty of something till I can prove my innocence. I have been classified as not conforming to any stereotype. I think I am perceived as a threat because the men look at me as someone who is now taking up political space, not as a die-hard feminist, but as a person who is encroaching into male space. There are other women who are also in the public sphere but they are perceived as being in a woman's space, dealing with women's issues. These are not the preoccupation of men. Although I am a feminist, I take up a different kind of space through my work and my various political interventions. I do human rights work, I tried to get the Tamil political leadership together so they can at least talk to each other despite their many differences. I am now in the process of starting a research institute that will study Tamil culture, arts, language. So I am perceived as someone who has 'captured' the human rights space, the political space and now the 'art and literature' space.

I am not 'capturing' anything. I do whatever I think has to be done. Then I would leave. This is what I did back in the 90s. In 2009, after the war, I organized a Human Rights Day in December, and over 2000 people came. I thought the time was ripe for such a mobilization in Jaffna. The silence had gone on for so long through the protracted war. I acted on my idea and people followed. When I tried to bring in the Tamil political parties together, no one else thought it was possible, but I succeeded. Now it has a dynamics of its own and I am out of the picture, but I am not sitting here taking credit for all of that.

People see me as someone who can bring people together, someone who can achieve things. I think it is more a fear that if I come in, what would happen to them - their political space, their political projects. However, my main concern as always is my human rights work. I haven't moved out of the human rights space. That is where I am located. However, I am interested in other things as well - such as politics in general, in research, in Tamil literature and language.

I also feel the constant scrutiny and the constant feeling of having to prove my credentials. I have a romanticized attachment to the space in Jaffna. In 1995, I came back to Sri Lanka as a Canadian-Tamil, a 'hyphenated' Tamil, but in Jaffna today, I have been classified as something else, more like a hybrid: who is she, what is she doing? I don't conform to any kind of stereotype. This puts me in a vulnerable position. I am always compelled to be on the defensive, by both men and women in the public arena. Some ask me how my dealings with such men are. Others presume I have different types of relationships with men in power. Jaffna is not a place I have no idea about. I am not alien to it but I get opposition from Jaffna. I don't feel this in Batticaloa or Amparai and yet I feel it here in Jaffna. My dad feels strongly about this, saying "Why do we have to go five generations back to justify what you do?" I have to be cast in a particular tradition. This not just for

acceptance: it is more like they (in Jaffna) would tolerate me if I belong to the right family or tradition.

Work after the 'War'

The situation in Jaffna, in the North, after the 2009 war is complex, which is why the work we do, is crucial. What is peace or conflict transformation in our situation? This is just terminology. Personally, I feel we are doing a bit of bandage work through HHR. The more fulfilling work for me now is what I am doing through Aakol, the culture and research centre I helped establish, and the work I am able to do with the women who have lost so much and done so much in the years of war.

Aakol is basically trying to safeguard our heritage. So we talk about the language, looking for the words that are getting lost, creating a dictionary, recording the oral history of our culture, delving into how culture was/is being interpreted. We also work to preserve some of the positive cultural markers – the instruments people used the pots and pans For instance, there was Tamil Buddhism practiced here in Jaffna but there is no acknowledgement of this. They are trying to re-write history. Have you ever heard in Buddhism that there were monuments to the dead? Never, but such monuments existed here. So at this time when they are trying to re-write history, we want to preserve history, recount it the way it has to be told. I want to explore the intersection of Tamil Buddhism and Sinhala Hinduism. We are also going through numerous manuscripts. There are a few people who can read manuscripts and we are working with them. It is not only to preserve our heritage but to tell people about it. Through this, we will be doing something interesting and tangible. We also want to look at the Sangam and pre-Sangam periods where womanhood was celebrated. For instance, the clothes women wore – the sari was draped differently to allow women to work— this indicates that there was a time when it was accepted that nothing should stop

them from moving freely and working. In the past, women were not confined to their homes. They played an important economic role. We need to let this surface and let women have the power of choice and use their full potential.

In researching our heritage, we will also depend on oral histories, which would automatically include the history of the conflict. There are records of the history of the conflict culled through oral histories. People are bringing out publications of those stories. Those stories are located everywhere, that is also a history in the process of being written. Some people are going to the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) and their stories are told there as well, but the LLRC cannot be reached by everyone, not everyone wants to engage with that process. Thus, we present another process, almost an alternative process, through the nature of our work. It pre-dates the LLRC and will outlast it.

Reconciliation is an empty word. I really get irritated with the way it is used in Sri Lanka after the war. When people come back to the community, whether they are Muslim or Tamil, they are at first outsiders, but they are gradually accepted into the fold. It was the same for me when I returned from Canada. Even for us coming here from Colombo, our acceptance would depend on how we interact with the community, how we break down the barriers. It is interesting, this thing of acceptance. I'll recount an incident here - We were looking for a house for Aakol and we found this house that belonged to a Jaffna icon - Poet Somasundaram... It was a pre-courtyard house, very different from the courtyard houses. We went and sat there, Megala, Duwarahan, another person and myself. We were an interesting combination - Duwaharan is from a Kurukal family, I am from Jaffna and Megala is from the hill country and the other from a presumed low caste but married to a Kurukal woman - we came from very different backgrounds. We started to talk about renting the house. The woman, the granddaughter of the poet.... was trying to find out who we were. I was very uncomfortable to describe whose family I am from but Megala said I was

someone's relative. The woman was able to place me immediately and brought out a 150-year old shawl that belonged to her grandfather to show us. Megala said she was from Colombo. That was the first time I ever saw Megala say she was from Colombo and not Kegalle in the hill country. She hid her hill country identity. This was the first time I heard her do this – she has always been very proud of her hill country identity. So I was accepted even though I had been out of the country for so long. When the other person was asked where he was from, he mentioned his wife's native place So nothing is in black and white – for certain types of work this caste-based hierarchy is very important but for other types of work it is not.

However when you want to enter a private space – like marriage or renting a house, or something to do with private life, one's caste becomes important. On the other hand to do business with them, to give them legal assistance, caste is immaterial. The high caste people who remained in Jaffna were fence-sitters when it came to the LTTE. They pretended they supported them but they did not. I remember 'caste-specific' type remarks being made about the LTTE even then. What people narrated was that as 'high' caste people went abroad, 'low' caste people bought their property so what were once 'upper' caste enclaves were now someone else's property. People did not know who lived next door. Different kinds of people were coming into the area. Thus, people belonging to the 'high' caste are now concerned about this and becoming even more conservative.

Regarding then Muslims coming back to the community – there is a big difference between the Jaffna Muslims and the Eastern Muslims. The Jaffna Muslims took their identity from Jaffna itself. Islam was their religion. Their social identity was more a Tamil identity. They identify themselves as "Muslim Tamils." For Jaffna Muslims coming back is a feeling similar to the Diaspora coming back. The umbilical cord for Muslims in Puttalam is still very much connected to Jaffna, or the north, from where they were expelled. However this is so only for the older

generation. The younger generation is different, they do not know Jaffna - their lives, jobs, and everything is tied to Puttalam.

Current Realities

This post-war situation is so complex. There are many rights that need to be claimed; for instance one of the critical concerns is that of land. There are huge problems with regard to land. There are the claims of people who owned the land before the war, those who were given the land by the LTTE, and those who were displaced and returned after the war. We resolved a case where we got someone with 30 acres of virtually unused land to share part of the land with the landless displaced. People cannot access housing assistance because they can't prove a claim to the land. Some people have pawned their land and have not redeemed it. Then there is also the fundamental question, under whose administration was the land transaction made. The LTTE ran a parallel administration. So it is now very important to help the community access rights.

Another issue that requires legal assistance is the issue of transfers outside the Vanni and within the Vanni - these have to be resolved. In this process of strengthening women's ability to claim rights that are perceived to be non-threatening, you make them less vulnerable and possibly also protect their civil and political rights.

We want to enhance the skills of people to advocate for rights. If this can be done nothing experienced in the community is non-justiciable. We therefore work in the North and have field workers in Jaffna. We are sharing different experiences and take them along a process. This is very different advocacy work. It is not high profile; we cannot make statements nor get our photograph in the papers. It is all about how you negotiate with different people – with politicians, bureaucrats, the military, and the community. It is also how you can mediate between people.

Sometimes Politician A may tell us 'Speak to politician B to resolve this problem, but don't tell him I told you to do so'. You become an interlocutor, in a way. This is the strength of community-based advocacy. It also allows Tamil political leadership to mediate jointly in issues that are not too contentious. You have to be politically non-aligned. Not all the information you have can be used and you have to be strategic on how you use it. You must be absolutely honest about who you are, why you are doing what you are doing, and it is only after gaining their trust can we work with them and be protected.

Within Jaffna and elsewhere are many self-help groups. I have many concerns about self-help groups; one borrows money from one place to pay off another place and who gets richer are the interlocutor organizations. The women's lot gets worse. So within our groups, we created an economic development activity so that people have some interest in common to stay together. The onus is on them to come out and do something through the awareness we create among them on many issues. We have been working with them for three years and we provide some assistance to them that can impact on their skill set. With the skill set they develop, they can become independent. They come together for events – Women's Day, May Day, Human Rights Day, among others. They also come together to commemorate death anniversaries. The importance of these groups coming together is also for them to track things – for instance, when one husband abandons his wife in Jaffna and goes to Amparai, they track him down through the groups' network. If there is a problem in one group, the others tend to help, whether it be an issue with the neighbours or with the government or others. There are alternative strategies women develop to support each other; they are not powerless all the time. Some of the groups are very strong. In Amparai, they were able to stop the white van abductions. They blocked the road at central camp. These are mixed groups but a large percentage of the members of these groups are women and survivors of human rights abuses – torture, sexual assault, family members of the disappeared and others. They are all survivors. You can

even map the rights violations in an area by studying the composition of these groups. In some groups they are mostly from families of the disappeared, in others, many of the members are those with family members who have been killed in the war.

