KU LEUVEN

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
MASTER OF SCIENCE IN CULTURES AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Reconciliation in Post-Conflict Sri Lanka

An Inside Perspective of War Affected Women

Promotor: Prof. Dr. S. VAN WOLPUTTE
Second reader: Prof. Dr. F. DE BOECK

MASTER THESIS
submitted to obtain the degree of Master of Science in Cultures and Development Studies
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Sophia HERNÁNDEZ REYNA

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Abstract

Less than four years have passed since the end of the Sri Lankan 'ethnic conflict'. Despite the efforts of third parties to shove a diplomatic end to the conflict, the ground on which today Sri Lanka struggles to maintain a fragile peace is a context of brutal military victory and the widespread extermination of the LTTE leadership. Since the end of the war, different ways to deal with the past have been discussed. 'Reconciliation' has become the buzzword that dominates the public debates. The three decades of war and the aftermath have had a tremendous impact on women, in the modification of gender roles in Sri Lanka; a continued back and forward in terms of emancipation. In spite of their historical effort to equally contribute to the decision-making process, women continue to be left out. The post-conflict environment has exacerbated the conditions particularly for those women who have been affected by war. This circumstance has directed me towards the formulation of the following research question: *What are Sri Lankan war affected women's perceptions on post-conflict reconciliation and how do they portray themselves throughout this process?* This thesis is focused – but not limited to –answering this question. In order to do so, this text has been structured in three main chapters which entail: a theoretical anthropological discussion on reconciliation; a description of the post-conflict situation in Sri Lanka and the roles developed by women throughout the conflict; and a final analysis for which field research in Sri Lanka has been conducted.

“Krishanthy”

As the birds sang
And the sun fell into the sea
Her death took place
At the open space of white sand
No one knew about it

When she was born a female child
She wouldn’t have thought of such an end
Her mother neither

First their look pierced her like a thorn
Then their terrible hands seized her arms

No sound arose
She fell in a faint
They raped her senseless body
It happened
At the open space of white sand
She was buried
At the edge of the salty cremation ground

When she was born
Would she have thought of such an end?

VINOTHINI

Mukamuddi Seypaval

Mothers and Daughters of Lanka celebrating the International Women's Day in Colombo, Sri Lanka.
(Picture taken by Women and Media Collective, 2012)

Preface

"So, I heard you are joining the Tamil Tigers?" – Joked *Uncle*, Visaka's husband, one day prior to our departure. After one month of working at the Association of War Affected Women in Kandy, Sri Lanka, the moment had arrived. I had been very insistent to participate in the training workshops in the north of the country and Visaka suggested that I was ready to join the staff in Kilinochchi. I was full of excitement and curiosity. It seemed surreal for me that I was about to visit the administrative heart of the Tamil Liberation Struggle; the *de facto* capital of the Tamil Tigers.

I was advised to bring my passport and to make sure my clothes covered my legs and shoulders. The changes during the road were remarkable. The contrast was fascinating. The areas near Kandy were characterized by the impressive extensions of tea plantations, the relatively cool weather, the imposing Buddhist temples and figures, and the *Kandyan* style houses which leaned out of the green hills. As we approached the north, the heat intensified and the enormous trees were replaced by the reddish soil and a flatter landscape that allowed the sunset to emerge. The colorful Hindu temples and bright full Tamil *sarees* completed the stunning and inhabited scenario. Jeny, the Tamil interpreter, translated to the army officers the purpose of my visit, and without a problem we reached our destination. After crossing the checkpoint of Omanthi, a disturbing calm and silence characterized the zone. The level of militarization in Kilinochchi was dramatic. Soldiers and police officers moved around on bicycles while openly carrying their weapons. Military camps, enormous war memorials, and brand new Buddhist temples grew from the deserted ground. The images of President Rajapaksa in every corner seemed like a slap in the face to what use to be the heart of the Tamil culture. What happened here? Where are the women?

The realization of this thesis has been an intensive academic as well as a personal journey, which would have not been possible without the support of many people to whom I am gratefully indebted to. I

would like to extend a special gratitude to *Aunty* Visaka Dharmadasa, for giving me the opportunity of experiencing the construction of peace in such a real and beautiful way, and for inspiring me with her insatiable struggle for justice. My deepest appreciation goes to the staff of the Association of War Affected Women, to my *akkas* Ranjani Premarathne, Seetha Kumari and Jinandani Parameshwaram, as well as to my *nangi* Shanel Sun for allowing me to work side by side with them, for their support and their laughter, without them the conduction of the interviews would have not been possible. I would also like to thank the family Bambaradeniya for opening the doors of their home during my stay in Sri Lanka and for making this experience so enjoyable. I wish to acknowledge with much appreciation the support given to my research by the staff of the International Center of Ethnic Studies and the Social Scientists Association, and the help with translations given by Mr. Joseph Calistus during my trip to Jaffna.

Foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my thesis promotor Steven Van Wolputte, for his well-grounded guidance, his insightful assessment and for being genuinely interested and compromised with my research. Special thanks go to the CADES staff, Dominique Joos, Ann Cassiman, and Sylvia Tutenel, for their constant support, for encouraging our curiosity, and for making the master program such a dynamic and joyful experience. I thank my fellow CADES classmates for the wonderful time spent together, and for being there for one another. I sincerely hope that our friendship continues to be strong.

I will always be unstoppably grateful to my lovely family. Thank you for believing in my craziness and for being there in every single time throughout this experience, I always felt you by my side. I really believe you make the world a better place, and none of my achievements would have ever been possible without having you as my family. *Muchísimas gracias,los amo*.

I would particularly like to thank my boyfriend and the love of my life Dick Nijssen for jumping in this Sri Lankan ride with me. Thank

you for willing to cross the world with me and for always living every adventure we go through with passion and enthusiasm. Thank you for believing in me, for listening and for being there in all the good and the bad times. This experience by your side has been one of the best journeys of my life, and I hope it was as delightful and enriching for you as it was for me. The rice and the curry would not have tasted the same without you. *Dankjewel schat, ik hou van jou*.

Last, but not least I would like to express my deep appreciation to the war affected women who shared their experiences with me and who allowed me to understand the complexity of the Sri Lankan reality through their eyes. This thesis is dedicated to you and to your exemplary work.

This journey has been a life changing experience. I hope it makes you all proud.

ස්තුති.

Acronyms

Association of War Affected Women	AWAW
Cease Fire Agreement	CFA
Eelam's People's Democratic Party	EPDP
Government of Sri Lanka	GOSL
Indian Peace Keeping Force	IPKF
International Crisis Group	ICG
International Center of Ethnic Studies	ICES
International Criminal Court	ICC
Internally Displaced Persons	IDPs
Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna	JVP
Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission	LLRC
Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam	LTTE
Sri Lankan Army	SLA
Sexual Gender Based Violence	SGBV
Tamil National Alliance	TNA
Truth and Reconciliation Commission	TRC
United Nations Security Council	UNSC
United People's Freedom Alliance	UPFA
Women's International League for Peace and Freedom	WILPF

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1. Introduction

Less than four years have passed since the end of the Sri Lankan 'ethnic conflict', between the Tamil ethnic minority and the Sinhalese majority population. Diverse actors were involved in the struggle, but the war's main belligerent performers were the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The conflict took place particularly in the northern and eastern regions of the country from 1983 to 2009[1].

The Sri Lankan war story is not new. Similarly to other ethnic conflicts in postcolonial societies, the eruption of violence is rooted in its colonial era. Under the British rule, the Tamil population was given priority by the colonial regime, triggering ethno-nationalist sentiments among the Sinhalese community. The independence of Sri Lanka, previously named Ceylon, from the British Empire in 1948 led to the creation of a centralized government at the hands of the Sinhalese majority (Herath, Höglund, Schulz & Kalinga, 2010). The anti-Tamil feelings and stereotypes originated during the colonial period were soon projected in discriminatory public policies, mostly in relation to language and the allocation of land. The Tamil population began to organize themselves in protests and demonstrations of resistance, for example through *sathyagrapahas*[2]. Moreover, it was until 1970 that the Tamil separatist belligerency began to consolidate among the young Tamil community in the northern Province of Jaffna. In 1975, the LTTE was born under the leadership of Velupillai Prabahkaran[3] (International Crisis Group

[1] See Map1, Map of Sri Lanka, in the Annex section.

[2] A *satyagrapha* is a non-violent form of resistance, often associated with Mahatma Gandhi's peaceful mechanisms for the Indian Independence Movement, and Nelson Mandela's fight against the Apartheid regime in South Africa.

[3] For an insightful view of Velupillai Prabahkaran's political ideology and career, see Narayam Swamy, M.R. (2003). *Inside an Elusive Mind: Prabhakaran: The first profile of the world's most ruthless guerrilla leader*. New Delhi: Konark Publishers.

[ICG], 2012). A series of attacks committed by the LTTE and the violent responses from the Sri Lankan government opened the ground to a full-scale conflict that continued for almost three decades. Summing up and borrowing the words of Orjuela (2003:198), the Sri Lankan conflict was an "economic, political and cultural deprivation and grievances of a minority [that] provoked a violent rebellion against a state that has come to be seen as representative of only the majority ethnic group."

Despite the efforts of third parties to shove a diplomatic end to the conflict, it finalized in May 2009 with no formal peace negotiation. A pure military victory of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces over a defeated LTTE. The initiative taken by the Norwegian government in 2002 to facilitate the peace negotiation became a landmark during the war, as both actors agreed to participate in six sessions to discuss the final terms of the Cease Fire Agreement (CFA). Nevertheless, the lack of genuine compromise from both parties to commit to the terms of the CFA came to surface and the negotiation failed. By 2008, more than half of the Sinhalese population supported the GOSL to take upon a military campaign to defeat the LTTE (Schulz & Peiris, 2010), and so they did.

