

Asia/ Sri Lanka

Stars in the dark

The story of Shaila, a widow struggling for survival in a war-torn area in northern Sri Lanka

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Shaila Idayaraj, her mother and her five-year old daughter are live examples of what and how 20 years of war—a war that is still not over—have contributed to Sri Lankan society. The situation of the people in Jaffna and their stories of survival amidst the cruel war are so painful, as revealed by the parentless children, widows, armless civilians, and displaced people we met when we visited Jaffna peninsula. We witnessed for ourselves how the war has affected the lives of people in war-torn areas. The high security zones (HSZs) have severely threatened the life and livelihoods of people. Farmers have lost cultivable lands. Fisherfolk face tight restrictions in accessing the sea. And, very specifically, it has affected people like 26-year old Shaila Idayaraj, of Sawalkattu fishing village in Jaffna peninsula, in northern Sri Lanka, who have lost the breadwinners of their families.

Can you imagine a situation where you have lost your father, your grandfather and your husband as a result of civil war and you do not even have a death certificate to claim compensation? Of course, if you are the wife of a politician, you have every possibility to succeed your husband in parliament or even in the provincial or regional councils. But if you are a wife of a small-scale fisherman, what would be your position?

Perhaps you are strong enough to bear such a situation. But when your culture, your religion, your relatives and the society as a whole does not recognize you as a *woman*, because you are a widow, do you think you could still survive? Shaila, has already gone through all these difficulties, though she is just 26 years old, but she still has the perseverance to survive, at least for the sake of her daughter. This is Shaila's story:

Life was very hard for people in Jaffna during the 1980s when war was raging in the area. The lives of women were more threatened. The first shock in Shaila's life was when her father was killed in 1987, by peacekeeping forces, when she was only 10 years old. Amidst these severe troubles her mother tried to send

her two children—a son and daughter—to school, but could not manage it with the low income she received from selling *beedis*. Her income was just enough to feed the children.



The only alternative was for Shaila to leave school at a very early age and marry her brother-in-law. However, a greater disaster befell her when her husband was killed by the armed forces just two years after she was married. Her husband was fishing at sea when his boat was fired at on 15 September 1996. He and four other fellow fishermen were instantly killed. Their bodies were not found at first, but later, the headless bodies were identified and buried in a common pit. Shaila could recognize the dead body of her husband, but, to date, she has not been able to obtain a death certificate.

A death certificate is needed to claim compensation from the government or any support agency. That is the basic legal document that recognizes you as a war victim. Though Shaila was not able to get this document, she had the will to survive for the sake of her daughter, her most precious resource at that time. But the society was so cruel to a widow, refusing to accept such a woman as a human being, completely marginalizing her, not wishing to see her face, or to invite her for important social events. Life was hard as Shaila struggled to survive without her husband and her father.

According to Shaila, there were several occasions when she felt like committing suicide because of the way she was treated by society. But, as a woman with the responsibility of feeding her daughter and her old widowed mother, she somehow found the courage to continue living. Even as Shaila was still struggling, she faced her third shock—her grandfather was killed, again by the armed forces. She has no tears left any more—only the awareness that she needs to continue her struggle.

It is not only Shaila who has faced such a destiny in this war-torn area. In Sawalkattu village alone around 96 women have lost their husbands or the breadwinners of their families due to war. According to available information, there are around 20,000 widows in Jaffna peninsula. But these women cannot go to sea to earn a livelihood the way their husbands did. Most of them are between 22 and 56 years of age. The women of Sawalkattu have found the courage to get together to form a women's group—the Star Widow's Association—which has initiated small savings for a start, to put together capital to begin some small business.

When we visited them, the group was engaged in the production of handicrafts from *palmyrah* leaves, preparation and sale of pickles, preparation and sale of breakfast items, and collection and sale of firewood. These are some of the self-help programmes that have been initiated by the association. Shaila, the main actor of the story, is the chairperson of the association, a post for which she bears more than enough qualifications.

When we asked the women's group whether they are ready to undertake labour-intensive activities, typically categorized as men's work, such as carpentry, mechanical activities, three-wheel driving, etc., the group was open to the idea. They had no more fear left of society, they said, recalling how they had been treated so badly. As we are in the process of healing the wounds of ethnic crisis today, it is very educative to hear Shaila's voice. It gives a very strong message to the majority Sinhalese people in the south on how the war victimized Shaila and others in the Star Widow's Association in Jaffna.

We asked the group: "How do you feel when Sinhalese people come to you and ask you about your life situation, even when this community may be considered to be responsible for your present hardship?" The group was very articulate about their situation and their reality. Shaila responded on behalf of the group: "We do not have any anger against the Sinhalese people in the south. They are not responsible for the situation. Only opportunistic politicians are responsible for the situation. We know the reality and we need your support to have a decent life here. We have lost our lands, our water, and even our own houses, as our lands have been occupied by the military. We live in refugee camps. As we are in the High Security Zone, our people cannot go for fishing. As members of the Star Widow's Association, we cannot buy fish for our survival. Because of land mines, our fertile lands are useless. We have no opportunities to work as labour in agricultural fields. That make our life situation even more difficult. Our life and peace are not two separate things. We need peace to live in harmony. Please help us to make peace".

It is so important to see the courage of these women, in the absence of the family breadwinners, amidst the tight security situation. It is difficult to imagine that the members of this association are today ready to help heal the wounds of the ethnic crisis in Sri Lankan society.

How can we help not only Shaila's group but also Sri Lankan society as a whole, which is suffering from war in the North as well as in the South? We think Shaila and the members of her association have given us the most important message on how we should move forward in this difficult situation.

(Shaila's Story was compiled during the visit by NAFSO and the Kantha Shakthi team to Jaffna in February 2004)

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