Now the point of reference is the women. The issues they raise are the ones we address. During the 90s, I remember many young women were married off to prevent arrest, disappearances or recruitment of the men in the community. However, there were still disappearances and the women were married only briefly. So there were issues of re-marriage: did they even want to re-marry? There were other everyday questions: Did they wear a Pottu or not; could they go to a wedding whether they were Sumangali or not, could they perform the Arathi or not, could they sit in front or at the back? In the mid-90s, I was not concerned with these socio-cultural issues; I never questioned social inequalities or the cultural barriers in Tamil society maybe because I was only 17 when I left. I questioned social inequality only from an ethnic point of view, not from any women's, feminist point of view. When I came back from Canada, I had a different view. I was engaged in women's rights work there. So at HHR they probably thought I came from Mars. It's different now. I recently took the second level leadership of HHR to India. Our team is very different now – composed of both men and women. In India, they were very impressed. The organizational structure, how staff respond to issues, their political worldview – interestingly the Indians felt they were not nationalist enough. So whatever I was thinking about in 1995/96 is now incorporated into our work and we implement or practice what we believe in, with regard to gender and human rights. I think it has become part of our organizational culture.

We also work with existing women's federations in the Vanni, which have about 2000 members each. The different structures of the federation are organized around savings and credit. They do so much for so little. I feel these groups have

now replaced the LTTE with the military. I understand that this is a survival mechanism, that there is a hierarchical mechanism in the villages, that people are used to patron-client relationships and that the LTTE was also behaving as such to the people and now they have been replaced by the military. Then, the question for me is how does one do human rights work? If their relationship is good with the military, who are we to judge? It's a question I ask myself: if they want to have a good relationship with the military, it is their call. Like the women told us, when the military became aware of what they were doing and they could explain themselves to the military in Sinhala, they were left alone. For these relationships to survive there has to be mutual benefit and sometimes you have to look the other way.

When they were under the LTTE, for instance, they did not deal with issues of violence against women, but the LTTE did. Now there is a lacuna, they have to access the legal and policy structures through which they can deal with violence. We need to document how these women dealt with many issues under the LTTE and how they are dealing with them now. The longer time elapses, the more memory fades or people begin to interpret what happened differently or they remember things differently. They are recording and documenting now but in a very ad hoc fashion. Our task is to recover this history.

3.3 “Keeping memories alive in the face of impunity”

Women’s Activism in Eastern Sri Lanka

Manavi

Colombo to Batt

I don’t recall ever making a conscious decision to relocate to Batticaloa. I did feel I would like to be out of the centre (Colombo) and work with a small organization. What I did was not particularly important to me at the time. I just wanted to work voluntarily, with different groups of people, in a different part of Sri Lanka. It was always temporary, so long as the women with whom I worked with felt that my presence and skills were useful.

I would have been 19 when I made my first visit to Batt right after my studies. I had accompanied some of the Colombo women who were attending the Annual General Meeting of Suriya Women’s Development Centre (Suriya) at the end of 1996. Many of Suriya’s publications were printed in Colombo so I eventually became their contact there. I wasn’t married at the time and more mobile than most of my friends so it was possible to come to Batt and work on things informally with Suriya. I was interested in documenting the work of their cultural group. So I interviewed many of their members for a paper, portions of which were later translated into Tamil. I was examining how this particular group of women used different spaces – actual physical spaces and discursive spaces – to talk about the conflict and the political context in which they worked.

My first experience of responding to Violence Against Women in Colombo was the Krishanthi Kumaraswamy case⁵. That incident, even now, is particularly close to me as Krishanthi was my own age. I thought of her as someone like me - we would have been doing our "A" levels⁶ at the time, sitting for the same exams, going for the same events – and then this tragedy happened to her. Perhaps I could relate to her more as she was also middle class and the people who were protesting on her behalf were also friends. The issue was obviously very serious but at my age it was just fun being out on the streets, marching and wearing all black.

I used to visit Batti during 1997/8 when I was working with a psycho-social support project, but it was only after the Tsunami that we decided to come and work full time. By that time I was married and both of us were very conscious that we should only be there if we were able to contribute something. We did various jobs and I worked with the Women's Coalition for Disaster Management (WCDM), the women's network coordinated by Suriya, on a voluntary basis. Suriya was always the point from which I was able to do things as I knew most of the women and we had a good relationship with one another. They offered me the use of their office, a warm welcoming space where we could have our discussions.

Suriya has always been a very supportive environment where children were accepted in the workplace. Their flexible work hours and the fact that women usually bring their children to meetings enabled me to balance my commitment to work and my family. My engagement with Batticaloa, and Suriya in particular, has crossed key transitions in my life. Now it is more of a conscious decision that Batticaloa is where we want to live.

⁵ Krishanthi Kumaraswamy was a 18 year old girl who was detained at a check point in Jaffna on her way back from school, and was gang raped and murdered by the 6 soldiers of the army on the 7th of August 1996. Her family members (mother, brother (16) and family friend) who subsequently came looking for her were also killed.

⁶ GCE Advanced Level examinations – the final examinations at secondary school level

Context in Which We Work

While the war began in the North, there was also a movement [towards recruitment] in the East during the 80's which was strongly linked to poverty. The Batticaloa district is one of the most impoverished in the country – very sparsely populated, difficult to access and there has been little investment inflows here in the past, and up to the present. The land between the lagoon and the sea is actually a strong boundary. The coastal areas are populated by landowners and are much more urban and commercial due to British colonization and the development of the road and railway infrastructure. The other side of the lagoon, where most of the mobile and aboriginal Veddah communities reside, is extremely rural, wild and beautiful, but very poor.

During the war, much of the recruitment by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who controlled that area at the time, was due to the fact that people were very poor and the majority of child conscription took place between the lagoon and towards the hills. The paddy land there is commonly owned by coastal residents, both Tamils and Muslims, and they have a tenant relationship with the villagers who live there. The villagers farm the land but do not own it. The Chena cultivation land, slash and burn, is actually owned by the State but people have settled there and use the land for agricultural purposes.

The health and education services in this area have also been extremely poor. All of these factors were the fodder which fueled the war and many of the social issues which Suriya has been dealing with: young marriages and relationships, very poor health care for pregnant women and almost no follow-up for rape and violence against women cases. Compounding the war and poverty in the region came the Tsunami, which devastated the coastal areas of Batticaloa and Ampara districts. There was extreme loss of life, especially amongst women. A larger percentage of women in every single district died; in Batticaloa this was

approximately 60%. This was due to many factors. The Tsunami struck on a Sunday morning while many women were going to church or the temple. Women traditionally do not learn how to swim or climb trees and had to carry or run with their small children. Women's saris and long hair got entangled and entrapped them. Some women in Muslim areas had never left their homes and they just did not know where to go. They remained in the house as they had never been outside alone. Many of the men were also out at sea, fishing in the early morning and had not returned so they were not affected in the same way.

The recent floods in early 2011 also took place in a context of multiple displacements and resettlement due to the war. In 2007/8 there was heavy fighting in Batticaloa. There was daily carpet shelling for six months to clear the area and people had to leave their homes and move to the camps yet again. People were barely recovering from these experiences and slowly rebuilding their lives when the flood disaster happened in 2011. It had not rained and flooded to this extent for over 50 years in Batticaloa. This led us to look at issues of food security, women's work, women's livelihoods and the economy in the context of war and disaster. The impact on the household – who bears the burden, how do you rebuild, how do you recognize the kinds of economic work and contribution of women – is where we are now, linking it to everything else. The floods happened, compounded by the effects of the war, poverty, and the Tsunami.

Strategies We Use

I clearly remember when WCDM was set up in 2005. Perhaps it was because I was not from Batticaloa and did not know any of the politics that had gone on between women's organizations in the past that I was able to befriend everyone and invite them to participate at the meetings, even if these groups had not been working together previously. Suriya, which neither belonged to any side politically

nor was bound to a particular donor agency, provided a new space for this women's network to come and work together.

We intentionally agreed that these were informal networks, that we would not be funded, that this coalition would rotate and not come under the auspices of any one particular organization. WCDM would exist so long as we needed to work together on issues. Seven years later, we are still here! Those basic principles set out by all in the beginning were essential. The network has the flexibility to respond to issues and we are still working well together, as a group. The coordination, unfortunately, still rests with Suriya as many of the groups do not feel they have the confidence to manage the politics or possess the leadership capacity to manage relationships between key people and organizations.

The history of coordination throughout the conflict has been one of control, whether it was the NGO Consortium controlled behind the scenes by the LTTE, or any other coordinating forum where one needed to get permission to work or act. It was always very top-down and often unpleasant. The other coordination forums were dominated by international humanitarian organizations or the UN. This was especially the case in the post-Tsunami context, where most of the decision-making forums were coordinated by international agencies. These forums were English-speaking, rushed, held in the late evenings and top-down with very little space for local groups to attend, let alone articulate their views. We were very conscious of the fact that WCDM should be coordinated by local organizations. We agreed that WCDM would never be a network that received funding and if we did need to do something together, and then our different organizations would have to share resources. That fact alone has helped us thrive – and survive.

At the time these principles also helped to manage the politics, even during the Ceasefire⁷. The LTTE was so strong and very much in public space with their offices throughout town, controlling the Consortium and all the other meetings that were taking place at the time. It was very difficult to remain independent of them. If you were in any way perceived to be strong, or had the support of others, or were working collectively, you would be seen as a threat. As we were not registered as an organization and did not have any funding, these factors seemed to serve as a form of protection.

When women working networks like WCDM where they are provided space, an idea, a collective, this becomes the basis from which all these women can come together and step into the public domain. When a young woman was raped and murdered at Central College in 2005, women were seen protesting on the streets and making statements. There was this collective work that happened through WCDM; a consciousness that violence against women was wrong and that all women need to respond to such cases. This is the kind of leadership Suriya has done well to provide direction to women and show women how they should respond to this type of violence by coming together, mobilizing around issues so that such incidents do not happen in the future.

