
DEALING WITH WOMEN'S MILITANCY

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Dealing with Women's Militancy: An Analysis of Feminist Discourses from Sri Lanka by Sarala Emmanuel, Social Policy and Research Centre (SPARC), University of Colombo, 2006.

The proliferation of long-term internal conflicts in many parts of the world has generated academic and activist interest in understanding and analyzing the range of political, social and economic consequences that arise out of these conflicts. A specific area of focus within these broad parameters has been on the implications of conflict on gender relations and on traditional perceptions of masculinity and femininity. There have been wide-ranging debates on whether the engagement of women in conflict, as direct combatants as well as indirect survivors, has in any way contributed to the transformation of existing patriarchal frameworks that position women as subordinate and secondary citizens. Explorations into women's 'agency' and 'empowerment' in conflict situations and in post-conflict societies have resulted in the examination and investigation of the roles and articulations of women's engagement in militant social movements in countries as diverse as Indonesia, Sudan, South Africa and Colombia. Sarala Emmanuel's work on women militants within the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka is an extremely valuable contribution to this body of feminist scholarship.

Within the broad discourse on women and conflict, the debates on women, war and militarism and on women in militant movements has, as Emmanuel points out, for too long been framed by analysis of women within formal militaries in the US and in Western Europe, done by pioneers in this area such as Cynthia Enloe and Cynthia Cockburn in the late 1980s. One of the consequences of this field of study during the early period was the utilization of the analysis of the gendered and unequal sexual division of labour within militaries to call for broader inclusion of women in formal militaries. The establishment of a masculine military identity and militarized notions of masculinity and femininity helped perpetuate a binary understanding of men as perpetrators of violence and women as passive victims. Explorations of the intricate inter-relationship between nationalism, militarism

and patriarchy have emerged in the last ten years, as the complexities of these relationships and their deep and lasting impact on women, and on masculinities and femininities have moved to the foreground of conflict analysis.

Much of contemporary work on issues of women, violence and conflict is rooted in current discursive frameworks of masculinity and femininity, and of violence, especially in conflict situations. A consequence of this is the continued essentializing of male capacity for violence and female capacity for care and nurture. Such a process downplays the role played by women as perpetrators of violence, although the participation of women in acts of utter brutality during the genocide in Rwanda (1994), in Sierra Leone (1997-1999) or during the anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat, India (2002) have been well documented. In the same way, the use of sexualised violence against men, especially 'effeminate' men in conflict situations is rendered quite invisible by this analysis. Thus it becomes necessary not only to recognize the multiple and gendered experiences of violence by women, especially in conflict situations, but also to engage in critical theorizing of women as perpetrators of violence. This angle has the potential for deepening our understanding of the continuum between violence against women and gender-based violence in the family, the community and in the broader society.

Emmanuel's work points out several analytical problems that arise when one uses the same paradigm one uses to look at women in formal militaries to examine the role of women in militant movements. For one, it erases or blurs the differences between formal armies mandated with national security and armed and maintained by a tax-levying government on the one side and armed militant groups who are usually engaged in open confrontation with the state and its security machinery on the other side. Secondly it ignores the reality that these two groups have vastly divergent ideological and political positions and goals. Both seek to challenge the essentialist norm that women are unsuited for combat. Both seek to normalize the use of violence to achieve a legitimate objective. Yet when it comes to the issue of the struggle for power, there is a parting of the ways. Soldiers are

professionals entrusted with the defense of the nation-state that employs them, militants are most often ensconced within a deep belief in the moral 'rightness' of their struggle for political power. In her critical review of the existing discourse on this issue, Emmanuel points to the divergences between 'western' notions of looking at women's roles within militaries in Western countries and non-Western women looking at women's role in liberation movements, drawing on the work of Chandra Mohanty, for example.

In the work of many scholars on the roles played by women in militant movements, including their participation in armed combat, a key contention is that by joining these movements, by moving away from traditional reproductive roles, by bearing arms, these women challenge existing norms on masculinity and femininity in their society. The common argument is that the many changes in gender roles and gender identities that occur during a conflict have a lasting impact on the society as a whole and serve to transform women's lives. This leads us to the classic formulation that women's agency in conflict situations leads to their empowerment.

