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# WHY DO WOMEN REBEL?



## *Understanding State Repression and Female Participation in Sri Lanka*

by Nimmi Gowrinathan

*When I see the enemy, I think of my brothers, and how they were killed, how they were captured and beaten, and how they did this to all our people, and the thought comes that if I can get close to the enemy, I can do whatever I want.*

—Interview with Sita, LTTE cadre,  
March 1996 (Trawick, 2007)

ON MAY 17, 2009, the Government of Sri Lanka declared a military victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a guerilla group who had waged a thirty-year-war for a separate state for ethnic Tamils living amongst the Sinhalese majority on the island. The few journalists

who had access to the conflict zone in the final days of the bloody war report that one all-women's unit of the LTTE fended off Sri Lankan Army military advances for nearly a week. In the year since the defeat of the LTTE, access to territories formerly controlled by the rebel movement has slowly increased—opening up the space for inquiries into life within the borders of, what was, a fledgling nation. One of the most underexamined amongst these continues to be the impact of the conflict on the lives of women in Tamil society, in particular the thousands who chose to take up arms and join the militant resistance movement. The women who survived now remain in detention centers across the island, with little to no access to the outside world. As we witness a resurgence of the state repression and militarization that first initiated this seemingly intractable ethnic conflict, how do we understand the impact of these processes on the lives and experiences of the female combatant?

Formed in the mid 1980s, the self-determination platform of the LTTE was modeled after liberation movements in



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Latin America and elsewhere, and the group soon became known (and feared) as one of the most ruthless and sophisticated guerilla movements in the world. The case of thousands of female combatants participating in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a nationalist movement which fought for an independent state in Sri Lanka, is one of several where an analysis of the relationship between state repression and the nature of female participation is particularly relevant. In 1983, the dedication and passion of four female Jaffna University students who were actively protesting the marginalization of the minority Tamil community led to their inauguration into what was then the seeds of a revolutionary movement. Breaking free of conservative cultural gender roles, resisting state oppression, joining brothers and fathers, and guaranteed, momentarily, safe shelter and food, these women eventually constituted the “Womens Military Wing” and “Birds of Paradise” Units, accounting for 30% of the participants in an ongoing struggle for an independent state of Tamil

Eelam (Balasingham, 2001).

The female rebel (and often, female martyr) and their role in resistance movements from the Black Panthers in the U.S. to the freedom fighters in the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front is a symbol that evokes mixed emotions and reactions in academic literature and the media—and particularly amongst feminist writers and scholars. In the post 9/11 era, all such rebels and martyrs quickly became terrorists and suicide bombers—further increasing the fascination with and scrutiny of the “female terrorist.” In 2007 *Marie Claire* magazine published an interview with a female LTTE suicide bomber who was in custody, highlighting some of the central tensions in how these women are perceived: “Listening to Menake talk, it’s hard not to sympathize. Her future will be at least as grim as her past has been. And yet, had she not been apprehended, her legacy would have been that of mass murder” (*Marie Claire*, 2007). We are conflicted in our understanding of the “agency” of this woman and her role in acts of political violence, a tension further complicated by western understandings of female “empowerment.” Even with the

numbers of female combatants increasing globally (most movements report participation levels between 20 and 40%), limited scholastic interest, as well as the difficulty in accessing these women, has limited our ability to understand the experiences and motivations of women who engage in rebel movements. In my research I attempt to better understand the “agency” of the individual female combatant in the LTTE and to explore the causes that led to her choice to join an armed rebel movement.

Existing studies in political science and resulting theories of mobilization and participation in rebel movements often rely on the underlying assumptions about gender. Women have often been assumed to be more peaceful and less warlike than men, creating an expectation that women are primarily nurturing and nonviolent beings. As women began to be considered within broader debates on mobilization, recruitment, and participation, gender-based mobilization was often viewed from the perspective of a patriarchal leadership, where women are only understood as “disempowered cogs” who have been discovered as an as yet

“unexploited constituency” (Coomeraswamy, 1997; Victor, 2004). Understanding female participants as a homogeneous collective, this approach to the agency of female combatants tends to “diminish women’s credibility and influence both within and outside organizations” (Cunningham, 2003).

Taking the role of female combatants more seriously, feminist scholars have found that large-scale structural changes combined with a rise in international feminism specifically generated new forms of women’s activism (Kampwirth, 2002). It has also been argued that periods of conflict and the absence of men open up spaces of agency for women to cross private/public barriers and to assume new roles as heads of households, thereby shifting cultural norms to allow for the mobilization of female fighters (Rajasingham, 2001: 105). Recent research on female fighters in Latin America has identified multiple factors that might push women to join rebel movements, amongst which state repression (using varying definitions of repression) is often a catalyst independently or in conjunction with existing activist networks pushing women towards violent forms of

resistance. (Kampwirth, 2002; Viterna, 2006). These studies enable women to be “ideologues” and active revolutionaries in their own right, rather than passive followers of a patriarchal movement (Cunningham, 2003:186).