On the programming side, you can ignore the politics completely and therefore end up doing rather “bland” work – non-confrontational or service-oriented programming which many women’s organizations have opted for. Suriya has not always been political but has had to be cautious in how we work. Our cultural group has addressed sensitive issues through songs, poetry and theater performances. We have used these methods in different ways, political ways and to challenge stereotypes. Not always knowing what to do but doing something

⁷As part of the Norwegian facilitated peace negotiations between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE, there was a Ceasefire Agreement that was in place between 2002-2004 which was monitored by the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission, an international body. However there were many violations of the agreement by both parties.

we thought would work out in the woman's interest. Suriya has also contributed to larger processes such as women's research, campaigns or doing something collectively. We have always tried to balance collective action while never losing sight of the individual woman's need.

If there is anything I would like to pass on to a younger generation of feminists it is that you can't always have any preplanned strategy or theoretically-guided way of working. Of course that feeds into it but realistically what you are able to do, how complicated the situation is and how you approach it, can only be learned by recognizing women's resilience. Having a face, a life, in front of you - not just statistics but looking into a woman's eyes - changes how you work and learn. This awareness also comes with maturity and learning from others who have managed very complicated relationships and situations for years. Knowing which option is the best in a situation of multiple bad options can only come from the experience and support of older women activists who have had to negotiate those things. A younger generation of feminists benefit from having older, stronger women by their side to think through the risks and provide the support for more inexperienced community workers. These insights from years of experience help give younger women the confidence to make decisions and take responsibility.

I feel one vital thing has got lost or is missing in feminists like myself of a younger generation. I sense a political awareness in the earlier generation of women. I don't know where that exactly came from, perhaps in their involvement in left politics globally or in political discourses of the time such as the civil rights movement or the non-aligned movement. But definitely, the older generation of women is much more passionate about feminist issues. I find that amongst my friends and younger women in general, that they feel it is not their fight. They do not use the same strategies; they have less protests and marches... I have tried to draw on that passion of an earlier generation but have chosen to act less confrontationally as I don't feel those strategies are so effective over time. I prefer

to work more slowly and qualitatively. I have also observed that younger women tend to use technology rather than ourselves as the medium to fight the same battles. The humanitarian sector is also making everything a “profession” rather than encouraging women to get involved because they are passionate about an issue. We are no longer trying to change the world: we are trying to do a professional job.

This was especially evident during the Ceasefire and Tsunami when there was a large presence of NGO’s. It was a time which created huge employment opportunities for young women in all organizations so NGO’s were definitely a new employment market. There were daily ‘cash for work’ programs, livelihood programs or other projects and training, all coordinated and financed by NGO’s. Because of the way they were structured with volunteers, community workers and health workers, I would guess that 80% of their staff was women. The post Tsunami period provided a space for us to organize. Women’s groups formed strong networks, lobbied for a lot of gender-sensitive planning in the camps and post Tsunami reconstruction. That space was definitely there – very vibrant – which wasn’t there earlier.

As I mentioned earlier, in 2005, we had to report on a case involving the gang rape and murder of a young woman. We employed several strategies by working closely with the media and police to help identify the woman. We supported the mother of the woman by remembering the death of her daughter and attending the rituals as she could not even access the police station to identify her own daughter due to security fears. There was no legal justice, no compensation, and no death certificate. We were, however, able to mobilize women’s organizations to protest against the rape and murder at that time. There is a difference, sadly, about what is possible when a woman has been killed. All the practical issues don’t arise so you are able to have a public outcry. Whereas if the woman were alive, then the first priority would have been to move her to a safe place for the

short and long-term and provide the support she needed to cope. In 2005, it was possible to demand justice for the woman, something which was not possible at all by 2009. We were all frightened to work on sensitive cases regarding abductions, killings, disappearances and rapes. We couldn't make public any information about such incidents as we could not protect the victims. We could only support the women survivors to find out more information, to deal with the trauma of the event, and to build community support structures for the long-term. In such cases involving violence against women, it is difficult to articulate one feminist definition of peace-building. Suriya has always defined peace in terms of no violence in the home, no violence in society, no violence in the country, and women should never compromise on this. We use a more holistic approach by providing support and empowerment programs for women to take control of their lives. We have always followed these principles on how we do our peace work in changing social norms, cultural norms, stigma against widows, domestic violence, military violence and war.

Where we have actually used the terms peace-building or conflict transformation are in formal policy documents and fact finding missions where we contributed to official UN reports on Sri Lanka. We highlighted the kinds of violence taking place in the district so that it was never made permissible or denied. Suriya and other women's organizations facilitated that flow of information on what was happening on the ground and we strategized around issues of human rights and the special impact on women. One contribution I have perhaps been able to make by being in Batticaloa is to facilitate a process to ensure that the voices of women in this district are supported, strengthened and inform an integral part of the national dialogue.

Suriya has always tried to make use of any available space to comment on issues affecting women. WCDM presented a statement to the Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) in October, 2010, highlighting the special

concerns of women around the war and the lack of justice. This Commission was primarily set up as the Government's response to the UN's demand for a War Crimes Inquiry after the war ended. However, the LLRC had no mandate to act as an accountability mechanism. There were three sittings in the Eastern Province and 90% of the cases concerned disappearances – women who had lost their husbands and children from as far as 20 years ago to the present came before the Commission. We were able to get our concerns into the official proceedings but were not optimistic about the outcome. Very few women even knew about the Commission or that the hearings would be taking place in the Eastern Province.

Challenges We Face

Recently, we have been receiving reports of resettled women engaging in sex work - some may be for money, some may have been raped - we do not know for sure and we do not know what to do. Suriya has arranged to have an experienced social worker talk about some of these issues with local community women activists. But it is a fine line. A woman is involved in sex work for money but then what can one do? Sex work is illegal and if we make a complaint, the police will arrest her. We need to ascertain why she is doing what she does, what is her family background, what happened to her, and determine where we would draw the line between sex work and rape. How do we understand her and what is our strategy as women? If we say no sex work, how is she to earn an income? Are we, as a women's organization, providing any livelihood support for her? We have tried to avoid sensationalizing the issue by not publicly highlighting that there is a lot of sex work going on in the resettlement areas. Suriya has been facing the dilemma of what to do with this situation in the last few years. Our staff visits villages where we have had such reports and they attempt to gain the women's trust. These women are frightened and suspect that we may have been sent by the police, especially if they are involved in an illegal activity. To build any kind of trust between women can only happen in very small groups of people you can

fully account for and depend on over time. Trust is never something you can assume.

We face many challenges when addressing stigma in our society. A woman who was raped by armed men was contemplating suicide because her neighbors questioned her morality and blamed her for the incident. Rumors of her rape were spread by the same neighbors in her village who at the time of the incident had helped her. In another case, two 16 year old girls were abducted by armed persons in a white van and the police spread rumors that it was a staged abduction and that the girls had actually run away with their boyfriends. They were missing for over a month. We supported the families in their search for their daughters. We accompanied them to various human rights organizations to file their complaints. We helped them draft press statements appealing for information about them and seeking their release. Fortunately, both girls were brought back in a vehicle, blind-folded, and dumped on the road close to their village. We visited their homes and supported their families, by helping both girls start school again. They were terrified to speak about anything that had happened to them. One mother was concerned about the virginity of her daughter and what had happened while they were in captivity. Dealing with community silence around such cases of violence and also dealing with social stigma and cultural stigma have been big challenges in our work. There is also the complicated issue around community involvement in such crimes through informers, jealousies and revenge.

There have been different peace-building initiatives between the Tamil and Muslim communities over the years, which were meaningful yet challenging. Reaching out to one another was extremely important but it takes years for such attitudinal changes to shift and something much deeper to be established than just a "sharing", a march or a workshop. During the ceasefire, there was funding for these programs between the Tamil and Muslim communities. I felt however

that it was very artificial. After the Tsunami, some organizations thought they could resettle Muslims in their original land after their expulsion and displacement by the LTTE. Surrounded by Tamil villagers who didn't really want them there, the organizations brokered a superficial dialogue and then left them to "live happily ever after".

The riots happened shortly after in 2008 and though Suriya worked in Muslim villages, we were unable to travel there. There were killings and attacks on vehicles, much propaganda and many politicians involved. Apart from feeling helpless by the actions of the men and politicians the women from these two communities were doing something quite different. They were not throwing stones at buses but were instead cooking together, checking on one another and helping those who needed help. Suriya created small intimate places for these women to deeply share what they were going through at the time. The land conflicts between the Muslim and Tamil communities need to be addressed at a macro level but some things need to be done on a small, practical level as well. As women, dealing with issues of identity, biases and deep prejudices can begin slowly, in a small experimental way.

Lessons We Are Learning

There was a particular kind of women's activism that Suriya was involved in when I first worked with them but there were a lot of negative views of the organization as well at the time. I hesitated to become a full time staff as I realized some of the criticisms may actually be valid. I continued linking up with various women's groups in the district, many of whom were quite critical of Suriya. I never got involved in defending the organization but just listened and tried to understand all the viewpoints. Many people said that Suriya was always acting alone, never working with others and engaged in rather extreme responses with little collaboration with other women's organizations. Not having a strong

presence nor constituency in the district nor sharing their national and international contacts with other women's groups were also facts. While other organizations criticized Suriya for these things, in hindsight, I feel it was a tactic of Suriya to protect a space for themselves, free of control over their associations and decision-making.

I believe the frustration and misunderstanding at the time contributed towards Suriya's staff not making an attempt to engage with other women's groups in the district. Most organizations were not necessarily working collaboratively but were partners of particular donors such as OXFAM and CARE, working in the community at the village level, promoting gender-based programs. Occasionally, they sought Suriya's assistance for legal support but generally, everyone was working on the issue of violence against women and did not get along because they were on each other's turf. That was the background when I joined Suriya. Violence against Women was the key issue during the years 2003-2007. It is no longer the key issue now. Very few organizations are doing any gender-based violence work at the present time. It is very hard to come up with comprehensive data on whether rape was more prevalent during the war as there has never been a baseline survey conducted. For me personally, I don't think this way of looking at violence against women is very useful. Even if it happened to one woman, it IS happening. All that is important is that it did happen and the circumstances which allowed it to happen.

