Women’s Narratives, War, and Peace-Building

“Women Cannot Cry Anymore”: Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict
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IN THE FIELD: Enacting the Power of Women’s Narratives: My Journey from Trauma and Silence to Become an Agent of Social Change
HONORATA KIZENDE

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Reflections from the Board of Editors

Women tell the stories of their lives—to their children, to their friends and neighbors, to their lovers and husbands. These narratives can teach a lesson, open a dialogue, pass information, share experiences; the ability and the willingness to communicate is one of women’s assets. With their stories, women connect both with other people and with their own inner voices. A narrative can empower both the teller and the audience. While the importance of sharing a personal story may start with introspection and interpersonal bonds, the real power of a narrative is its potential to illuminate a social problem and create social change.

One of the important contributions of women’s movements worldwide has been the sharing of personal narratives that help “name” issues that have previously gone unmentioned. For example, violence against women has always existed, but when victims share their painful stories, the phenomenon can no longer be ignored or compartmentalized. The telling impacts both the speakers and the listeners: battered women recognize that they are not alone, and those who hear the stories, including other battered women themselves, begin noticing commonalities and accepted norms and demanding change. This is not to say that domestic violence has disappeared. Far from it. But it is now recognized for the global social problem that it is. This consciousness raising is only possible when women share their stories. Once the conversation is started and the problem named, the possibilities for social change emerge.

Many stories reveal women as victims, oppressed and beaten down by systems that they did not construct and that hold them powerless. We cannot ignore the horrors of war that are visited upon women and children; we cannot avoid the pain of refugees fleeing their homes after watching loved ones tortured or killed. We have to know the suffering to understand the dynamics of the problem and to be moved to respond.

But hearing only narratives of pain and suffering can lead to feelings of despair and powerlessness. It is critical that stories of survival, success, and concrete solutions in the face of profound problems are also shared. Stories of women who become heroes under impossible circumstances can uplift and inspire. In addition, if we define ourselves by our problems and our oppressors rather than by our strengths, we lose hope, and chances for change fade. If we only think of women in the context of war, we lose the vision of peace.

Narratives cross borders; they are not static. But there is a challenge in getting stories heard in a way that can foster positive change. We have gone from sharing stories around campfires to the potential for stories to be shared among millions. Television, radio, magazines, newspapers, and the Internet have replaced the village square as sources of information. But the power of the media to distort the realities of everyday life is tremendous. Therefore, a vital step in the creation of a just and peaceful world is the development of a media platform that truthfully disseminates women’s experiences of war and of peace-building.

If a story is heard without distortion, it can resonate by inspiring attentive and compassionate listeners to work with the tools and resources available to create a better world. Citizens in peaceful regions have a responsibility to listen and to pass along the stories that women in conflict regions tell. Funders, academics (especially in women’s studies), and lawmakers are all crucial links in the chain of change.

The links between narratives and social change are complicated. Peace and reconciliation are possible when stories are compelling and the audience is alert, empathetic, and moved to action. Ending conflict is not an impossible dream as long as stories that reflect both the realities of war and the possibilities of peace continue to be heard.

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THE TAMILS OF SRI LANKA HAVE BEEN ENTANGLED IN A RUTHLESS CIVIL WAR FOR 30 YEARS and have been continuously facing state terror aimed at claiming their traditional areas. In addition, their freedom of expression has become greatly limited. Attendant upon such social conditions, there is an extreme paucity of narratives, oral or written, in the public domain to attract outside attention and intervention. The circumstances and dissemination of three selected Tamil women’s narratives illustrate how suppressing women’s voices contributes to their threatened status.
Suppression of Tamil Women’s Narratives in Sri Lanka

DUSHYANTHI HOOLE

Introduction

Sri Lanka, home to Sinhalese- and Tamil-speaking peoples, has been called “the site of the world’s longest running” civil war. The protracted conflict is complicated by, on the one hand, religiously rooted racism which denies the humanity of the other and, on the other hand, a culture of revenge and belief by militants that separation is the only solution. The number of Tamils in the island has diminished by half in the last 50 years. Today, the minority-Tamils are listed as one of the most threatened ethnic groups in the world. This article briefly reviews the history of Sri Lanka’s conflict and the characteristics of the Tamil society and, using examples, discusses how Tamil women’s narratives are silenced and prevented from attracting solidarity and support.

