

# Widows' struggles in post-war Sri Lanka

**This report documents the post-war struggle of women, mainly widows, from the fishing communities of Mannar, Sri Lanka, attempting to reconstruct their lives**

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In 2012, Yemaya had carried a report based on my meetings with women of fishing communities of Batticaloa, a district on the east coast of Sri Lanka which had been badly affected by both the ethnic based civil war in Sri Lanka and the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004 (see *Yemaya* Issue 41). This year, at the end of August, I had the opportunity to return to Sri Lanka where I met widows who are organizing themselves in groups to survive and meaningfully reconstruct their lives.

There are an estimated 89,000 such war widows in Sri Lanka. Since 2009, the guns have fallen silent after 26 years of ethnic based civil war, but the widows are still struggling to feed themselves and their children. Many war widows belong to fishing communities in the north and east of Sri Lanka. Their plight has recently been captured in an Al Jazeera documentary as well (see <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/101east/2015/04/sri-lanka-widows-war-150421161203533.html>).

I was able to talk to some of these widows during my meeting with women's groups at Mannar Island, a fisheries dependent area in north Sri Lanka. The meetings were arranged by the National Fisheries Solidarity Movement (NAFSO), an NGO that works with fishing communities all over Sri Lanka.

Mannar Island is located in the Mannar district of the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, and is connected to the mainland by a causeway. It is situated in the Gulf of Mannar, a large shallow bay forming part of the Laccadive Sea in the Indian Ocean. The bay lies between the southeastern tip of India and the west coast of Sri Lanka. From Thalaimannar at the western tip of Mannar Island, a chain of reefs, sandbanks and islets nearly connects Sri Lanka to India at Rameswaram).

The Gulf of Mannar is an ecosystem with high biodiversity. It is rich in fishery resources, and fishing is a major contributor to the economy of Mannar Island. Approximately half of the island's population (99,051 in 2012) is involved in fisheries. The large majority of fishers practise small-scale fisheries using fibre reinforced plastic boats with outboard engines, motorized traditional boats (*vallam*), non-motorized traditional boats (*theppam*) and non-motorized beach seine boats, and a large variety of nets. Although much of the catch is from the sea, lagoon fishery is also practised. Mannar Island is famous for its dry fish production.

Mannar Island was hit hard by the war because of its location. It was a major exit and entry point from and to India, and became a key host to Tamil refugees from all over Sri Lanka. The island's large Muslim population was driven out by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1990. After the war, the composition of Mannar's population changed. It now has around 80 per cent Tamils, the majority of whom are Christian, and 16 per cent Muslim—a demographic change responsible for growing tension between the two ethnic groups.

The war had a major impact on the fishing communities of Mannar. Many fisher families were displaced. The situation was compounded by restrictions on fishing hours and fishing grounds. Since the end of the war in 2009, the fisheries have revived, but fishing communities still face major difficulties in their life and livelihood.

The fishing village of Santhipuram has 450 families of which 75 are headed by women—60 widows and 15 deserted women. Fishery is the main livelihood source. The men go out to sea, fishing, and the women do various types of related work. To provide food

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Women helping in cleaning nets, Mannar Island, Sri Lanka.  
The livelihood of the widows and deserted women is very fragile

and income to their households, the widows go to the beach at four in the morning to help in removing fish from nets, and cleaning and repairing nets. In return, they are given some small fish. The men sell the big and valuable ones to middlemen. The women keep some of their earned fish for food and process the larger part into dry fish. In the absence of adequate facilities, the dry fish processing is carried out under unhygienic conditions.

The livelihood of the widows and deserted women is very fragile. Selling dry fish at the local market is their mainstay. They earn around SLR 500 (USD 3.5) per day when there is fish, and SLR 100 (USD 0.70) when there is none. The fishing season is only six months long, and for the rest of the year, they live off their savings, and from selling dry fish and some homemade food in other villages. They take micro-credit loans from NGOs for poultry or goat keeping, but these do not provide a real alternative livelihood. There is no programme to help these women to improve their dry fish processing and marketing. The women feel they are drowning in debt, but still take more loans to educate their children, in the hope that they will bring a better future.

In all the fishing villages, there were similar stories. Women related that the major problems of fishing families after the war are access to land and sea. Many had lost their homes and land when they fled during the war, leaving behind all their documents, including land titles. When they returned, they found their houses destroyed, belongings looted, and all their livelihood equipment had gone missing. Their lands are now occupied by other people or confiscated by the Sri Lankan security forces, who even today keep the former war zone areas under tight control.

In the lagoon fishing village of Pallimunai, the land and houses of 22 families are still occupied by the Navy. Of these families, 12 are headed by widows. These families have been displaced by war since 1990. One woman said: "For so many years we have lived nomadic lives, shifting between camps for displaced persons and the homes of relatives. Now it is our biggest dream to have our family land and houses back, and our livelihood and community life restored." It was only in 2013 that the affected families of Pallimunai were able to go to court to get their land and houses returned; but their cases are still to be settled and they feel very frustrated. The navy had offered the families alternative lands, but these were far away from the coast and therefore not suitable. Fishing is

their traditional livelihood and they need to live close to the coast. The widows said that they wanted to stay in their traditional communities, where they felt safe and looked after. With their traditional lands occupied by the navy, the women also lost their spaces for drying fish.