There are different ways of working and with different people which are also very helpful in supporting women. I discovered this when I stepped away from this work briefly and focused more deeply on psycho-social support work. There is so much that the feminist/human rights discourses and the psycho-social support discourses could learn from one another; the former being very legal, top down and advocacy-driven, the latter being much slower and more focused on individual support. The field of psycho-social support work still needs to be more

politicized and the human rights work needs to place the individual at the core. One should influence the other. That is where I feel I have been able to help Suriya combine both methodologies, neither forgetting the importance of political action nor keeping silent on issues, while still doing something long-term to support the women who have been affected.

Our experience taught us that we need to ensure proper documentation and follow up of the large numbers of sexual abuse cases coming to Suriya. We need to think of a strategy for the long-term while continuing to file the police reports and carry out the proper paper work for these cases. We have sometimes lost a file or by our own inaction of not following up a case, we have caused delays. Least of all, we should not be the cause of such delays in the system.

I've learned that there are no particularities in who acts in times of crises or need, just mere commitment. In the end, it doesn't come down to one's training, education, language or experience - Just the willingness to risk something for the sake of another. It has always been individual women who are willing to take personal risks when an organization feels they cannot get involved for whatever reason. In that sense, Suriya has provided both the confidential space for informal networks of women to gather, share and strategize as well as indirectly providing institutional protection. That is what is so strengthening – to do something! Trust is such a key factor, especially in times of war, but I'm not sure whether or not women are more trustworthy than men. I think given any specific context, everyone can be perpetrators at all levels. It is not a given that women have built trust differently than men. The kinds of relationships borne out of friendships, support and trust have, however, been sustained by women and that has allowed very small networks to continue to work over time.

I feel there is more space and confidence in the East to respond to cases of violence against women now that "the war is over". Violence and incidents are

still taking place primarily because of impunity. I have no illusions. There is no legal justice when only approximately 2% of cases are sentenced in this country. Justice delayed is justice denied. Legal punishment and legal action are not the only options one has. Everyday actions like providing women the space to talk or write about something is also about challenging silence and impunity. It is important not to forget: this is our way of challenging impunity. Hopefully, at some stage, it will amount to the perpetrators being held accountable, or a system which allowed something to happen, being banned or exposed for what it is – as being unjust and unfair. One given is that women won't forget anything that has happened until they die, so time is not an issue. However, there is a limit – a life time – but it is our responsibility to ensure that women remember all that has to be remembered. That is an important contribution that feminists have made – keeping memory alive.

As women's organizations and activists, we must remember particular people, particular events...record and document...strengthen one another....always speaking out, never giving up, like little scratches that keep etching away at a solid surface over time. Women need to think outside the box, always pushing at the boundaries. Everything one does to counter and reduce gaps, to provide spaces to heal, to understand what is possible and what can be done, even when it appears to be hopeless, is a challenge to impunity. I am still hopeful. I often think of lines that a friend quoted to me from one of Brecht's poems:

in the dark times
will there also be singing?
yes, there will also be singing
about the dark times.
(Bertolt Brecht)

CHAPTER 4

THE NEPAL CASE STUDIES



to Peace and Security for Women
and the
Achievement of



“Traditional policing of women continues to take place for supposed violation of moral/cultural codes, thus adding another critical concern”

CHAPTER FOUR - The Nepal Case Studies

Foreword

My Struggle to End All Forms of Violence against Women in Any Context

Jyotsna Maskay

In March 2009, WOREC Nepal hosted a number of women's rights advocates, activists and academics from South and South East Asia on behalf of Development Alternatives with Women for A New Era (DAWN) to a Consultation on Feminist Engagement with Conflict, Impunity and Peace in Kathmandu. The women were part of a DAWN initiative that brought together feminist activists working on conflict and peace-building in a process of reflection and writing and a sharing of experiences across conflict-affected countries in this region. The DAWN process had begun a year previously with a similar coming together in Chennai, India. Each country - India, Sri Lanka and Indonesia - had begun a process of identifying women activists and processes of activism they wanted to write about. Nepal was represented at the meeting in Chennai by Shobha Gautham of INSEC. However, due to a full complement of commitments, Shobha withdrew from the initiative and DAWN approached WOREC to be part of this process of recall, review and reflection. Dr. Renu Rajbhandari and I began co-coordinating the Nepali part of the initiative.

At the Kathmandu Consultation in 2009, we presented a series of case studies mainly focusing on the work of Nepali Women Human Rights Defenders but set in the context of conflict, transition from conflict, and the current post conflict period. The studies we conducted were on the following:

- Abduction of Ms. Devkumari Mahara, allegedly by Maoist militants in July 2006;

- Physical harassment and rape of Nepur Devi Yadav by a private non-state actor in April 2007;
- Abduction and enforced sex work in October 2007 of Ms. Kaushila Shah by State and non-state actors;
- Attack and harassment of human rights defenders Rita Mahato and Dev Kumari Mahara in April/May 2007 by private, non-state and state actors;
- Torture, ill treatment and murder of Laxmi Bohara by her family member in 2008 and state complicity

The Nepali case studies reflected different trends in each of the cases. We found that private crime within the family, public crime against women, and state-condoned crimes during war time receives inadequate response by the state due mainly to lack of political will and the inadequacy of judicial processes and structures. Abduction and enforced sex work fear of reprisals and threats continue in this post-conflict phase as it did during the war. Traditional policing of women continues to take place for supposed violation of moral/cultural codes, thus adding another critical concern: the lack of any support mechanisms for women, and the threats to women human rights defenders.

The work that informs this DAWN initiative is placed in the context of the Peoples War for a New Nepal. In February 1996, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) - CPN (M) - declared a 'people's war' from 13 February 1996 to 31 October with the aim of establishing a 'new democracy' against the existing feudal and patriarchal system. The ensuing 12-year old conflict claimed the lives of approximately 13,000 persons. As in all conflicts, women were the most affected. Violence, displacement, forced migration, forced exploitative work, loss of family members and limited access to the district administrative services, were added hardships borne by poor women.

Aspiring for peace and liberation, and desiring freedom from all forms of violence against them, women joined the *Jana Andolan 2* or the Democracy Movement of 2005/6. A broad alliance against the royal takeover called the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) was organized, encompassing about 90% of the seats in the old, dissolved parliament. The SPA and the CPN – M signed a 12 point agreement on 22 November, 2005 and CPA on 8 November, 2006. Implementation of this agreement is still in process, but is proceeding at a snail's pace. In April 2008, Nepal voted for a change with elections for an unique representative Constituent Assembly and the formation of a coalition government, giving hope for the marginalized and voiceless in addressing issues of human rights and sustainable peace. The inclusive Constituent Assembly has 601 members, of whom 197 are women. However, the inability to reach consensus has seen several coalition governments come into power, and the Constitution drafting process, which was due to be completed by May 2010, has been extended.

As the DAWN initiative moved forward, WOREC Nepal decided to document life histories of 3 women; Dev Kumari Mahara, a Dalit Women Human Rights Defender from the Terai region, Binu Chaudhary, a former Maoist turned woman activist, and Laxmi Bohara, a Women Human Rights Defender whose death stirred and re-energized the women's movement in Nepal. The common link to the three case studies is the pattern of strategies adopted by individuals or organizations or networks to assert women's rights for peace-building and conflict transformation.

Dev Kumari was supported by her family members to follow her vision – her family members felt the trauma of witnessing a Dalit woman break traditional family practice as she committed herself to the women's movement;

Laxmi Bohara transgressed the norms and culture of the far western region, and was murdered while defending her identity and her right to engage in work for social justice. Her death became a symbol of hope and encouragement for

Women Human Rights Defenders nationwide, which launched a campaign, in the midst of the drafting of a new Constitution for Nepal, to engage with Constituent Assembly members and obtain recognition for women's rights. As a result, the chairperson of the Constituent Assembly passed the first resolution on violence against women, thus validating the role of women in peace-building and transformation of patriarchal structures.

Binu Chaudhary shares her story of how she joined the Maoist movement for the liberation of women and social justice. She draws a line separating the overall politics of the Maoist movement for national liberation and the need for women's rights to supersede these politics.

Thus, the three women from different districts and diverse identities devised creative strategies in their activism not only to end violence and discrimination against women but also to engage in their own way to both define and build peace. This work at the local and national levels so specific to lived realities and contexts is a challenge to the straight-jacketed UN resolutions on women, peace and security, as women developed their own understanding of peace and negotiation even before these resolutions were named.

4.1 From Maoist Leader to Woman Activist

Binu Chaudhary

My Background

My Name is Binu Chaudhari. I was born in Bardiya District, Baniyabhar VDC, Narayanpur in 1982. was born of a Middle class family. I am the daughter of Mr. Chandra Bahadur Tharu and Ms. Tihari Tharu. Now I live in Bardiya district, Mainapokhara with my husband and two children.

I have a small piece of land on which I plant rice, wheat and cereals. I have a small fish pond which brings me some livelihood. The Maoist Party proposed that I return to work for them again but my interest lies in working as a female Human Rights Defender for the protection of women's rights. I had joined the party for women's liberation to ensure equal rights for women with males and to establish peace in the country. I have to struggle further to achieve my goal and more effort is essential to establish peace in the country. Now I work as the Chairperson of the Women's Advocacy Forum (WAF). I will be active in this work until I achieve my goal.

I am a member of the *Tharu* indigenous ethnic minority that until a decade ago, worked as bonded laborers. I was attracted to the Maoist Movement that started in 1996 as it raised issues of the marginalized. My enthusiasm for singing and dancing was a bonus and I easily joined the Movement's central level cultural team - *the Samana Pariwar* - and worked for eight years during the armed conflict period. I was thrilled when I initially got a chance to be with the team. After my performances, I felt a sense of accomplishment when I received standing ovations in districts all over Nepal.

Though I am from a so called low caste, I work with courage so that I can share my knowledge and skills to women for the protection of their rights. Initially, it

was difficult to express my views, but now I can express my views comfortably since I am recognized as a female Human Rights Defender in the district. My husband, mother-in-law, father-in-law, father and mother are recognized because of me. I really feel a sense of self confidence because of this.

