Chapter 63
Socio-Cultural Barriers of Female Ex-Combatants' Social Re-Integration in Sri Lanka

Kana Takamatsu
International Christian University, Japan

ABSTRACT

This chapter identifies the post-conflict social barriers to the social reintegration of female ex-combatants. This study refers to the case of Sri Lanka concerning the conflict between the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that ended in 2009. During the conflict, the LTTE actively recruited female combatants, and women consisted of a significant number of the entire LTTE combatants. However, after the end of the conflict and even today, many of them are rejected by the community. First of all, the LTTE was fighting for Tamil's independence, but Tamil's community has expressed mixed opinions toward the LTTE. Second, female ex-combatants were then and are now a divergence from the gender norms of their society. Third, from their roles in the conflict, female ex-combatants experienced an indelible change in their ideas through the conflict and observed themselves as capable of being independent women. Consequently, they felt a high level of resistance to returning to traditional gender roles.

INTRODUCTION

It is inevitable that the field of development studies actively engages in peacebuilding and security arena. Many regions supported by aid project have experienced armed conflicts, particularly internal armed conflicts. It is worth noting that the proportion of internal armed conflicts has remained consistently high since 1946. In post-conflict society, there are usually conflicting groups and individuals living in one country or community. Consolidating these people into a peaceful whole is crucial, particularly to facilitate the social integration of ex-combatants.

The number of female combatants in government forces, guerrilla groups, and terrorist group is more remarkable in recent conflicts, and the role of women in conflicts has undergone significant changes (Sjoberg and Via, 2010, p. 5). In the conflict between Sri Lankan government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the number of female combatants in the LTTE was unprecedented. In 1986, under the guise of the propaganda of the liberation of Tamil women, the LTTE formed the Birds of Freedom women's military troop and incorporated women into all LTTE combat activities (Stack-O'Conner, 2007).

Becoming an LTTE combatant was a significant opportunity for women who felt oppressed by the Tamil society (Alison, 2003, pp. 48-52). Their participation as soldiers did not allow them to return to the culture's original (Tamil traditional) social positions or roles (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2004, pp. 158-159). They remained symbols that embody changes in the values of the Tamil society and images of women who fought for Tamil's independence and gender equality.

There were conflicting opinions toward female combatants. Research from other conflicts also showed that female ex-combatants are exiled from their family and the community for having been soldiers, which led them to be secretive about having been combatants (Mazurana and Cole, 2013, p. 206). Moreover, female ex-combatants are not recognized as legitimate soldiers, even though they played responsible, central roles in the conflicts. This lack of recognition prevents female ex-combatants from receiving profits and support from social reintegration programs that male ex-combatants are receiving (Cohen, 2013).

There is a need for a new perspective for discussion leading to providing support to female ex-combatants for social reintegration. In order to facilitate this goal, this interview research aims to further the understanding of their post-conflict experiences to identify the barriers to social integration. Their motivation to become combatants and to document their fighting experiences during the conflict is necessary because of their profound influences on their post-conflict lives. Thus, this study examines and focuses on individual experiences of female ex-combatants through three stages of their lives—joining the conflicts as combatants, what they did and was done to them during the conflicts, and the post-conflict difficulties in their reintegration into the society—especially the negative impacts of gender relations in the community.[1]

This paper consists of three parts: (1) a brief examination of the conflicts and government's reintegration policies, (2) describing the results of the interview research, and (3) identifying and discussing the barriers to social reintegration.

Civil War in Sri Lanka

On May 19, 2009, President Rajapaksa declared in the congress that the civil war between the government and the LTTE was won after more than 20 years (Sengupta, 2009). On May 17, 2009, the LTTE issued a statement that admitted defeat. Unfortunately, this conflict did not come to an end by agreements, even though during this protracted conflict, third parties such as Norway tried to act as mediators to end this conflict.

Although this conflict has been defined as an ethnic conflict, it is not a conflict between the Sinhala people and the Tamil people. According to Hayashi, this conflict was brought on mainly by politics after independence was achieved (Hayashi, 2004, p. 170). The demographics of Sri Lanka consist of 75% Sinhalese and 15% Tamil, along with other smaller ethnic groups (Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website). After gaining independence from the Commonwealth of the United Kingdom in 1948, Sri Lanka launched a preferential policy favoring the Sinhalese. For example, declared Sinhala as the official language (Of-

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