The ground on which today Sri Lanka struggles to maintain a fragile peace is a context of brutal military victory and the widespread extermination of the LTTE leadership. This context is currently shaping the main reconciliation discourses in the country (Herath, 2010). The government of President Rajapaksa must seek a way to counter-balance the different interests of what remains a geographically and culturally divided Sri Lanka, the so called 'Tamil north' v. 'Sinhala south'. Not only must his government respond to the domestic demands, but also to international scrutiny on regards of the accusations of crimes against humanity allegedly committed by both, the LTTE and the Sri Lankan Armed Forces.

Post-conflict and post-authoritarian societies face the challenge of dealing with their past in the aftermath of violent periods of confrontation. During this phase of transition, the new elites must

select the most adequate instrument to solve their previous disputes and prevent future violent clashes (Teite, 2003; Huyse, 1996). Diverse models have been implemented, from national and international criminal prosecutions, truth commissions, reparation projects, hybrid courts, to other sort of measures. Some countries have chosen to look into their own traditional practices to establish culturally-sensitive procedures, while others have preferred to import foreign models which have proven to be –to some extend – "successful". Criminal prosecutions are perhaps the most radical mechanism of accountability as they are mostly centered in the 'perpetrator'[4]. Furthermore, there are alternative measures such as truth commissions which are more likely to deal with the victim's experience in a more in-depth sense.

Since the end of the war in Sri Lanka different ways to deal with the past have been discussed. Interestingly 'reconciliation' has become the buzzword that dominates the public debates in post-conflict Sri Lanka. Policy-makers, leaders of civil organizations, intellectuals and diplomats often refer to the process of reconciliation between the different ethnic groups that constitute Sri Lanka today, a process embedded within the post-conflict reconstruction scheme (Rambukwella, 2012). The word heads the titles of conferences, workshops, newspaper articles, programs, film festivals and intellectual gatherings. Nevertheless, as any other buzzword, reconciliation signifies different things for different groups of people and for different purposes. After a stay of four and a half months in Sri Lanka I came to identify a particular section of the Sri Lankan society which if often excluded from the reconciliation agenda. In spite of their historical effort to equally contribute to the decision-

[4] The creation of international criminal tribunals to prosecute crimes related to genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity represents a breakthrough in terms of justice, as now high ranking individuals can be prosecuted without immunity. However, they have been perceived as 'top-down' and 'short-term' instruments, often based on western values that fail to consider complex socio-cultural dimensions of the armed conflict. Additionally, they have been criticized for being highly bureaucratic and leisurely instruments (Weitenkamp et. al., 2006).

making process, *women* continue to be left out. The three decades of war and the aftermath have had a tremendous impact in the modification of gender roles in Sri Lanka; a continued back and forward in terms of emancipation. The post-conflict environment has exacerbated the conditions particularly for those women who have been affected by war. This circumstance has directed me towards the formulation of the following research question: *What are Sri Lankan war affected women's perceptions on post-conflict reconciliation and how do they portray themselves throughout this process?* This thesis is focused –but not limited to –answering this question. In order to do so, this text has been structured in three main chapters which entail a theoretical discussion, a description of the situation in Sri Lanka, and a final analysis; for which literature review and field research have been conducted.

I will begin the theoretical framework by reviewing the paradigms related to the concept of reconciliation. I will briefly examine the input brought by truth commissions models due to their focus on this process as an essential course through which post-conflict societies can understand their past, and also due to the importance given to the role played by 'victims' of war. After this short preamble, I will review the studies made from an anthropological spectrum. Although relatively few anthropologists have been focused on the study of post-conflict reconciliation, I have chosen to use anthropological remarks in my analysis because I consider them to be essential and the most adequate for this thesis. Anthropological observations have gone beyond romanticized political discourses to critically examine how the existing models of reconciliation have impacted the lives of those mostly affected by war. Bearing this in mind, I will reflect on the work done by Richard A. Wilson, Lars Buur and Michael Humphrey. Furthermore, I will focus more deeply on the study realized by Fiona Ross on the participation of women witnesses in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Her work will be of particular relevance for my final analysis, as she is one of the few anthropologists who have specifically studied the role of women and the impact that processes of national reconciliation might have on women victims and witnesses of conflict. According

to her extensive research, there is a lack of an appropriate language that can "voice to both suffering and the capacity to act." In her opinion, the prevailing understandings of voicing "do not do justice to the range of women's experiences of harm and the diversity of efforts to cope." (Ross, 2003:165).