Conflict

Due to the open border with India, Bardiya district was very sensitive during the conflict. Since the border was open, arms were imported and supplied to many parts of the country through this district. It was easy to take shelter in India during army operations. Mostly ethnic groups lived in the district such as the Tharu, Chaudhary, Rana, Raji, Badi, etc. People of this district make bamboo products and engage in agriculture. There was a high level of conflict between the People's Liberation Army and the Nepal Army in this district. They attacked each other for revenge. *About 8,400 people were killed during the conflict. Likewise, about 700 people were forcefully disappeared from this district.* I feel there may be more than this number. After the peace agreement, the party told us to return home. But my family told me I have invested so much time in the party so the party needs to do something for me Marginalized communities such as mine were the most affected during and after the conflict. Now many people are sent back home but no one is thinking about those who have become disabled during the conflict.

Experience of Conflict

My interest in dancing and singing drew me easily to the Maoist movement. I became a member of the Maoist party in 1994. I was 12 years old when I joined the movement's central level cultural team "Samana Pariwar". My house was a training center and various Maoist leaders used to visit my home. President Prachanda also visited many times during that time.

Women were not allowed to leave their home before the movement, but during this period women were equally involved in armed conflict. They started to work

with guns and bombs. Such boldness of women encouraged me to be a part of the Maoist movement. Even illiterate women in the community were working very well with weapons. This made me feel that women can do anything; they can change the world, if they so wanted. I used to raise awareness and empower people through my singing and dancing skills. But the police and army harassed and arrested anyone suspected of having any links with Maoists. If we had their books, songs, diaries or even a word, they harassed us. We had to keep quiet and kept our feelings inside but such things gave me more courage to further the revolution.

The army could shoot anyone they suspected of having Maoist links. This terrified my family. Once, one of my neighbours reported to the police that I was involved in *Samana Pariwar*, and that Maoist leaders come to our house. This was enough for the police to make arrests. They arrested my father, mother, younger brother and sister. They destroyed all the food by pouring dirty water onto it. My family members were harassed and tortured every day in prison. They were physically assaulted and beaten by the police. The police were searching for me. My younger sister wanted to save me and told them that she was me. They tortured her. I feel very sad when I remember those days.

While I was empowering people through my songs and my martial arts skills, my family in *Bardiya* were being harassed and tortured by the police. *Kilo Sierra Two (KST)* brings chills to all Nepalis that live far away from the reach of district headquarters even to this day. KST was one such operation that was brought into effect to crush the Maoists during its formation years. Police physically abused and arrested anyone suspected of having any links with the Maoists. In my case, it was not suspicion, but a known fact that I was part of the *Samana Pariwar*. That was enough for the police to ransack my house, abuse each and every member in my family. My old mother had to go through abdominal surgery because her body could not endure the pain of inhumane beating by the police. My younger brother and sister were jailed for nine months and experienced torture every day.

My mother and father were also jailed and asked about the whereabouts of their daughter. They had no idea where their daughter was. Hearing about the atrocities my family had gone through, I came home immediately but only to return back to the *Samana Pariwar* after ten months with my family for the Maoists convinced me that someone like me with great skills should put it to good use. However, my heart remained with my family, my mother who loved me very much. My mother didn't like my involvement with the Maoist party. I was blamed for the suffering of my family. The police were searching for me and could arrest me any time. At that time, I decided to go underground and remained so from 1996 onwards.

My real revolution started from within We faced a lot of struggle and hardship. We reached our destinations everyday by walking. We used to walk for three to four months. I felt proud that I was doing all this for my country, for peace and for democracy. I felt more energetic. We used to cook food in the jungle, and eat whatever was available. Sometimes we walked with empty stomachs. While we were underground, I was younger than many others but I was courageous.

Once, all the members of the dance team were arrested by the police in Kathmandu. We were 25 in the team, 15 females and 10 males. Minors were kept in one place and they said that the others will be kept in jail but they all were shot dead. Four others and I escaped from the police through a window. Later, I heard that my remaining colleagues were also shot dead by the police. Then we reached Rukum by foot and we organized a cultural program in the school. But unfortunately, police got information about our program, went to the place and started firing at random. We were not injured but many civilians were killed.

After the peace dialogue between the government and Maoists in 2009, I decided to return home. Most of the colleagues were in favor of continuing in the movement. But I thought that continuing the conflict will kill more people and the country would have to bear more loss.

Reality Bites

After I quit the CPN Maoist political party, I decided to get married and returned home. When I approached my parents about this proposal, they refused, stating that as I have been away from home for years, I am no longer their responsibility, thus I can arrange my own marriage. Disappointed with the decision of my parents, I organized my wedding and married the person of my choice. My struggle did not end there. My in laws treated me like a stranger because I arranged my own marriage and I did not follow the customary processes.

In my community, I was treated as an outcast; the women in the villages were scared of me and ran away, my appeal to attend the orientations and trainings were turned down, no one spoke to me, because *as a woman*, I chose to join the Maoists revolution – when the pre conceived notion was that revolution is only a space for men.

I came to know about an agriculture training organized in a school. I was quite eager to attend the training. Thus, I sat next to the door, and listened to the mobilizer. Suddenly, the mobilizer approached and asked me to attend the training. However, as I entered the room, all the participants left the room. They explained to the mobilizer that I cannot attend the training with them because my identity as a Maoist will label them as the same. Tears started rolling down my cheeks, and I said that I joined the Maoist revolution *for Freedom, for Peace, For Sovereignty, To end Violence Against Women, to end discrimination between men and women, to end caste based and class based system and to end the feudalist structure that exploits and subordinates weak, poor and marginalized groups.* Despite this, I have been treated as an outcast, and no one evaluates positively my contribution and my struggle for social justice. Though the participants listened to me, no one responded to my explanation. However, it eased the tension with the community groups, and the women started speaking to me.

Ray of Hope, Standing Against Challenges

I could not tolerate being treated indifferently. So, I initiated meeting people and convinced them; the same group (men and women) who ran away from me and my identity, and I finally organized a group of women. I am not a Maoist, but I was only affiliated to the political party because of a common vision; for liberation of women, and to assert women's rights. I want to continue fighting for women's rights, and this significant issue should not be politicized by linking it to a political party for it has its own space and territory. I firmly believe that the issue of women holds a higher priority before the name of any political party. I received support and solidarity from all my sisters, and decided to organize a women's empowerment training.

I started raising my voice against abusive drunkard men, who used to harass and torture their wives. In the process of doing so, I was labeled a trouble maker, someone encouraging women to fight against existing normative structures, someone creating problems inside the domestic sphere and someone setting a bad example to society. Some men used to write vulgar, abusive graffiti on my walls, i.e. You can't talk about women's rights; women cannot be free and independent like men. There were numerous times when I was taken to the District Administration Office for committing such an 'offense'.

Then I organized a women's court with the intention that women should not only work confined to a private space, but they should be allowed to do competent work in the public sphere. We used to organize a ward assembly every month, and teach women to speak on the microphone, thus encouraging women to break their silence. Over the months, the women slowly started coming out, and men began to support them.

Coincidentally, when at I was at my lowest ebb, I met the CARE staff who were informing women about advocacy literacy classes that were soon to start in *Maina*

Pokhar, where women would gather weekly for discussions on women's rights, good governance, etc. I was encouraged to join the sixteen-week class. Joining the class was a turning point in my life. The class was an antidote for me. It gave me confidence and brought me closer with community women with whom I wouldn't otherwise have opened up, strengthening our solidarity. I was an active participant, an attentive listener, and I had a curious mind – yet, people did not stop commenting about me.

While I was with Radha Krishna Jana Sewa Samaj (RKJS), CARE's partner at the time in 2004, the Nepal Army forcefully took me to the barrack, charging me as a Maoist spy. The state of emergency was at its peak in 2004 and the Nepal Army atrocities skyrocketed. I was then considered a major liability to the organization and the community. Keeping me with the organization meant an unnecessary tussle with the Army at such a critical time. However, the RKJS chairperson did not budge and supported me all throughout. He approached the army, convinced them that I was no longer with the Maoist Movement and got me back from the barracks.

In 2003, the Women's Advocacy Forum was established, and I was bestowed with the position of being Chairperson, a position which I have held until now. Through this Forum, we have formed 25 women's groups within the Bardiya district. The main objective of this forum is to facilitate empowerment of women through orientation, trainings, access to justice for victims of violence and to organize adult literacy classes for women.

Upon the recommendation of the women's group, I became a member of the Village Development Committee. I am currently involved in negotiating that the separate budget allocated for women must be spent for women's rights and not for developmental activities. Earlier, the budget allocated for women was 15,000 Rupees; the current budget is 83,000 Rupees. I informed the women about this, so

that they are aware that there is a separate budget allocated for us, and it is not misused or spent on other activities.

How Can We Achieve Peace?

When I joined the CPN Maoist, I was committed to the revolution. It was a life of struggle. There was no money, thus we had to beg for food and we were taught to be bold and strong. My revolution was for the country and the citizens, but when I witness the current situation, I feel distressed. Citizens have to live in fear of harassment in a culture of rampant impunity. The aspiration for peace and transformation has not been realized by all. Violence against women has increased in more complex and complicated forms. I live in constant fear of being killed for my earlier involvement in the revolution.

I am amazed at the attitude and behavior of the political parties and their constant struggle for power and supremacy. Unless all the political parties can overlook their egos, and make concerted efforts for peace and peace building, there will never be an end to conflict and no transformation,; the Peace Agreement will not meet its objectives and the country will not develop as envisioned.

I Feel...

The tide has turned, now that the community recognizes women's potential. Initially, people were startled when they saw Village Development Committee's *male* leaders coming to me for suggestions. Do I have some supernatural power? This is what people had started gossiping about. But now, my community appreciates my work. Even my in-laws have changed and are now supporting me. Believing in oneself and having a mentor is what it takes to make a substantial impact. CARE has been my mentor. Respect comes to me in dozens of ways now; it is as though people are making amends for their past behavior! I am now a renowned name in *Bardiya*. I am a role model for many women. People in the

village know my husband through my name. This is completely new to our village. I am proud I have started changing the norm.