History of the Conflict

In 1796, the British conquered the separate Tamil and Sinhalese kingdoms on the island and ruled them as a unitary state. In 1948, at the end of colonial rule, Tamils were 22 percent of the entire population. Half of the Tamils were denied citizenship and the Sinhalese thereby obtained full control of Parliament and State-sponsored settlement of traditional Tamil areas began. In 1956, Sinhalese was declared the official language, and in 1972, Buddhism was afforded foremost religious status under a new Constitution that took away clauses enshrining equality. In time, Sinhalese settlements in Tamil areas were backed by state terror, and the resultant frequent displacement and loss of life and property spawned a youth movement which took up arms following a state-backed program in 1983.

Attempts at a ceasefire, with some efforts at peacebuilding, between 2002 and 2005 failed and violence has resumed and been continually escalating. A few foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were able, however, to penetrate the Tamil areas when the highway into the areas was open during the attempted ceasefire. Since the NGOs operate with governmental registration, they rarely risk taking actions that might displease the government. Thus, the impact of the NGOs has been neither equitable nor significant. Since many Sinhalese are suspicious of foreign donors, humanitarian personnel working with Tamils face risk.

State-sponsored Buddhist institutions and some universities resist the introduction of a human rights paradigm (which will be explained in further detail below), viewing it as an extension of Western missionary efforts before independence. Besides, the research capacity of the universities is very low. The Tamils themselves have attempted very little analysis of their own situation. Though there is gender parity in education, inequitable allocation of resources has caused nearly half the students in the cultural capital of the Tamils, Jaffna, to drop out. Writings by Tamils are, therefore, generally not firsthand but from interest groups abroad far removed from the actual scenario and are mainly propaganda. The few narratives that have emerged are not in ready circulation because possessing a Tamil manuscript could be construed as treasonous. Similarly, Tamil films and documentaries are not locally made and, as a consequence, do not capture the reality of the situation.

The prevailing “Prevention of Terrorism Act,” under which any suspect can be arrested, punished, tortured or “disappeared” with impunity, furthers the suppression of Tamil narratives. Many fear making any negative comment about the Tamil militant group that could be construed as treason by that group and by their powerful civilian supporters. One survival tactic, therefore, is to never express an opinion on any matter in public. As a consequence, public discourse in any form is at a standstill among the non-politicized Tamil sections.

Tamil Society

As is common in Sri Lanka, Tamil society is matriarchal and predominantly matrilocal. Real property is
passed down the female line, and an elaborate system of kinship and marriage rules reduces the number of marriages. The honor of the family depends on the chastity of its women, including their conformity to marriage rules, and on the education of its men to command a high dowry. The men’s role is to protect and safeguard this system emphasizing the woman’s ritual purity but not the man’s. According to the Hindu religion many Tamils practice, the norm for a Tamil woman is that “her father protects her in her childhood, her husband in her youth and her sons in her old age; a woman is never fit for independence” (Laws of Manu, IX.3). Thus, her status is lower in society and she is excluded from decision-making, often even regarding her own marriage. Caste is sanctioned by religion, and revenge for the violation of women is extolled in Hindu epics. These factors reinforce a strange matriarchy where religion puts the man in charge of managing property but unable to displace his wife who owns the property and is pivotal in the home.

With Sri Lanka at war, however, men regularly join the militants or migrate for safety and employment. Owing to male death/migration, the male-to-female ratio has been estimated to be as low as 1:8, making many young women family heads. Tamil women greatly outnumber men and bear a disproportionate share of responsibility. Traditional values of their matriarchal society are threatened because vast tracts of land and much property have been taken over by the Sinhalese depriving Tamils of their dowries and livelihood. Threats to the family’s honor, including rapes, frequently also occur in the process. Heavy losses and damage to property have also occurred due to years of aerial bombings.

Although there is significant unemployment, Tamil women fear leaving their territory. Further, educated Tamil men are scarce, thereby increasing dowry demands. Roles traditionally reserved for the father, husband or brother are increasingly performed by the militants in their absence. Dependence of Tamil civilians on the militants has increased. Adherence to cultural norms in dress and behavior is enforced on Tamil women by the militants. The Tamil community has been diagnosed by experts as suffering from collective trauma.

Circumstances of the Narratives

Few Tamil narratives exist, fewer still by women. The narratives transition from the collective to the individual, indicating the increasing threat to freedom of association and expression and fear. The narratives are problematic, for they must remain anonymous. Further, women’s stories are often written by the Western educated and only vernacular narratives relating to themes considered significant in the West receive attention. Two specialized collections of narratives produced during the ceasefire period dealt only with the integration of militant women and refugee widows. A human rights group that is the recipient of the Martin Ennals Award for 2007, aiming at accountability from the parties at war, has included summary narratives in its online reports in English.