In the chapter that follows I will shift towards the case of Sri Lanka. I will start by describing the post-conflict arena and how this new panorama has influenced the situation of women. Thereafter, I will discuss the different roles that war affected women have undertaken during the armed struggle. I intentionally use the word *affected* because I wish to talk about women whose lives have been modified by war, but I explicitly aim to distinguish that these women are not necessarily *only* victims of war. They have also carried out other determinant roles such as perpetrators and peacemakers during the conflict which must also be considered. To conclude this descriptive section, I will outlined the two main political discourses on reconciliation which are being advocated in Sri Lanka, to emphasize how war affected women are (or not) being included.

Finally, I will interweave the findings resulted from the field research and interviews which I have conducted, together with the anthropological remarks on reconciliation. I will begin the analysis by focusing on the different ways in which war affected women have reacted in response to nationalist discourses promoted during the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, and accentuated in the post-conflict period. I will argue how the different roles of women have developed a tug of war between women's emancipation and women's reversion towards conventional roles. Furthermore, I will discuss these women's personal understandings of the word 'reconciliation' and their opinions on the current governmental efforts to stimulate it. Finally, I will revise the Sri Lankan war affected women's own discourse on reconciliation –frequently reflected on projects implemented by non-governmental organization –as well as their own portrayal within this discourse.

2. Research and Methodology

The data collected for this thesis was in its majority obtained during a four and a half months period of field research conducted in Sri Lanka, from September 2012 to January 2013. The first three months, I realized an internship at the Association of War Affected Women (AWAW) in the city of Kandy, under the supervision of its chairperson, Mrs. Visaka Dharmadasa. During this experience, aside from the normal tasks from which I was responsible (e.g. fundraising proposals, design of programs, drafting of reports, etc.), I was able to conduct research which was relevant for the association and related to my thesis topic. This investigation became a crucial element of the data collection process for this thesis, and it also resulted in the publication of two documents[5]. Although most of the work realized for AWAW took place at the central office in Kandy, I was also permitted to participate in the workshops implemented in the post-conflict cities of Kilinochchi and Mannar in the north region. In spite of the relatively short stay, this experience with AWAW, in combination with the opportunity of living with a Sinhalese host family, allowed me to conduct qualitative research with an ethnographic approach. As a researcher I kept track of my observations related to everyday interactions, cultural practices, and stories shared by different people in public spaces, which enable me to better understand the Sri Lankan social reality. (Uyangoda, 2010).

During the second period of my stay, I focused on conducting a total number of eight interviews with twelve participants in the cities of

[5] These documents are: Dharmadasa,V., Moledina, A. & Hernández, S.(2012). Asia: Sri Lanka. In Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP).*GNWP Women Count: Security Council Resolution 1325. Civil Society Monitoring Report 2012*.1-20. Retrieved from http://www.gnwp.org/wpcontent/uploads/2010/02/SriLanka_Report.pdf ; and: Hernández, S. (Ed.) (2012). From the Heart of Conflict in Sri Lanka, Women Build Peace. *Peace X Peace: Voices from the Frontlines*. Retrieved from: http://www.peacexpeace.org/2012/09/from-the-heart-of-conflict-in-sri-lanka-women-build-peace/

Jaffna, Kandy and Colombo. The contact details of the interviewees were obtained during the internship with the help of AWAW's staff. The criteria to include participants in this study were women whose lives had been affected by the ethnic conflict in one way or another, and who have also been active in the construction of peace, during, and, or after the war. Amongst them were leaders of civil society organizations, feminist scholars, politicians, diplomats and students. Some interviews took places at their offices, while others were realized as informal gatherings in places such as their homes' living rooms, restaurants and cafes. The interviews were based on a semi-structured list of open-ended guiding questions related to the impact of war on the interviewee's lives; their engagement in peacemaking projects; their perception on the change of gender roles as an effect of war; and more specifically, their personal conceptions of the word 'reconciliation'. The questions were adapted to each participant, following a series of key subjects, in order to make them sensitive to their experiences and to allow them to self-reflect. Although some women shown an initial –and comprehensible–reluctance to open up about sensitive topics, particularly the Tamil women in the north, most of the interviews became rather personal conversations and interesting exchanges of ideas. Seven of the interviewees, those living in Jaffna, were interviewed in two different focus-group discussions with the help of a Tamil translator, as they felt more comfortable and secure by sharing their experiences in the presence of other(s). Five of them were Tamil students from the University of Jaffna, which decided to be interviewed all together and preferred to not reveal their names. The remaining individual interviews took place in Kandy and Colombo.

In combination with the realization of the interviews, I was also permitted to access the literary and visual materials of the International Center for Ethnic Studies (ICES) and the Social Scientists Association (SSA) in Colombo. I was able to use their installations to work on my thesis and organize my research. This opportunity allowed me to access updated Sri Lankan literature, mostly books and journals. It also facilitated me to contact scholars related to the subject and gave me the opportunity to participate in

the film festival *Picturing Reconciliation* in Jaffna, as well as in other human rights related festivals and discussions. The rest of the information employed for this thesis, has been obtained through literature research.