Reflect Circles Working Towards Peace

The PPC has used the reflect concept to work on an agenda of peace in the community to help establish a peaceful, harmonious society. It focuses on initiatives that support building long-term social conditions and structures that will ensure sustainable peace and prevent conflict. As the PPC intervenes in conflict situations working with conflict-affected communities, it also addresses some of the key conflict dynamics and processes. It focuses on post-conflict activities like relationship and trust building in the community and resolving internal conflicts in the community such as domestic violence, access to resources and services.

My group and I have extensively worked at the community level towards conflict transformation. Like me, many of the women in my group have been directly or indirectly affected by the armed conflict. Bardiya has an ethnic angle to it as well which made it one of the most sensitive areas during armed conflict. The majority of Bardiya's population is from the Tharu community, an ethnic minority which fervently supported the Maoist movement and thus became the state's target at the time. The district has seen major atrocities by the Nepalese Army. Consequently, WAF's community intervention came at the right time. WAF became a platform where women could meet and express their frustrations as well as discuss taking action on community issues of social injustice. Demanding citizenship for the children of war widows became one of their primary tasks, which continues even to this day as back then, citizenship was only given with proof of father's identity and lineage.

WAF became community watchdogs exposing different forms of corruption that were taking place in the villages at the time. One of the major issues we raised was a case on *Chapla Nala*, a community bridge that was built by the community's

investment. The women, inspired by a discussion on good governance, went to question the president of the bridge users' group. The president was blamed for embezzling community money during its construction, but no one had bothered to question him. Women especially had been least bothered as such issues were part of men's business. Women's continuous pressure made the president admit his embezzlement and he returned the money to the community.

Women's Advocacy Forum in the National Scene

WAF has become increasingly active in national level advocacy work to ensure sustainable peace. Our role in bringing women's voices into the Constitution-making process is significant. WAF is now part of a grassroots women's national network called the Forum for Women's Rights and Concerns (FOWRC). We recently collected recommendations from community women about their issues that need to be reflected in the Constitution, and presented them to the 10 constitution making committees of Constituent Assembly members. Similarly, the Domestic Violence Bill that has been tabled in the parliament has received numerous recommendations to make it truly reflective of grassroots women's needs with continuous ground level engagement and discussions through WAF. WAF has come a long way. Our group is a true reflection of community solidarity and collective effort towards bringing just and sustainable peace to Nepal. WAF is determined to continue our advocacy till a gender-sensitive Constitution is written. Our community is constantly changing; there will be many more issues to work on. After the Constitution will come the new laws and policies reflecting the Constitution. Our work load will increase, as implementing laws has been Nepal's weakest area!

4.2 Feminist Engagement in Ending Impunity: Voices of Women Human Rights Defenders in Nepal

Jyotsna Maskay

This study is based on the case documentation, and series of strategies adopted by the Nepali women's movement against the murder of Laxmi Bohara, Women Human Rights Defender in Kanchanpur district.

Women Human Rights Defenders Network is a coalition of Women active in defending human rights. I am a part of this network. We advocate for the promotion and security of our rights and the rights of other women. We women come from diverse backgrounds and include lawyers, government officials, journalists, volunteers, teachers, social activists, students, youth working on arrange of rights such as disability, sexuality, sexual minorities, land, squatters, rural, Muslim, Dalits (Badi), health, entertainment sector (informal) etc. We are also affiliated with women's groups, Community Based Organizations, and Women Federations.

This network has been set up in more than 72 districts with a National committee. One of the objectives of the network is to create a secure space for women to come together and discuss our various concerns regarding women's rights, violation of women's rights, support that can be extended to respective victims through drafting urgent appeals, safe space, negotiating with various stakeholders, lobby and advocacy on different levels, engaging and working closely with government organizations and to actively participate in the process of peace building and women's agenda to be incorporated into the Constitution of Nepal which is currently being drafted. This network has also created a stir and established itself as a movement based network.

The network works closely with human rights organizations, National Human Rights Commission, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and with

their district administrative offices on different levels. It works through the Secretariat of National Alliance of Women Human Rights Defenders for national and international networks.

Transgression begins, Life Ends

Laxmi Bohara, a Women Human Rights Defender was found dead on 6 June 2008 inside her house. The medical report claimed that she had committed suicide – she had some poison in her body. However, the Women Human Rights Defenders denied the medical report, and claimed that Laxmi was murdered, poisoned by her husband, who for several years had subjected her to beating, harassment, and physical assault. The struggle to have justice for her was launched, in the context of rampant impunity, conflict transformation and peace building.

Laxmi Bohara was a Women's Rights Activist who advocated for Human Rights especially for Women's Rights. She was also a committee member of Community Forestry, who voiced her protest against illegal logging activities. She married Tek Raj Bohara in 1996, and lived with his family members that included his mother, Dhana Devi Bohara and Laxmi's three children; a daughter, 6, and two sons, aged 4 and 12.

Laxmi transgressed the rigid and discriminatory social and cultural structures of the far western region. She may have been satisfied with her life outside the domestic sphere, but the internal conflict with her husband about her regular movements and work subjected her to physical battering and harassment. She was also severely criticized by her mother in law, who supported her son in his wrongdoing. Around ten days before the murder, she told her fellow defenders about the physical injuries inflicted by her husband, and his attempt to force her to leave the house. The defenders counseled her, and suggested meeting her husband and other family members to mediate in the situation. Laxmi's father implied that she must not leave her husband as this can cause social stigma and

instead requested her to *forgive her husband* for the last time. Laxmi had no other option but to return to a violent husband for the sake of protecting *the family honour*.

On 6 June, 2008, according to the Women Human Rights Defenders Network in Kanchapur district, Laxmi was severely beaten and then poisoned during night. She was eventually taken to the hospital by her husband after a substantial delay, though the hospital was not too far from their house (approximately 20 minutes' drive). She passed away while being treated in the hospital at 10:30 AM on 7 June 2008, after which the husband fled. The Post Mortem was investigated by Dr. Khagendra Bhatta, a distant relative of Laxmi's husband, Mr. Tek Raj Bohara, in the zone hospital. The medical examination claimed that she died due to poison, and her body had minor bruises. It was a case of suicide, and not murder. This medical report was later sent to Kathmandu for further investigation. The report claimed that it was a case of suicide, and not murder.

On 7 June, the Women Human Rights Defenders informed WOREC Nepal about the incident. The incident was reported to the Home Ministry, District Police Office, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and National Human Rights Commission.

Challenging Impunity

Laxmi Bohara's father submitted a First Information Report (FIR) to the District Police Office (DPO) stating that his daughter had been *murdered* by his son in law.

⁸ First Information Report (FIR) is a written document prepared by the police when they receive information about the commission of a known offence. The police can then proceed with the investigation. However, in this incident, the police declined to register the complaint, based upon the medical report that this is *a suicide, and not a murder*. It was discerned later that the Police Officer at the

⁸ <http://www.humanrightsinitiative.org/publications/police/fir.pdf>

complaint desk was *friends with the perpetrator*. The Defenders then approached the Chief District Officer (CDO), the head of the District Administration to investigate this incident, but he clearly stated that registering an FIR does not fall under his mandate and he should not be disturbed for such incidents.

On 10 and 11 June 2008, Laxmi Bohara's father went to the District Police station to register the FIR. However, he was told that without any legal and strong evidence, it cannot be registered. In any event, the police response violated the State Cases Act, which clearly mentions that the police should register any complaint lodged by a citizen of Nepal and initiate an investigation. Finding evidence proving a crime falls under the mandate of the police and the burden of proof should not fall on the complainant. Besides, conducting of the postmortem in this case is not the ethical obligation of the Nepal Medical Council Act. To the dismay of the Women Human Rights Defenders, it was found that the FIR registered by Laxmi's father was not registered in his name, but was instead registered under the family of the perpetrator, declaring the incident as a suicide. The Defenders claimed that this was a case of irresponsible conduct by a state agency, reflecting rampant impunity and weakness of judicial structures.

The Defenders also claimed that they were subjected to threats and harassment when they raised their voices against this crime, against the government and against the system. They gathered together and developed concerted strategies to exert pressure on the government to take this incident seriously and to end the culture of impunity. Their strategies included organizing sit in protests in the district and circulating urgent appeals to the women's movement all around the world to extend their support and solidarity to exert pressure on the state to show their accountability and allow access to justice for the victim.

The case was then registered on 16 June, 2008 at 3 PM, with the number 224, after national and international pressure and the husband was arrested along with his mother. But, as a part of the Hindu culture, the dead have to be cremated

by *the man of the family* followed by a strict ritual of 13 days also known as *the mourning period*. Since the religion demands that a "man" has to follow such "holy" procedures, the police informed the family members that even if an FIR has been registered, they are not able to apprehend the husband since he has to perform the "ritual". Thus the husband was not arrested but agreed on a paper with the Police and Defenders that he would present himself at the Police station in 13 days.

On 2 July 2008, the Nepal Police (NP) completed its investigation and submitted its report to the District Court without considering procedural and substantive remedies suggested by the Women Human Rights Defenders and National Human Rights Commission. *The NP investigation did not conclude murder*. The mother-in-law was released on order from the Public Attorney and the husband was released on bail by the court.

Calling for Support, Organizing Women, Strategies Redefined

The district Women Human Rights Defenders then initiated expanding the movement from the districts to a nationwide Campaign. Laxmi Bohara became a symbol of the movement. The Defenders claimed that violence against women is nebulous, and still does not fall under the criminal justice system. The Seven Party Alliance and the Maoists signed a 12 point agreement on 22 November, 2005 and the Comprehensive Peace Accord on 8 November, 2006 which is based on 12 point agreement and signed by Government and Maoists. However it has not been implemented by the current government that was a part of the signatory of the agreement.