There are, however, many problems associated with this work: (a) the narratives are confidential, (b) access to the Internet is scarce and English proficiency is extremely low in the Tamil areas, (c) selective printings from this work favorable to the Sinhalese appear occasionally in the South undermining the narratives’ credibility among Tamil youth, and (d) the authors are working underground following death threats and face a slander campaign with attacks that include charges of drug smuggling, being traitors in the pay of the government, and accepting prostitutes from the government. Nationalist Tamil organizations, such as the New York Tamil Sangam, freely publish the slanders knowing that writers from Sri Lanka do not have the means to sue in New York.

The Use of Narratives in a Human Rights Framework

Personal narratives are a powerful strategy for voicing concerns over social issues. They are used as primary or secondary sources of evidence of suffering, as a participatory tool in rights-based research and education, and in peace-building in post-conflict societies. Thus, the suppression of narratives by terror is considered a significant denial of rights. A human rights framework is used for analysis here because the subjects of the narratives set forth below (with altered names) identified with the belief that “it is...the best discourse available for the nonviolent transformation of society and the vindication of the rights of individuals” in the Sri Lankan context. In this context, “human rights framework” means a paradigm of governance whereby states guarantee the enforcement of all human rights conventions based on the ideals of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Further, human rights are recognized as providing a holistic framework for social justice and have been employed as an effective probe for the measurement of non-enjoyment of fundamental rights.

Three narratives of Tamil women are discussed chronologically below. They are unique and important in that they were written based on direct testimony from affected individuals collected during support group meetings or court hearings and written by academics. The Works were collected over a long time through conversations with the affected persons and contacts with foreign

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and Sri Lankan rights-based groups including a translator. The selected examples below show how both collective and individual narratives that arose as part of the process of exercising economic, social, cultural and civic rights were suppressed by the very same groups claiming to serve those most affected by Sri Lanka’s civil war.

**Tangam’s Narrative**

One of the first narratives by a woman to appear among the Tamils in Jaffna was by Tangam in 1987 when the Indian Peace Keeping Force (expelled in March 1990) began its operations. She was a single mother and a medical doctor and in late 1982 had helped the militants with medical aid. Tangam’s women patients included victims of rape, war-related injuries, and mental distress. They were often from the socially marginalized groups within the Tamils that formed the bulk of the Tamil militancy. Women and children were very vulnerable in the hands of security forces. To explore and address their problems collectively, Tangam formed a women’s group and wrote a collection of their narratives to serve as case studies. Her work could not be published in Sri Lanka at the time because the President of Sri Lanka (controlling the South) and the Tamil militants (controlling the North-East) had made common cause against the Indians. Tangam, being an academic with access to national and international networks, sent an English version of her writings abroad. As the Internet was not available in Sri Lanka then, and both telephone services and electricity were generally cut in Jaffna until 1995, her stories had to be handwritten or typed and carried out of the country. One associate attempting to smuggle a narrative to Colombo, Sri Lanka’s capital, was killed for it (as testified by his wife to Human Rights Watch).

Tangam was murdered in Jaffna in 1989 and then labeled a “loose woman.” This was intended not only to make her appear worthy of her punishment but also to discredit her for challenging cultural stereotypes. She had lived without her husband, was publicly outspoken, and worked closely with male activists—all acts that were unusual for Tamil society. Her support group soon lost many members to both fear and the blockade of Jaffna from 1990 associated with the departure of the Indian Peace Keeping Force. Her works in manuscript form would be published only posthumously in the US. Few bookstores even in Colombo were willing to sell it: the premier bookshop, Lake House, sold the book only after redacting negative references to the President in each copy. As the narratives were a collection of common scenarios, misplaced revenge due to mistaken identity was a serious possibility. Tangam’s work was translated into Tamil and Sinhalese 10 years later, when that President had long been assassinated, and gained wide currency. This shows not only the importance of vernacular writings, but that suppressed narratives cannot be suppressed forever.

**Mani’s Narrative**

The personal narrative of Mani, a mathematics lecturer, depicts the climate of terror Tamil women face in the Sinhalese areas and the exploitation of Tamil women’s narratives by a Tamil nationalist. Her research work required travel. In the process she was arrested five times between 1995 and 1996 by the police on suspicion of being a terrorist in different parts of the country and finally kept in prison in 1996. Her identity card issued from Jaffna was confiscated by the police. (Anyone without an identity card is presumed to be a terrorist and is detained during midnight arrests.) The day her brother reported this incident to the press, police officers searched his house, questioned his domestic aide, and left a severe warning with his wife.