As a final remark of this section, I also consider important to mention the challenges I confronted while collecting the data. Firstly, I had difficulties to contact war affected women who had been engaged in the hostilities as combatants. In spite of my attempts to contact ex female cadres of the Tamil Tigers and women soldiers of the Sri Lankan army I was not able to interview any of them. It should be understood that in the case of LTTE ex cadres, many girls and women were self-demobilized and are understandably reluctant to share information of their war experiences due to fears of reprisal and trauma. Many others are found in detention, rehabilitation and reintegration centers, which are often supervised by the Sri Lankan public authorities[6]. Although I established appointments on several occasions with officers of the Sri Lankan Rifle Corps Headquarters at Balakotuwa Estate, the meetings were never formalized and my contact person became unwilling or unable to be reached. Moreover, another challenge worth mentioning were the difficulties to travel to the war affected zones. The Sri Lankan Army is known for discouraging, particularly foreigners, to visit these areas due to the large amount of international critiques condemning the government's militarized control of this part of country. This context and the previous mentioned challenges, complicated the journeys to the north and east areas.

[6] See for example Inbaraj, S. (2012). The Transition to Civil Life of Teenage Girls and Young Women Ex-Combatants: A Case Study from Batticaloa. *Series on Post War Reconciliation, ICES Research Papers*, N.1.

3. Theoretical Framework

> So I asked, "Do you want to remember, or to forget?
> He hesitated. "We must remember what happened in order to keep it from happening again," he said slowly. "But we must forget the feelings, the emotions, that go with it. It is only by forgetting that we are able to go on."(Hayner, 2001: [Introduction])

3.1 From the aftermath towards reconciliation

In the latest decades, increased attention has been given to instruments that promote the idea of post-conflict reconciliation. Stakeholders in reconstruction projects –donors, governments and international organizations –have come to consider it as a vital element to endorse "[…] conflict prevention, human development, human security, the elimination of poverty and peace-building" (Bloomfield, Barnes & Huyse, 2003:17). The bet on reconciliation originates from the expectation that previous hostile enemies can resolve their differences, so societies can move forward with the establishment of a mechanism that "consolidates peace, breaks the cycle of violence and strengthens newly established or reintroduced democratic institutions" (Bloomfield *et al*., 2003:17).

Who could be against reconciliation? Most likely nobody (at least not publicly admitted). For this reason, the discussion on reconciliation is not a matter of *in favor v. against*. The main debates are pinpointed in the model through which reconciliation is aimed to be achieved; the actors and interests behind such apparatuses; and the impact that these can have in post-conflict societies. Scholars from different disciplines coincide that there is no consensus when it comes to this complex concept. Bloomfield *et al*. (2003:12), however, adventured to define it as follows:

> […] an over-arching process which includes the search for truth, justice, forgiveness, healing and so on. At its simplest, it means finding a way to live alongside former enemies –

> not necessarily to love them, or forgive them, or forget the past in any way, but to coexist with them, to develop the degree of cooperation necessary to share our society with them, so that we all have better lived together than we have had separately.

According to Bloomfield, Barnes and Huyse, reconciliation is a reflection of the past which can be a painful process for a society, but can also contribute the construction of sustainable peace by analyzing a divided and tensile past. It is a process that can take place at an individual level but a community level as well, by debriefing the negative prejudices and attitudes between hostile communities. The authors also consider that overlooking the occurred might lead to a society continuously hunted by its violent past. Therefore, it is of upmost importance for political leaders to examine the root causes of the struggle once the violence has ceased, and to bargain and to agree on a compromise bounded by the diverse parts' interests. According to them, three main stages constitute the process of reconciliation: "replacing fear by non-violent coexistence"; "when fear no longer rules: building confidence and trust"; and moving "towards empathy" (Bloomfield *et al*., 2003:20).

Bearing this in mind, victims and perpetrators are identified and released from the 'paralyzing isolation' in which they have been trapped, towards coexistence. They are also able to recognize different degrees of perpetration and similar identities that link them, for instance the fact that they are both 'survivors' of war. In this way victims and perpetrators can move towards empathy, becoming more tolerant to listen to the *others'* motives to engage in the hostilities. Bloomfield *et al.* do not consider empathy as an equal concept to forgiveness or *forgetting*, and pointed out that a strong feeling during reconciliation processes might remain.

Amongst the diverse models that promote the process of reconciliation are the so called truth commissions, which have been widely examined by scholars working with post-conflict societies. This thesis is not meant to meticulously analyze truth commissions,

but I do consider it pertinent to briefly discuss them for two reasons. First, due to the emphasis they set on the role of the 'victims' and their experiences, which is a relevant departure from the customary attention given to the 'perpetrator'. Second, they entail an important linkage with post-conflict 'reconciliation'. The study of truth commissions has shaped much of the existing literature, which will be discussed in this work.