During the war, restricted access to their lands and fish resources was a major livelihood constraint for Mannar's fishing communities. After the war, fishing restrictions were lifted, but the process was extremely slow. Furthermore, another threat arose from large fleets of Indian trawlers invading the Palk Bay and Gulf of Mannar, attracted by its rich fish resources. The Indian trawlers fish very intensively near the shore and leave little fish for the local fishing communities who primarily use small traditional boats and gear. Further, these trawlers also destroy the nets of the locals. Women of Pallimunai, as also of Santhipuram, Jim Brown Nagar and other villages, related that their fishermen could hardly make a living now from fishing: "Our resources and livelihood are being ruined and we are without any compensation. The Indian trawlers must be stopped from fishing in our waters." The women spoke strongly, and some also blamed the occupation of their land by the navy on the intrusion of the Indian trawlers: "Because of the Indian trawlers, the navy camp is here".

After the war, the Sri Lankan government started reconstruction of the war affected areas, with a focus on building and infrastructure. On Mannar Island, a highway and the causeway to the main land were reconstructed, and since April 2015 the railway has also been restored. Mannar is now connected again to the mainland and to Colombo, the country's capital. But the government paid practically no attention to rebuilding local village infrastructure and rehabilitating displaced and traumatized people, including, and in particular, the war widows.

The women of Mannar's fishing villages indicated that they felt forgotten by the government. The lack of assistance from the government and limited assistance by United Nations bodies and NGOs compelled people to fend for themselves. In the fishing village of Jim Brown Nagar, a woman leader had this to say: "We lost everything in the war. In the IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camps, we were only given dry rations and not allowed to go out to undertake livelihood activities. And now, six years after the war is over, we still live in misery. With no access and equipment to engage in our traditional fisheries activities, it is hard to survive. There are no other livelihood options for us. Our housing conditions are also poor. Women feel unsafe when going to the jungle for

toilet needs or to collect firewood. In the rainy season, the temporary houses we live in are often flooded and many families have to seek shelter in the church. Of course it is good that there is no more killing and raiding, but our housing and livelihood problems are not being solved. And we still live in fear because of the presence of the security forces.”

The women’s (widows’) groups in Mannar Island have been in existence for only a couple of years. Earlier, there had been many restrictions imposed by the security forces for people to organize. NGOs were only allowed to support government programmes. Community assistance was primarily organized by the church or mosque and these institutions played a binding role for the people, although unfortunately the relations between Christian Tamils and Muslims are still tense.

The Negombo-based NAFSO came to Mannar in 2004. The NGO supports Tamil women’s (widows’) groups and citizen groups in fishing communities, generally in collaboration with the Catholic Church. They started with providing livelihood loans to families headed by women, but later also took up land rights issues and the issue of intrusion by Indian trawlers. Presently, there are 13 village level women’s groups supported by NAFSO, which are federated at the district level under the name Valarpirai (‘ascending moon’) Women’s District Committee. The village level meetings mostly deal with the immediate needs of widows and deserted women, such as children’s issues and livelihood problems. Community services, including helping the sick, are also rendered. At the district level, common problems such as land and other rights issues are discussed. The women are encouraged to write petitions to the authorities, for which they get assistance from NAFSO. The women’s organization of Mannar also became a member of the national Women’s Federation, organized by NAFSO.

When asked what has changed for them since they began to participate in the Valarpirai women’s organization, the women’s groups in Mannar Island responded enthusiastically: “We feel more self-confident now to fight for our dignity and rights. Earlier we felt so isolated and alone. Now we meet other women’s groups from fishing communities, also from other parts of the country, and get solidarity.” The women are aware of the need to speak out and actively approach the authorities with their problems. But, as they emphasized, “without solidarity and support from outside this is really difficult”. The NGO had encouraged the women to vote in the recent General Elections. For many women this was the first time they cast their vote. Disappointingly, the Mannar district had no women candidates, but the women said they hoped that this would change in the future.

The new government in Sri Lanka promises to focus more on reconciliation, restoration of human rights and rehabilitation of livelihood. The women said that a survey has now been conducted of displaced people in their area. These developments have generated fresh hope.

On 7 September 2015, war widows and human rights activists handed over a fact finding report on war-displaced people to the government in Colombo (see <http://wodep.blogspot.nl/2015/09/round-table-discussion-on-ensure-land.html>). At this event, Nimalka Fernando, a women’s rights activist and president of the International Movement against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism, spoke in solidarity with the war widows and called on the newly elected President and Parliament to accept the responsibility to return land to Sri Lanka’s war widows and allow them to rebuild their lives: “It is not enough for the government to run vocational training for internally displaced persons. Give them back their sea, lands and jungle; let them restart their livelihoods. It is their fundamental right.” ❏

**The underestimation of women’s labour in fisheries can lead us to understate the costs of fishing, while overstating and oversimplifying their economic benefits.**