The plight of Tamil women gained worldwide currency when the British Refugee Council reprinted Mani’s article. Mani and her husband left the country within a few days of the publication. However, the story was stolen by a news magazine operated by a New York Tamil Association, which is hostile to human rights when violations are by Tamil militants. Its version of Mani’s narrative doubled the time she spent incarcerated and claimed that she was searched naked as men watched. In Sri Lanka, where verbal sexual harassment against women is not accepted as an offense, the doctored version would subject her to loss of respect. When a correction was requested, a member of the editorial committee said that they can issue a statement saying that “her family says that Mani was well looked after in prison,” which would put her at risk with the militant group in Jaffna and diminish her and her family before the Tamil public. The original narrative exists abroad even 10 years after its first appearance as many, both men and women, seeking asylum, request and obtain copies.

**Ponni’s Narrative**

The third narrative is that of Ponni, which appeared in parts in the English language newspapers between 2005 and 2006. Once an academic in the country’s only university system, her services had been wrongfully terminated (as determined separately by the courts, the Parliamentary Ombudsman and the Human Rights Commission). Further, she had openly worked for the inclusion of women in the natural and physical sciences, taught hu-
man rights, and filed an action against the university for demanding that women using the pool dress in what the female students overwhelmingly felt was culturally unacceptable swimwear because they considered the specified swimwear too revealing.

While fighting her case legally, Ponni worked for two international NGOs (INGOs). One of them had advertised for a “rights minded” person to work in education. Her project proposal at the first INGO included the only Tamil province (which had been excluded from such national studies and census because of the war) and two other provinces. Funding for the Tamil area, however, was delayed and was finally granted on the condition that it be a minor study funded by monies leftover from the year’s budget.

The findings of the study, based partly on personal narratives, jeopardized the government’s position that areas in the Sinhalese South were the most marginalized and in need of massive aid. Many Tamil parents were willing to go to court with their collective narratives as evidence to ask for the minimum facilities for their children’s schools. Ponni was not allowed to write or contribute to the final report, and her contract with the organization was not renewed. The research was published a year later by people who had no connection to the study and excluded the names of the researchers. The publication omitted critical findings clearly indicating ethnic disparities, apparently to avoid difficulties in working with the government. Ponni was not invited to the book release attended by donors and education dignitaries.

The second INGO advertised to work with the “poorest of the poor,” and Ponni was hired as the Rights Specialist. She was requested to write two narratives of girls for an internationally published book of war narratives, but from the Sinhalese border areas only. This INGO had official, paid advisors from political parties that spoke against the interests and even existence of the Tamil people living in Sri Lanka. Though the actual “poorest of the poor” lived in refugee camps and elsewhere in the Tamil areas in the North and East, these areas were systematically excluded from this INGO’s areas of operation. Even tsunami relief was not granted, though a country donor verbally protested. Statements of need were written without any research. The heads of both well-respected British institutions, foreigners on assignments, did not have much understanding of the local situation or its ethical implications. Ponni voiced her concerns and was switched to part-time work, which she declined, reporting the matter to the head office.

Ponni’s story illustrates the consequences of sharing Tamil stories or correcting the context of inaccurate narratives in circulation. Women are afraid of the consequences of whistle-blowing in their organizations, and suppress other women’s and children’s narratives, as well as internal narratives out of the fear of losing a high paying job with an INGO. Despite these circumstances, Tamil women’s narratives have inspired and challenged the thinking of women living in a conservative society. They helped in forming links with groups promoting peace nationally and internationally by explaining and publicizing their situation. They attest to a work, promoting peace, achieved by involving both ethnic groups.

Conclusion

Narratives are invaluable to the safety of marginalized people who are deliberately kept isolated by those in power. Narratives facilitate the empowerment of those affected and help to identify and assess needs and human rights violations. They serve as research material for peace-building and grant proposals and are windows to the situation within for the outside world. Yet narratives of the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka are few and far apart.

In the case of threatened communities, therefore, the reason for a lack of narratives should be identified and the dissemination of narratives facilitated. With respect to the Tamils, international pressure should be applied to force the repeal Sri Lanka’s Prevention of Terrorism Act. It suppresses Tamil voices and threatens Tamils’ existence. Networking with local and international interest groups with established credibility is also necessary to provide a credible source of narratives. Lacking such measures, true narratives can not surface and the marginalization of the Tamils of Sri Lanka, especially women and children who have little influence to begin with, will continue unknown to the outside world.

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