According to the expertise in transitional justice, Priscila Hayner's (2011), truth commissions are temporary bodies which conclude with the publication of a final report. They are established to analyze past events –rather than ongoing –and they are sanctioned by the state in revision. Their main objectives are: "fact-finding" (meaning clarification and acknowledgement of the occurred events), to address the needs of war victims, make recommendations for criminal prosecutions, evaluate institutional responsibility, make reform recommendations, and to promote reconciliation. The wide mandate that truth commissions may entail have made them a feasible way of dealing with widespread human rights violations and impunity. In cases in which not all perpetrators can be prosecuted, at least the 'truth' can be said (Wilson, 2003). In Latin America, for instance, they were useful to talk about the disappearance of an alarming number of people, whose bodies were never found (Roth-Arriaza, 2003). The case of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC[7]), one of scholar's favorite study models, enhanced a linkage between the concept of reconciliation and notions such as 'truth', 'forgiveness', 'healing' and 'justice' (Rambukwella, 2012). The importance given to 'truth' in this instrument has ethical as well as legal roots.

[7] "The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was set up by the Government of National Unity to help deal with what happened under apartheid. The conflict during this period resulted in violence and human rights abuses from all sides. No section of society escaped these abuses". For further information, see The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, available at: http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/index.htm

The idea of truth as an inalienable right, and the ethical aspects attached to truth commission models have been questioned by several scholars. As promising as truth commissions might seem at first glance, they face huge challenges during their implementation. They often do not fulfill the expectations of victims, they cannot assure that previous mistakes will not be repeated, and they might have unintended negative long-term consequences when their mandate is misleadingly implemented (Hayner, 2011).

3.2 Anthropological perspectives

Following the previous glimpse on reconciliation, I will now shift towards the analyses that concern this research, which are the studies done by anthropologists. Richard A. Wilson (2003), made an excellent revision of anthropological studies related to national reconciliation, in which he reviewed his own research, and emphasized the contributions made by Lars Buur, John Borneman and Fiona Ross. I will begin with his findings.

In Wilson's book *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State*, he recognizes the valuable contributions made by truth and reconciliation commissions, for disrupting the "denial of truth" promoted by despotic regimes. Notwithstanding, he discusses their truth-seeking dimension by observing how they report "the bare facts" without deeply analyzing the structural and historical dimensions, as well as the political origins of violence. Additionally, he questions the 'morality' linked to truth-finding projects, utilized by the new regimes to legitimize themselves through the use of nationalistic discourses and nation-building projects, cemented in the creation of a new national vision. He considers that such projects have represented an effort of the state to reconcile with itself, rather than to reconcile social groups. The risk here is the deformation of justice, as a strategy of political hegemony, state morality and the legitimization of elite's interests. Reason for which, Wilson suggests that we should not analyze reconciliation throughout moral or legalist lenses,

but with a Weberian suspicion of the legitimacy of the state. In his words:

> Nation-building strategies appropriated and absorbed truth-finding, and a collectivist vision of politicized morality took precedence over the liberal humanitarian project initiated by human rights organizations. In this way, truth commissions became one of the main ways in which new elites sought to manufacturer legitimacy for tarnished state institutions. (Wilson, 2003:369)

Moreover Wilson criticizes the use of organic models of the state and the metaphors of *illness* and *health* employed in reconciliation literature, such as the work done by Hayner and Minow. In these models, the state represents a "sick body that is in need of healing" and reconciliation becomes the "collective model of national healing", in other words: the "therapy for a sick society" (Wilson, 2003:371, 372)[8]. This way, the new political mandate is presented as cleansed and detached from the previous authoritarian regime. The problem with this conception, in Wilson's opinion, is the fact that states have no psyches to be healed, and in trying to do so through reconciliation, justice can be overshadow and inaccessible for the most affected victims of war.

Furthermore, Wilson –as well as other anthropologists –strongly rejects the use of a positivist approach so commonly employed by human rights organizations and international institutions that endorse reconciliation. The anthropological concern with legal positivism is the way in which law is perceived as a "value-free, neutral activity guided by the strict application of legal principles". On regards of positivism in social sciences, there is a disagreement with the use of empiricist knowledge "through systematic observation and experimentation" (Wilson, 2003:274). Such approach may apply for natural sciences but not to societies, let alone to the classification and

[8] This is comparable to the Platonic conception of "moral and political hygiene", explained in his master work *The Republic*.

measurement of human rights violations. Such was the case in the South African TRC, as explained by its own staff:

> Positivist is the best way to present the truth to the majority of South Africans, for reasons that most South Africans would not understand. Truth will be delivered by methodological rigor and scientific findings. The legitimacy of the TRC depends on its ability to create a truth that is acceptable and that means a scientifically valid process that people can buy into. (Personal interview, TRC office, Johannesburg, 16 October 1996 as cited by Wilson, 2001:38)

