A Response Paper on
Sexuality and Women's Rights in Armed Conflict in Sri Lanka
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This paper outlined into 5 categories namely: 1). Armed conflict in Sri Lanka, 2). Negotiating bodily integrity and sexual autonomy in war, 3). Widows: negotiating self-determination in spite of community pressures, 4). Sex work and other marginalized sexual relations, and 5). Promoting sexual autonomy during armed conflict and reconstruction.

Each category describes problems that women have faced during the time of conflict and militarization. These problems have included sexual harassment and assault, forced marriage, limitation of sexual choices and negotiation, torture and custodial rape and sex work as a treasonous act.

1. Armed Conflict in Sri Lanka

The 19-year old civil war in Sri Lanka was in fact the result of the actual and perceived discrimination against the minority Tamil community by Sinhala-dominated governments. One of the examples of the discrimination against the Tamil people was the establishment of the so called “Sinhala-Only Act of 1995”. Under this Act, no other languages, but Sinhala is the sole official language, which leads to exclusion of Tamils from the state employment. Another example of the discrimination against the Tamil was relevant to the land distribution. The Sinhala government provided land arable for agriculture to large number of Sinhala settlers in areas that is predominantly occupied by Tamils and Muslims.

Due to this inequality and the discrimination against the minority group, the rise of militancy among Tamil youth was formed in the late 1970s. One among the several Tamil militant groups is the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). They were committed to the establishment of an independent Tamil state comprising of the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. The raid by the LTTE took place not only in the northern and eastern provinces, but also in the commercial capital Colombo. One of the methods they use to fight against the
Sinhala government is suicide bombing. And events leading to the anti-Tamil pogrom in July 1983 marked the beginning of the armed ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka.

During the conflict, human rights violations by the government troops, police and pro-government paramilitaries against Tamil non-combatants have been extensive and enormous. These have included retaliatory attacks on unmarried civilians, extensive shelling and bombing of areas under civilian habitation, and harassment, torture and custodial rape under the name of the Prevention of Terrorism Act. The LTTE, in turn, killed Tamil dissidents, Sinhala and Muslim civilians. The LTTE also deployed women cadres in frontline combat and as suicide bombers.

2). Negotiating bodily integrity and sexual autonomy in war

Like men, women share the problems of displacement, physical and psychological damage, and loss of family members, housing and possessions. Women during the time of war, more than men, face other challenges such as sexual assaults and sexual harassment. Women’s choices to sexual rights are being also oppressed and violated. The construction of female in Sri Lanka about pre-marital virginity, marriage, motherhood, sexual abstinence and sexuality is rarely treated with positive value. An obvious example of the violation of women’s choice to sexual rights was the forced marriage by parents in the belief that marriage will provide protection against increased sexual vulnerability. Women, especially Tamils, are also subjected to sexual assault and rape by the government armed force, especially, at the checkpoint areas around the country.

It is never easy for women to negotiate for their sexual autonomy in Sri Lanka. However, Inform, a human rights organization, has been trying to promote the sexual choices and rights and negotiations with the frame of militarization and war. Inform has raised awareness to promote the right of the women to resist marriage, to refuse sex if not by choices and to engage in sexual activity de-linked from marriage or reproduction.

3. Widows: negotiating self-determination in spite of community pressures
The result of the armed conflict has made a lot of women become widows. The husband is always the breadwinner in the society. The death of the husbands leads women to get new skills to support themselves and their families. At the same time, they also face a lot of problems with their in law, for instance, bids to the source of income, eviction from the shared family home and deprivation of property. Some women are even condemned to be bad luck, sexually lacking and thus should be responsible for the death of the husbands. Many widowed women, however, choose not to remarry, in that they believe in spouse for life, to avoid further community exclusion and the possibility that their children might not get along well with the new fathers.

4. Sex work and other marginalized sexual relations

Due to the destruction from the armed conflict, women engaged in sex work to support their life because war has blocked all the economic opportunities. However, sex work during the cross ethnic war is seen as controversial and contested. On the one hand, inside militarized setting, sex workers will have to serve troops from different ethnicities. Nevertheless, they are often accused of morally degrade or as a betrayal to the nation. On the other hand, Sex workers outside militarized setting, often face dangers such as violence from the police, pimps, brothel owners and clients as well as being criminalized for loitering, soliciting and living off the earnings of prostitution, making them vulnerable to arrest when the police raid brothels.

5. Promoting sexual autonomy during armed conflict and reconstruction

It is clear that the rights that can be asserted for the interests of the community is more likely to be accepted and acknowledged, while the rights that is more likely to be individual, for example, sexual rights are rarely respected. Female sexuality is still seen to be burdened with negative meaning. Anyway, sex work need to be decriminalized and public awareness must be raised to promote their rights to dignity, bodily integrity and work. People should not be shy to discuss about sex divorced from reproduction to fully understand their sexual rights. Forced marriage and all forms of sexual activity, not by choice, shall be condemned and condoned.
Applying the concepts of gender, sexuality and health in Cambodia

It is hard to apply these concepts in the Cambodian context, because the situation in Cambodia and Sri Lanka nowadays is not the same. Cambodia is stable and steady and has no civil war anymore. However, to be applicable in applying these concepts, I will look at Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge era (1975-1979). In this period of time, Cambodia was in war and fighting with each other. The problem that Cambodian women faced at that time was, to more or less extent, similar to the Tamil women in Sri Lanka. No person was granted any right including sexual rights. Marriage was forced and arranged by the Khmer Rouge. Even parents had no right to make the decision on behalf of their children’s sexual and reproductive health and rights – with whom to marry, when and how. Outside marriage women were victims of sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape committed by the Khmer Rouge. However, within the marriage life, sex was reviewed for almost nothing – neither for procreation nor for fun and pleasure. People were afraid to talk about sex and to engage in sex. According to the Khmer rouge’s rule, people shall not be that be free to talk about sex, but work. They can be punished to death if found lazy or trying to avoid from work.

Gender role was divided if not so widely. In spite of the fact that women were also required and forced to work in the farm like men, many other women were also assigned to work in the kitchen and sewing house.

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