Emmanuel's work challenges this premise. In her analysis, she draws on the definitions set out by Kumkum Sangari with regard to the concept of women's agency from several different perspectives, from that of direct agency (participation in conscious and direct political action) to that of indirect agency (use of stereotyped gender identities such as motherhood for political and resistance activism). Through a rigorous and critical analysis of existing writing by feminists on issues of violence and agency, Emmanuel explores the emergence of a nuanced and complex understanding of women's agency and victimhood in the context of conflicts in the South Asian context, and goes on to focus on the existing body of work on women cadre of the LTTE.

She analyses the writings of Sri Lankan scholars such as Qadri Ismail, Neloufer de Mel, P.L. de Silva, Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, Nandini Sornarajah, Rajini Thiranagama and Sitralega Maunaguru from the point of view of their divergent perceptions of the women cadre of the LTTE. In particular she focuses on the issues raised by Radhika Coomaraswamy in her 1997 article titled 'Women of the LTTE: The Tigers and Women's Emancipation' and the response of Adele Balasingham in her book *The Will to Freedom: An Inside View of Tamil Resistance*. Emmanuel uses the dialogue, which took place on the printed page, to focus on how different one's conclusions may be regarding the women cadre of the LTTE depending on whether one locates them within the larger political narrative that has

shaped the Tamil national struggle, or outside it. She casts this difference as being that between historically situated, contextualized, dynamic analyses and the more abstract and principle-oriented accounts of women's role within militant movements. Yet, in conclusion, her observation is that in this battle of representation, both Coomaraswamy and Balasingham essentialize the woman within the LTTE: Coomaraswamy through de-sexualising her, dwelling on her androgynous character and her espousal of the masculine norm of celebrating death not life, Balasingham by extolling the virtues of the LTTE woman cadre who embraces violence for the greater good and in whose person one also discerns creativity, love, compassion and strong bonds to the institution of the family.

In the main body of her text, Emmanuel unpacks the existing conceptualizations of women in militant and liberation movements, looking at a range of diverse political and sociological narratives that focus on the emancipatory potential of women's involvement in movements that enable them to confront and challenge existing gender-based ascriptions of what is appropriate for women. Although much of the available writing focuses on women's empowerment and agency through militancy, Emmanuel points out that there are diverse understandings of what would constitute 'emancipation'. This divergence to a great extent depends on the indicators one uses to measure emancipation. For example, as she points out, Nira Yuval Davis looks at data on women's increased economic independence, on women's access to political decision-making and their participation in direct combat as being indicators of emancipation while Christine Sylvester examines women's ability to dismantle patriarchal structures, to challenge and change the sexual division of labour and to influence mainstream political agendas.

The notion of activism that takes place in the public arena as being the only form of activism that could be 'empowering' in a way, as pointed out by Emmanuel, legitimises combat as the primary indicator of women's agency in a conflict situation. This in turn often leads to the romanticization of the woman militant, as manifest in the number of revolutionary propaganda posters depicting a woman with a gun in one hand and a baby in the other that have emerged from societies and cultures as diverse and separate as Vietnam and Nicaragua. This leads to a further arena of inquiry into whether conflict and the active engagement of women in direct and indirect conflict in fact leads to a politicization of women's traditional roles as mothers and as caretakers. Emmanuel refers to the work done by Maxine Molyneux in

Nicaragua and her development of the concept of 'combative motherhood', and to the work of Rita Manchanda on the roles played by women in militant movements in the north-eastern states of India, for example in Nagaland.

A history of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka that takes into account the gendered nature of Tamil militancy and the equally gendered and often sexualized expressions of this militancy has yet to be written. Basing herself on available material, Emmanuel reflects on the gendered structure of the LTTE as reflected in writings by the handful of scholars who have attempted to delve into this specific aspect of the Sri Lankan conflict. Among the various perceptions that prevail is that of the dichotomy of the woman martyr and woman goddess. On the one hand is the perception of militant women as 'acting out' as men, wearing male clothes, bearing guns, transgressing the 'natural' limitations of patriarchal sex and gender order. Coupled with this is the way in which women militants in fact de-sex themselves, and are de-sexualised by the puritanical codes of behaviour imposed by the organizations that demand abstinence from sex for the sake of 'purity', so that they may wield power without 'disturbing' discipline in the ranks. The use of classical Hindu mythology and symbolism, especially the image of the 'veera thai' (heroic mother) is referenced to the work of Sitralega Maunaguru and her concept of the 'social' mother. Both Maunaguru and De Mel are referred to by Emmanuel in terms of their analysis of the links between female sexuality and female martyrdom within the LTTE, the cyanide capsule worn by all LTTE cadre becoming both one's protection and one's declaration of defiance and resistance. Emmanuel also references her work in this area to the concept of 'martial feminism' expounded by Peter Schalk who glorifies the chastity of the woman militant.