Buur and Ross coincide with Wilson's rejection of the positivist approach, and more specifically the use of the Information Management System (Infocomm[9]).This is a transnational methodology for the documentation of human rights cases which was employed in post-apartheid South Africa. Buur closely studied the use of Infocomm in his ethnographic research of South Africa's TRC. According to his findings, Infocomm ended up being a bureaucratic and statistical measure that homogenized local realities and only took into consideration issues that could be measured. This systematic documentation was built at the expense of the painful process that victims had to go through by sharing their bitter experiences of war. Buur and Wilson spoke about the use of *factual or forensic truth* which was the only type of truth that was granted epistemological value, while the other three sort of truths *–personal or narrative truth; social truth; and healing and restorative truth* – were used merely for 'emotional catharsis', reason for which "[…] individual statements from victims did not featured in the writing of the *Report*" (Wilson, 2003:376). The TRC report, became in a moral chronological description of 'wrong acts', in which the use of the word 'evil' symbolized the apartheid system, and became a

[9]Infocomm was a large-scale human rights database project created by Patrick Ball of the American Association of the Advancement of the Science, and adapted from use in other places, such as El Salvador and Haiti. (Wilson, 2001:38)

simplistic answer for complicated dimensions and conditions, " 'evil' was put in place to answer the question: why did people commit gross human rights violation? Because apartheid was evil. End of story" (Wilson, 2003:377).

John Borneman on the other hand has a more optimistic perception on processes of reconciliation, and differently from other anthropologist, he gives greater importance to the rule of law. He (2002:281) defines the word *reconcile* as "to render no longer oppose", interpreting reconciliation not as peace or harmony but as a 'departure of violence' in which the antagonistic actors involve accept to move away from the cycle of violence in which they have been trapped. He talks about how victims intend to depart from violence and how they cope with traumatic loss and painful survival. In his findings, physical reproduction is a common phenomenon in which victims try to fulfill the absence of the loosed ones, during their stage of mourning. Additionally, 'revenge' is another mean through which victims try to achieve what Borneman (2002:287) calls "the impossible: to recuperate a loss through the righting of a wrong". This coping mechanism, only reactivates hostilities and increases the possibility for future 'rebounding violence'. According to him, reconciliation should be achieved through the provision of retributive justice. He considers that trials, regardless from their limitations, can become a "*ritual purification of the center*"; a symbolic way of bringing an end to a period of violence and injustice (Borneman, 2002:298). It is through this 'symbolic ritual' that the desire of victims to obtain revenge and make justice by their own hand will be diminished, and rebounding violence will be less likely.

3.2.1 The 'spectacle of the victim'

Taking on Borneman's research, I will begin this sub-section with the obvious. Armed conflicts can create diverse types of victims, such as detainees, abducted, injured, raped, homeless, demobilized, humiliated, and so on. The identifications of types of victims has been widely discuss, the debate swings between the adoption of a

narrow conception and the use of a broader scope that can embrace a bigger amount of victims. (Huyse *et al*., 2003).

Borneman (2002:296) discusses the relevance of 'witnessing' and 'listening'. He considers that the act of listening is a primary step in bringing victims' "silenced voices" into the reconciliation discourse. He talks about listening and voicing as a dynamic which is interactive, questioning and involving. Not in the sense of "voicing the oppressed", emphasizing the authority of the speaker, rather than the agency of the victim, and can have distorted effects such as recreating trauma. Bearing this in mind he considers that:

> Listening to marginal actors is important because they often have the greatest interest in departing from patterns of rebounding violence. With the most to gain and the least to lose, marginal actors are also willing to take the greatest risks. Their voices deserve our attention, then, not because of the extremity of their suffering or the location from which they speak, but because of the risk they embody in speaking the truth. Listening for the truth in the aftermath of violence, while crucial for long-term reconciliation, only actually becomes truth, as Michel Foucault (1980) would argue, when plugged into practices and systems of power.

Borneman suggests that anthropologist can enormously contribute in this aspect due to their position which allows them to listen to victim's voices and witness' narratives, as part of their "professional ethos" (Borneman, 2002:300). Nevertheless, Michael Humphrey (2003) considers that one should remain critical of the involvement of victims, either in trials or truth commissions, particularly in latter, in which they are considered the ultimate source of truth.

Humphrey's (2003:172) critiques on processes of reconciliation are in the same direction as those contributed by Wilson and Buur. He emphasizes the way in which the testimony given by victims and their "private individual memory is transformed into shared public knowledge as part of the basis of the political legitimacy and

authority of the successor state, re-establishing the rule of law and promoting reconciliation." In a nutshell, he considers that the light shed upon victims as the center-piece of reconciliation, can become a ritual through of state legitimatization. In this sway, the new regime inverts the actions of the former one, by acknowledging the atrocities committed against victims, rather than perpetrating them. Based on a Foucauldian grounds, he argues the following:

> The spectacle of the victim's pain and suffering inverts the ritual of power from one which silences the victim (by no words or the compliant words of confession) into one which allows the victim to speak (to recover individual choice) in truth commissions and trials seeks to undo the original spectacle of violence, the atrocity –the use of excessive violence on the body as a visible display of power. (Humphrey, 2003:176).