The seeds of my own intellectual interest in the women of the LTTE began with a grassroots experience with girls living in the conflict-affected zones in the northern and eastern districts (areas partially controlled by the LTTE). Developing a leadership and English-teaching program for orphanages in these areas from 2002 to 2005, I spent my summers living amongst these young girls, listening to the traumatic stories of their journey to this place. As a result of a temporary ceasefire, girls who had relatives in the LTTE were joined by young women who had been recently released by the LTTE. Self-conscious about their short hair and often more aggressive than their peers, these young women largely kept to themselves. Some had joined the LTTE voluntarily, others were abducted—but each of their life histories challenged and complicated my preconceptions about agency and the impact

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of state repression on female combatants.

From 2004 to 2009, I have engaged in looking at issues around gender, militarization, and state repression in Sri Lanka from a number of vantage points. While in the doctoral program at UCLA, I have also been working part-time as the Director of South Asia Programs at Operation USA. I managed post-tsunami and post-conflict humanitarian programs on the island, focusing in particular on vocational training and educational support for young girls and women in the northeast. Later, as the UN representative of Operation USA, I chaired the Sri Lanka Working Group of NGOs, spearheading advocacy efforts with policymakers and members of civil society in the U.S. around issues impacting Tamil communities in Sri Lanka. Working with the very active Tamil diaspora in the United States, I also developed Tamil Women's Groups, which are formal community groups across the country that raise funds and awareness around issues impacting Tamil women in Sri Lanka.

In my academic research, I developed a unique sample set of interviews with current and former female fighters, political leaders in the LTTE, former fighters in refugee camps

in India, as well as leaders of civil society and academics in Sri Lanka. Close ties to the communities I worked with also gave me access to regions and archived materials that have been overlooked in most existing scholarship. The approach I take in this study combines approaches adopted in existing interdisciplinary studies to create a unique theoretical framework within which the hypotheses developed in my dissertation can be tested. This framework applies social psychological approaches to existing understandings of the state repression within political science. I argue that the approach taken in this dissertation is best able to highlight the central role of state repression in understanding the causes and types of female participation in rebel movements. The theoretical framework is comprised of three distinct components, which draw on and build upon existing theoretical approaches put forward in various disciplines.

First, this study moves away from static conceptions of female participation and conceptually situates the grievances of the individual female combatant in an interactive dialectic with the grievances of a collective

group, such as the LTTE. This approach highlights that there is a multicausal pathway for each individual female combatant into rebel movements (Viterna, 2006) but understands varied individual grievances as reflective of and incorporated into collective grievances framed by the LTTE.

This study also draws on a “person-centered” approach more common in anthropology, where theories on specific behaviors of personal or cultural experience are understood through interviews that allow for reflection on past and current experiences of female combatants. (Hollan, 2008) Rather than focusing on particular events (moments of state repression or specific experiences in the movement), this approach extracts patterns in the behavior of female combatants from within the broader context of an individual combatant’s life story.

Finally, this study shifts the site of agency away from being entirely embedded in the rebel leadership and its ability to influence and recruit possible female combatants to being a more nuanced relationship which allows the female combatant some agency in

her choice to participate.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on the approach put forth by Miranda Alison, I view female combatants as exercising “restricted agency,” acting as “agents making their own choices, though acting within multiple hierarchical structures and specific contexts” (Alison, 2004).

Working within this framework, I find that given pre-existing conditions of inequality (both social and gender), the identity of female combatants in the LTTE (a unique intersection of ethnicity and gender) were mobilized by multiple mechanisms, among which experiences of direct and indirect state repression were most likely to shape the nature of their eventual participation in the movement.

While the hardline approach of the government of Sri Lanka drew widespread criticism for its blatant violation of internationally established humanitarian and human rights norms, the military defeat was absolute. A hastily called presidential and parliamentary election that consolidated

1. “Agency” here is understood as women taking action with purpose and meaning, though the meanings and contexts of these actions may be partially culturally pre-determined, and not entirely intrinsic (Paul, 1990).

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power in the center, but political grievances of the Tamil people remain unaddressed (Gowrinathan, 2010). Female activists in the capital city of Colombo fear that the entrenched militarization and harsh crackdown on all forms of dissent under extended “state of emergency” policies has limited the space for women’s activism, particularly those from the Tamil minority (Interview with author, Colombo, January 2010).

This space was ironically most present at a moment when the LTTE was at the height of its political power. Visiting former rebel strongholds, one woman activist commented recently on the role of Tamil women in the LTTE: “Women had this romantic notion of emancipation and were looking for a taste of equality, which the rebels were providing” (Semath, 2010). During the peace talks in 2002, the Subcommittee on Gender Affairs brought members of civil society across the island together with the female leadership of the LTTE to discuss ways to address issues of gender equality that should be incorporated into any political solution.

Many of these same activists now face

continued harassment and intimidation as they push for the implementation of basic standards of democracy, transparency, and human rights in former conflict areas. They have been denied access to the female leadership of the LTTE, whose actions and writings had once initiated a new discussion around gender and militarization. As we attempt to understand the driving forces behind the mobilization of women into an armed resistance struggle, state repression emerges as one of the primary causes of female militancy. Nearly thirty years later, as the context and conditions of repression re-emerge, the question remains, will history repeat itself?

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