Emmanuel traces the history of women's involvement in Tamil nationalism and militancy, from the 1970s, when the movement was influenced by the interactions between militant women and women from traditional Tamil society, to the late 1980s by which time one could witness the slow rupture of this relationship. Looking at the debates around the identities of women LTTE cadre, Emmanuel describes the various formulations through which both female and feminine identities have been selectively mobilized by the LTTE for propaganda use, discursively and politically. In doing so, she points to the lack of scholarly exploration into the sexual dimensions in the masculinised identity of the LTTE militant and asks the question as to why notions of chastity and purity are only used in reference to the gendered identity of the woman militant and not of the male. In the

literature drawn on by Emmanuel in her work, she identifies Nandini Sornarajah as being the only writer who has identified both masculine and feminine characteristics in the construction of the identity of the Tamil woman militant.

At the same time, Emmanuel refers to some recent examples of the involvement of women cadre of the LTTE in political activity, such as the establishment of woman-specific units within the LTTE mainstream and the inclusion of women in the highest decision-making structures of the LTTE, citing the work of Miranda Alison and Rajasingham-Senanayake as well as that of Balasingham. Emmanuel also cites the brutal suppression of the independent activism of Tamil women in the north and east by Tamil militant groups including the LTTE. The physical elimination of women and men who were critical of the movement as well as the imposition of moral codes on the female populace in general.

The conclusion that Emmanuel brings us to is located within the reality of the structural changes that have occurred in 'normal' life of the people of the north and east of Sri Lanka because of the conflict, and their significant impact on the lives and status of women. There has been a dramatic rise in the numbers of widows and of female-headed households. The mobility and the opening up of the space to acquire new skills and capacities that occurred as a consequence of displacement have also shifted many social and cultural restrictions on women. Much of the existing analyses differ widely on the actual impact of these changes on women in the long-term. Nevertheless, the common point of agreement is that the women of the north and east of Sri Lanka will never return to their pre-conflict status.

Examining the contemporary discourses on Tamil women militants in Sri Lanka against this reality, Emmanuel focuses on the diverse notions of victimhood and agency that prevail. According to her reading, some writers such as Ismail contend that the nationalist and patriarchal project can only be fulfilled through violence and that the nationalist subject is always male. Emmanuel herself points out that framing women cadre of the LTTE as being confined by a male/ patriarchal nationalist discourse in this way denies their capability of constructing an identity of their own. She would rather explore the potential for subversion within the militant discourse.

The critical question that Emmanuel asks at the end of her exposition on the role of women in the LTTE is whether one would better understand the nature of women's militancy if one moved away from the frameworks of empower and

agency and instead looked at the phenomenon from the point of the inter-relationships between violence and gendered identities. Her contention is that women's agency may in fact entail fluid movement between roles and identities that may conform to or challenge traditional gendered constructs. Although the LTTE constructs a dominant (ascribed) female identity of the armed virgin, the process of a developing political consciousness may lead the same women to also assume other identities.

Emmanuel's argument is borne out by the current reality. The process of transition of LTTE cadre from armed militants to those engaged with administrative responsibilities and interacting with the civilian population which commenced with the Ceasefire Agreement of 2002 and which was sharpened by the tsunami of December 2004, has made more visible the roles played by women ex-combatants especially in the Vanni. Along with the notion of female martyrdom, the creation of a special women's unit within the Black Tiger suicide assassination squad, the celebration of the National Women's Day—declared by the LTTE in October each year, to mark the date of the first death in battle of a woman cadre, Malathi—all ways in which the LTTE signals the potential for women within its ranks to attain celebrity status, one can juxtapose the establishment of women's police desks and strict measures taken against men perpetrators of domestic violence that have most recently been recorded by Sophie Elek, in her work on conflict-related internal displacement in northern Sri Lanka, as well as by film-maker Anoma Rajakaruna in her film on 'Women in the Vanni: The Other Woman'.