The Defenders traveled to Kathmandu, and designed different strategies to involve diverse groups in the movement. A 24 day (beginning 1 July, 2008) relay hunger strike was organized – getting together Defenders from more than 30 districts, inviting different women based organizations, requesting efforts of

various human rights organizations and writing petitions to Constituent Assembly members for their action and support. The 24 days campaign made 3 demands: a) Thorough impartial investigation into the murder of Laxmi Bohara, b) Formation of an independent High Level Committee that deals with all forms of violence against women (VAW) and c) End all forms of violence against Women Human Rights Defenders and guarantee the security of Women Human Rights Defenders.

They organized activities under the name of Movement of the Struggle Committee to end VAW.

Different strategies such as rallies, interaction programs, workshops, media interaction on different levels, interaction with different human rights bodies (national and international), black protests where the women wearing petticoats (up to their chest) signifying the nakedness of the state and our anger about the present legal provisions were organized with efforts from different groups.

During the black protest day, the police received prior information, and as the women prepared to march out in the streets. A group of police personnel apprehended those in black in the name of promoting and defending "state security". The women were pushed, grabbed and arrested. Hence a request was made to the Minister of Home Affairs to ensure that the Police personnel who committed these acts of violence are seriously reprimanded and strict actions taken especially against Superintendent of Police Sarbendra Khanal at the Meteropolitan Police Range, Kathmandu who denounced the women's movement and labeled the women with vulgar, obscene, derogatory, insulting, offensive, resentful words. The language used exposed the attitude of a system that is patriarchal, feudal and the root cause of the structural violence. Some of the Women activists were severely injured. Kamala Gahatraj, another Defender faced injury to her lower abdomen that disabled her for months. She had to receive special medical care. A case was filed against the government of Nepal for this act. She won the case in 2009, and received compensation from the state.

Likewise, this movement was supported by the human rights groups, media houses, artists, community women, NGOs, INGOs, international networks, some government officials, and Constituent Assembly members.

It was also during this movement that the Chair of the Constituent Assembly Honorable Subash Nembang passed the first historical remarks on violence against women and how it is a matter of grave concern and that the government should consider this a priority and address it immediately.

The hunger strike came to an end on the 24th Day, when Ramesh Lekhak, the Minister for Labour and Transport Management, offered water to all the Defenders, who relentlessly struggled during the strike. The government agreed to form a High Level Task Force consisting of nine members with three members from the women's movement. It was to be coordinated by Brinda Hada, Secretary of the Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers, Joint Secretary Mahendra Prasad Shrestha from the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare and one representative each from the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, Ministry of Home Affairs, National Women's Commission, and Senior Superintendent of Police Parbati Thapa. The Task Force was to submit its recommendations to address the issue of violence against women within two months. It became an issue of defiance when the government did not include enough members from the Struggle Committee. After the protest, they agreed to include three members from the women's movement: Dr. Renu Rajbhandari, Sharada Chand and Bimala B.K. The Task Force ended its term but without much success. The report was then submitted to the government with various recommendations, which were accepted but then ignored.

A Public Interest Litigation was filed against the government of Nepal by WOREC and its lawyer in 2008, stating the unwillingness of the government to protect the Defenders. The Supreme Court passed a judgment in 2009 directing the government of Nepal to design security mechanisms for the protection of Human

Rights Defenders, especially Women Human Rights Defenders. The mechanisms are currently being discussed.

Tek Raj Bohara was eventually released as there was no evidence of murder. He died of a snake bite in June 2009 – on the first year death anniversary of Laxmi Bohara.

This was the first time, after the formation of the Constituent Assembly, that Women Human Rights Defenders initiated a campaign that had full ownership, independence and diversity of representation. It was a call of the women to end violence against women, with the conviction that this was an important step towards achieving sustainable peace.

Challenges that Defenders Face

Non-recognition of the work of the Women Human Rights Defenders can be attributed to the existing feudal and patriarchal structures that are discriminatory towards women and the work they do. Such rigid structures open an atmosphere of risks, threats, harassment that even extend to murder, resulting in silencing the Women Human Rights Defenders.

In addition, discussion with Women Human Rights Defenders working in the community indicates that impunity still persists and presents a major challenge to their work. The process of documentation and threats and intimidations from various ethnic groups, armed groups and others has created an atmosphere of fear and terror. In addition, lack of appropriate and efficient mechanisms to deal with the past history of human rights violations and have perpetrators reprimanded and made accountable has created an environment of increasing human rights violations and crime. This is reinforced by the government's lack of political will in addressing this issue, as evidenced by the lack of initiatives to tackle the emergence of armed groups often backed and in some cases supported by some political parties. Private actors are usually either protected or backed by such

groups. The harsh reality is that marginalized groups and women working in all these groups in particular are the ones who are worst hit.

The case of Laxmi Bohara was the first nationwide movement of the Women Human Rights Defenders that created a platform for thousands of women to come together, develop collective actions and exert pressure on the government to meet their demands. It was the strength and dynamic leadership of this and other networks that enabled this campaign to be known outside Nepal. Network members realized the need of the women's movement and how they, as Women Human Rights Defenders, can play an active role within it. Moreover, the campaign managed to spread to national and international levels. There are several women's organizations, institutions carrying diverse memberships and disseminate information widely to their groups by being the connection point for the others. Their membership includes young feminists and activists who are also a part of this network.

The 24 days movement of the Women Human Rights Defenders forced support from heads of political parties, Constituent Assembly members, and enabled a meeting with the President Mr. Ram Baran Yadav.

On the other hand, the international network working on the issues of Women Human Rights Defenders showed their support by circulating and endorsing action alerts, holding discussions on human rights mechanisms and special procedures and engaging with UN Declaration of Human Rights Defenders and the European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders. However, there is still the need not only to engage in dialogue with the government of Nepal for updates but also to remind them of their obligation, duties and compliance with international law/conventions that they have ratified as well as to disseminate it widely to the community.

Remembering Laxmi Bohara

The 24 days campaign ended, but the struggle prevailed; the Defenders left and justice was accessed. But we will remember Laxmi Bohara, who brought women together nationwide, to ensure that such incidents are not repeated, and women's rights are respected and promoted.

4.3 Feminist Engagement in Peace Building: Challenging the Status Quo

Dev Kumari Mahara

This study is based on the personal life history of Dev Kumari Mahara, a Dalit woman who challenged identity politics with the support of her family members and organizations; mobilized both Dalit and non-Dalit women; entered the process of peace building to nominate a woman representative in the Constituent Assembly, and balanced her domestic responsibilities.

Eye Witness – Why I Chose to be Different

My name is Dev Kumari Mahara. I am 34 years old. I have completed High School. I never thought I had the potential to break the deep-rooted discrimination against Dalits. When I was young, , my grandmother used to nag my mother to send me to a school, something that was unspoken and unheard of for a daughter born to a Dalit family. However, I was married off at the age of 11 to my 18 year old husband. At first, it was difficult for me to understand the concept of marriage. I had to learn household chores that were new and difficult, but my sister in law helped me. My husband is one of the most supportive people in my life, who encouraged me to study and complete my schooling. I am now a proud mother of three children, two sons and a daughter.

I am a Dalit, belonging to a lower caste and an untouchable. I have been subjected to caste based discrimination from a very early age. I am amazed with

the attitude of my non Dalit friends, who hide their faces when they come to eat in my house. The people in the Siraha district where I live are engaged in agriculture. Usually, when the farmers carry their food to their fields, they try to avoid being touched by the people of Chamar Basti. The discrimination is so pervasive that even if they are touched by a child of a Chamar, their food is considered impure and then fed to the cattle.

I was encouraged to work outside my home and thus I joined Save the Children to run their Adult Literacy classes for a year. After that, I came across WOREC Nepal, which recruited me as a social mobilizer, where I was to organize women's group and discuss issues such as violence against women, peace building, and women's role in decision making. It was then that I became a Women Human Rights Defender and I committed to end all forms of violence against women.

My district Siraha, is located in the south eastern part of the eastern developmental region of the country and shares a border with India. The population of the district encompasses the Madhesi and Pahadi communities where there is a strong presence of feudalism and social exploitation of marginalized groups. The upper caste/class controls the district by holding rights to land, and by dominating the marginalized groups such as women and Dalits including the Musahar, Paswan, Ram and Sarki, who are socially excluded. Caste discrimination is one of the root causes and an insidious consequence of the civil war in Nepal. The conflict will remain unresolved without a sustained commitment to ending caste-based abuses.

Siraha is a part of the Sagarmatha Zone, and is one of the seventy-five districts of Nepal, a landlocked country of South Asia. The district, with Siraha as its district headquarters, covers an area of 1,188km² and has a population (2001) of 572,399; male 293,933, female 278,466. It has 106 Village Development Committees (VDC) and 2 Municipalities. In the north lies the district of Udayapur, in the east Saptari, in the west Dhanusha and in the south is the border with India. The literacy rate

stands at 40.31 percentage and the population by caste/ ethnic group is as follows; Yadav- 23.99 %,Muslim- 7.25 %, Musahar- 5.51%, Koiri- 5.49% and Teli- 4.92% Tharu- 4.76%, Chamar, Harijan- 4.66%, Dhanuk- 3.87%, Sudi- 2.83%, Dusadh/ Paswan- 2.76%, Kiwat- 2.19% and Unidentified Caste- 2.68%.

During the time of conflict, Siraha district was the hardest hit along the Terai belts in the eastern region. This was a stronghold of the Maoists and violations of human rights were high. The Siraha district was highly influenced by the Madhesi movement in 2007. Madhesi are the residents of the Terai region and their movement is directed towards ensuring rights to the Madhesis, and fighting against the discrimination, negligence and oppression they have faced for decades. Though a strong and visionary movement, the path it took to bring changes was through the use of violence so as to ensure that security forces were not able to enter these areas. Without any form of state administration in these areas, Siraha has become a breeding ground for criminals and gangs who have further dominated the area and suppressed the rights of marginalized groups such as the Dalits and women. The movement has been led by several groups such as the Janatantrik, Mukthi Morcha, Madheshi Jaanadhikar Forum, Terai Tigers and Terai Cobra and others. Siraha district follows strong patriarchal norms and values.