In discussions that take place on the peace negotiations, this debate is reflected in the reality of women's participation in peace-building, reconstruction and rehabilitation processes. The question that re-emerges from Emmanuel's work is whether, when the sharing of political power was on the negotiating table, women will be pushed out of the political arena once more and forced to revert to playing supportive roles.

Feminist debates about the attitude of armed militant groups towards women and about the nexus between violence, sex and gender identity and militarization will continue to preoccupy all those who are committed to human rights, equality and the upholding of democratic principles, especially in post-conflict situations and in countries in transition. In November 2004, writing about women and the Naxalite movement in Andhra Pradesh, India, in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, Kalpana Kannabiran, Volga

and Vasanth Kannabiran critiqued what they called the 'semi-feudal patriarchal revolutionary attitudes' present within the movements and called for the expunging of the words 'veeramatha' (heroic mother) and 'veerapathni' (heroic woman) from revolutionary vocabulary, calling them 'extremely sexist terms'. Their argument was that:

the glorification of motherhood masks the active denial of entitlements and equal citizenship in practice, while idealizing sacrifice, service and unquestioning surrender to sons. This glorification of motherhood is a mirror image of the simultaneous worship of the mother goddess and the debasement of women in reality. This mystification of reproductive labour serves to keep women in chains.

In March 2005, again writing to EPW, they said that 'to construct the other of the revolutionary in the image of the mother goddess speaks to the poverty of existing revolutionary paradigms with respect to women, but especially to mothers.'

In the same piece of March 2005, they have an equally strong critique of the violence tactics of silencing dissent employed by the Naxalite movement in Andhra Pradesh. According to them:

It is not merely in the bearing and use of arms that the Naxalite movement mirrors the state. Unfortunately there is a stark resemblance even in the indiscriminate and extremely moralistic identification of the enemy who must then be eliminated. The power of naming in this entire scenario vests with the police on the one side and the Naxalites on the other. Concerned citizens and institutions of justice are rendered voiceless. The defence and public recognition of human rights of political activists has been a slow and gradual struggle. Actions such as this destroy public confidence and increase the faith of the people in repressive measures and fascist solutions. The fear of terrorism is not easy to contain and when radical politics begins to use the weapon of terror that in our view signals the end of politics.

From around the world, feminists who observe and study women's participation in radical and militant movements have pointed to the fact that while these parties and movements are based on a political understanding of unequal power relationships between classes and castes and between these groups and the state, they rarely address the more

fundamental and ubiquitous power relationship between men and women. This not only obscures the power that men wield over women within the movements, and offers immunity to perpetrators of violence against women inside the movements and in the society outside,

Judy el Bushra, in a study of women in conflict-ridden societies in Africa points out that while the violence of warfare and its consequences displacement, impoverishment, demographic imbalance have given rise to changes in gender roles at the household level, including limited increases in women's decision-making power and political participation, the ideological bases underpinning gender relations appear to have remained unchanged or have even been reinforced. Citing several examples, el Bushra contends that changes in gender roles at the micro-level have not been accompanied by corresponding changes in political or organizational influence. She refers to interviews with women ex-combatants in Eritrea, for example, where in the post-war period, many of the women have become destitute and socially isolated as a result of their participation in the armed forces'.

Half way around the world, Maria Eugenia Vasquez, a former combatant of the M-19 movement in Colombia has testified to a similar marginalization of ex-combatant women and a lack of recognition for the role played by women when it

came to defining post-conflict political agendas.

In the societies in which she hases her work, el Bushra observes growing tensions between people's ideals of masculinity and femininity and the practical reality available to them. Her conclusion is that although gender roles have changed, they have done so in line with existing gender ideologies:

women's increased economic responsibilities result from rather than challenge existing notions of women as caretakers of the family; in turn, the gap between the roles men play and the roles they should be playing serve to underline the ideal rather than transform it.

While conflict may in some cases redefine social relationships including those between men and women, el Bushra's voice joins the voices of many others who share her opinion that in so doing it seems to rearrange, adapt or reinforce patriarchal ideologies rather than fundamentally alter them.

It is in this context that the issues raised by Emmanuel on violence, women and the impact of the multiple gender identities borne by women militants within the LTTE in Sri Lanka on their potential empowerment becomes a critical and thought-provoking contribution to the work in this area.

Sarita Abeysekera, Director of JSPOM

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