The women and the children were the worst affected by the People's War. The conflict between the state and the Maoists created fear, harassment and assault to a lot of family members who were poor, belonged to the Dalits and marginalized. Every individual was considered a suspicious informant, houses were ransacked, and families threatened. The male members used to leave for work, while the women and children stayed home. Without any protection from the male members (women are considered vulnerable without any men), they were subjected to lot of questioning and remained in constant fear about family members, not knowing if they would come home alive. We were often searched all over our body and this was very uncomfortable for us.

I have experienced and witnessed the multiple dimensions of violence against women. The women in my district are regarded as mere "objects or puppets" who dance to the tune of the piper (I call them the men). Women are discriminated through control over our physical and bodily integrity, sexuality, reproductive functions and movement by a feudalistic society. Women are obliged to veil their heads and keep them low in the private and public sphere, as a mark of respect to family members. I have been compelled to cover my head for the past 15 years, and I still have to continue doing so. However, I do not want my daughter to follow a system that subordinates women. Violence against women is rampant, and women are not allowed to either speak about it or expose it. The family members and the community regard it as a matter of "honor" and it is mediated by a group of influential people. I feel repulsion when a victim is not even allowed to be a part of the remedial process, and instead blamed and harassed for being a "bad" woman. I can share an instance where a woman was forced to stand on three bricks, and lashed with bamboo sticks, as social punishment for committing immoral acts. Sometimes, when the incident cannot be solved without mediation, then the women are forced to leave their homes without any support mechanisms. Women have been paraded naked or paraded with smeared face (black paint) around the village development committees as a sign of insult and harassment, but also as a warning to all the women who dare to commit immoral acts. Women in our community are not allowed to work outside the household and only men are allowed, thus preventing us from pursuing all forms of employment.

From a Chamar Basti to Being Recognized as a Defender in the District

Chamars are further marginalized groups within the Dalit community. Their occupation is to dispose of dead animals from the houses of upper caste and upper class groups. In addition, women from the Chamar communities are also midwives who assist in delivering babies, who clean up the mess of the birth of the

child. However, when the same child grows up, they are taught not to socialize with nor touch the midwives. Why is there such discrimination? A Chamar woman is allowed to enter any spaces of a house during delivery, but the same woman is discriminated once her task is done. Will anyone recognize her contribution of saving the life of another woman, when there is no access to health services which are so far away?

The Chamars have launched their own campaign to call for an end to such discrimination against them. This historical event took place 11 years ago in Gara VDC, Siraha district. The Chamars were forced to organize themselves due to the discriminatory behavior of the then Minister, Padam Narayan Chaudhary. The Minister's cattle had died, and he sent for a Chamar to dispose of the carcass, but the Chamar person was unavailable due to another engagement. The Minister became infuriated with the behavior of a mere Chamar person, and avenged the people by imposing a blockade. He blocked the roads that extended to markets, shops, and open spaces. Thereupon, the Chamar groups decided to stand against such a feudal and discriminatory system, and launched a movement. Though it was a successful movement, it became politicized, and people benefited unduly from it. However, it freed the Chamars from their old rigid occupation and allowed them to exercise their own freedom of choice. Nowadays, disposing of the carcass and delivering babies are no longer done by the Chamars.

During the time of conflict, I faced several challenges in the course of my work. We were strongly advocating for peace-building, and the role of women in conflict transformation. For me, peace is an environment where people can exercise their freedom without any fear, harassment and reprisals. It is a stage where women and children can walk freely, where discrimination has come to an end and where the women are a part of the government structures. Conflict transformation is a change in the feudal and patriarchal structure, where there is equality and women have the right and opportunity to equal contribution as men.

I recall a time when I was stopped by 20 army personnel. I was scared, and feared the anxiety of harassment. I had once raised the case of a murder of a woman by her husband in my district. Unfortunately, it became politicized and I was under strict Maoist surveillance for more than 12 hours, I want to call it disappearance, as the cadres did not allow me to leave unless I withdraw my presence from the case.

I am proud to be a part of the women's movement. Before the conflict, it was difficult to mobilize non Dalit women, who separated their identity from Dalit women. Now, after the conflict, they have become open to working with Dalit women, and we mobilize other women together. I feel that it is an outcome of the second people's movement, where we stood with each other against the autocratic regime, and called ourselves as women's movement. That space broke the barriers between us, and we supported each other. Yet, there are still other women who try to separate us as Dalits and non Dalits.

We mobilized ourselves during the movement. We walked in the streets and we did not falter. Women from other VDCs joined us, some came without Chappals, and some came with their children. We achieved the historical Comprehensive Peace Agreement yet it was painful not to see a single woman amongst the Seven Party Alliance when it was signed.

We negotiated within the women's group to send 5 women as Constituent Assembly members, irrespective of political party affiliations. Amongst the five women, Ram Rati Ram has become a prominent Constituent Assembly member, and she was at the forefront of the Chamar movement. However, to our dismay, our women leaders are not able to keep their commitments to their women comrades, as they have to abide by the whip of their political party.

Only a short time remains for the Constitution to be promulgated, but I'm not confident that the Constituent Assembly members will agree to declare it within

the stipulated time. However, we are gathering our women comrades to organize once again, to raise our voices and pressure those members whom we have nominated. We will travel to Kathmandu and join the "Let's go to Kathmandu" movement, where our women colleagues with other networks are organizing a protest program. We want to make it a nationwide campaign, and be an example of how women can mobilize for peace and peace-building. We have done extensive trainings on UNSCRs 1325 and 1820, yet implementation is weak. I want to know more about the National Action Plan for 1325.

I left WOREC as I want to become a campaigner, and not be tied down with rigid time. I am free and independent now, and support my women comrades in human rights issues.

My Challenges

My personal challenge is the continuous conflict with my family members. I left my children when they were very young, and now I am spending time with them. My husband assists me in the kitchen and explains to my family members. I find it difficult to balance my home responsibilities and work, but I have to do it. My mother, sister and sister in law take care of my house and children when I am out working as a campaigner. However, I still want to do more, learn more and commit myself.

The biggest challenge to the work of Women's Human Rights in defending the rights of the women and Dalits, documenting cases of violence against women, and providing various forms of support to victims, is that they have been unsupported by the community in their efforts. During the time of conflict, there used to be two forms of judicial systems through which the cases of violence against women used to be dealt with – one system was operated by the Maoists and the other by the government. The system of the Maoists was powerful as their access and control was stronger than the government. There was also fear,

insecurity and threats to life because the perpetrators backed by the Maoists and groups supporting them used to be set free without any punishment. There was no rule of law and a culture of impunity was rampant. The Women Human Rights Defenders found it very difficult to work during that time mainly because the cases of violence did not come out into the open; there were problems with security and even when the cases were addressed, they become a political issue for the opposition groups.

This situation further deteriorated in April 2007, during the Madhesi movement. The situation became difficult for WHRDs to work in as this was when identity politics based on the ethnicity of Madhesis were questioned and raised. Though a strong and visionary movement, since the path it took to bring about change was violence and there was an absence of structures of law and order, it became a breeding ground for criminals and gangs who have further dominated and suppressed the rights of marginalized groups such as the Dalits and women. It was during this time when the government was not able to create an atmosphere of security as the district was ripped apart with the Madhesi movement against the Pahadis taking advantage of such absence of rule of law, that violence increased amongst the community and the perpetrators became more confident about committing crimes with impunity.

We of Siraha have expressed that we receive severe threats during our work from all over the district and especially those WHRDs who work in the area of violence against women face harsher threats, humiliations and harassment on a regular basis. We are willing to fight against these atrocities and discrimination and women have started to speak against injustice and violence against them.

In the current context of political transition the culture of impunity still exists. The feudal and patriarchal structure of Siraha district is apparent through existing practices that allow the settling of cases of violence against women through reconciliation in the community. The victim might be asked to seek forgiveness

and admit that she was not raped or sexually abused as opposed to a case being filed in Court and the perpetrator punished.

The Women Human Rights Defenders have shared that after the Constituent Assembly elections, the situation has slightly improved. The government structures have become functional, although the structures still remain feudal. The government has also started assisting the Women Human Rights Defenders in cases of violence and impunity. The Women Human Rights Defenders have become active and stronger and now the government agencies come to engage in dialogues with the group. The National Human Rights Commission and other international agencies have been very supportive to document and report cases of violation in Siraha. The political parties in Madhesh have started showing their support and solidarity. However, it is yet too early to conclude if this support is truly for the protection and promotion of women's human rights or another strategy to gain support for the general elections.

Likewise, even though the new government has taken positive initiatives to design programs which have been widely recognized and appreciated, implementation still remains weak. Hence, the government still needs to have the political will to meet the aspirations and demands of the people for which the people's war was fought.

My Final Words...

I am proud of myself and the struggles I have endured and had I faltered, then my vision would not have been achieved. People recognize me and my contribution. Yet, at times, I feel tired and burned out. As I struggle, there are challenges that lie ahead of me, and I get very scared and contemplate why I dedicated myself to this movement for change. Then, I take one step back; think of my women comrades who support me in the process of healing, and I rise up again, revived, refreshed, and ready to resume my mission.

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“We want a world where inequalities and discrimination based on gender and all other identities are eliminated from every country and from the relationships among countries and peoples; where development processes are founded on social solidarity and economic, political, ecological, social, and personal justice; where poverty and violence are eradicated; where human rights in their fullest and most expansive sense are the foundation of laws, public policies, and private actions.

We want a world where the massive resources now used to produce the means of destruction are diverted to building ethical and socially responsive development alternatives, promoting lasting peace, and justice within and outside the home; a world where people interact with ecological systems in humane and sustainable ways. Such a world would ensure bodily integrity and security of personhood in every dimension of our lives, promote inclusiveness and respect for diversities, and realize sexual and reproductive rights for all.

Women would share equally in determining priorities and making decisions at all levels and in every location, and all institutions would be committed to inclusive, participatory and democratic processes.

We believe that respecting and realizing the human rights of all peoples in this way will affirm the ethical basis for a just and humane world.” -DAWN Vision



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