Following this argument, the 'spectacle of violence' resembles triangular monarchic structures in which the 'ruler', the 'victim' and the 'people' participate (Foucault, 1977:49, as cited by Humphrey, 2003:176). During this show, the public is able to witness the bodily violence lived by the victim by listening to her or his experience.

Mechanisms of reconciliation are focused on victims which have been excluded from the protection of law and who have experienced extreme violence; "the legally and politically invisible". In this sense, truth commissions aim to inverse that exclusion by using a human rights discourse, in which their suffering can be acknowledge and they can become "morally visible" in order to reintegrate society. This idea can also be considered as an importation of the cultural belief that the healing of a society can be achieved through the process of 'revelation'. (Humphrey, 2003:174-175).

One can observe how this shift from 'perpetrator' to 'victim', 'silence' to 'revelation', 'invisibility' to 'visibility', should not surprisingly be the reflection of another shift made by the state, from using 'terror' to 'trauma'. In this sense, the new state differs from the

previous one because it does not utilize terror as means of legitimization, but it does refers to victims' pain as a historical condemnation and reminder of what no longer is. The risk of not embracing recognition of pain is that antagonisms can be again instigated. Even worst, if the state does not acknowledge the others' experiences of pain and instead opts to mark a disconnection with the past, violence is likely to regenerate. This is what the author calls "the problem of the victor's justice" (Humphrey, 2003:180), by rendering full responsibility to the other and establishing its new form of sovereignty.

3.2.2 Fiona Ross, women and reconciliation

Following the line of anthropological studies on reconciliation and retaking on Borneman's and Humphreys findings on the role of victims, and the importance of listening and witnessing, I will move on to the contribution made by Fiona Ross with her book *Bearing Witness: Women and the Truth Reconciliation Commission in South Africa*. She is one of the few anthropologists who have written particularly about women experiences as witnesses and as victims during reconciliation.

Her research demonstrated two main trends during the testimonial procedures of the TRC in South Africa. The first was that in spite of the balanced participation of women and men witnesses, women had the tendency to talk about the suffering of other men, while men spoke about their own. The second was that women activist who struggled against the Apartheid System, rarely participated in public testimonies. Due to this pattern women came to be referred as 'secondary witnesses.' Throughout the report, it was clear that women were considered as a lesser threat to the Apartheid regime, which led to the conclusion that they were also less victimized. It was understood that men were more actively involved "while women were denied 'active citizenship' because of their location within the private sphere" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC], 1998 as cited by Ross, 2003:19). This private sphere was considered "less political". This kind of statements undermined women's agency

during the apartheid regime and beyond. In addition to this, the Commission seemed to only consider women 'visible' as long as they suited traditional roles such as being 'mothers of victims' (Ross, 2003).

Ross also criticized the positivist classification and reporting methodology of the TRC, which rendered visibility and validation to few women's experiences but keep many others 'invisible'. The narrow classification of violations and different sorts of violence limited the examination of different practices of violence, such as racial discrimination, symbolic violence or forced mobilization, which also took place during the apartheid. Ross sustains that the Commission's mandate was "body-bound[ed]", as the main interest was to investigate cases of gross human rights violations that were 'physical' or 'embodied', (e.g. visual sexual forms of violence). This focus shadowed the violent abuses that took place at other spaces such as the domestic one (Fiona Ross, 2002; Wilson, 2003). In spite of this condition, Ross argues that through their 'silence', women managed to keep their coping mechanisms out of the sensor of Infocomm. Their silences were not passive, but rather cultural and political, a form of resistance and a coping mechanism do deal with the violence experienced. In her words:

> Hidden in the discourse of domesticity are powerful forms of knowledge and agency that need to be recognized and sensitively understood […] These have to do with experiences of family life, with expectations of time, with silence and secrecy and the location of self in stories. (Ross, 2002:42)

Moreover, the TRC gradually increase the embracement of women's voices as a result of women's activists' pressures to adopt a gender approach. The category of 'women' finally emerged after a series of interventions. Special hearings were held to listen to women's experiences, but only those that could be measured. Ordinary but equally valuable features remained obscured. In spite of this, the active participation of women and their practices of resistance were

also recognized by others. Christina Stuckey, wrote in the *Sunday Weekend* 1996, in relation to women in South Africa, that,

> Their husbands' deaths forced them to take over the traditional duties of the man and to play the dual role of father and mother to their children.
> The deaths also pulled them into the midst of the struggle, some willingly, some less so. As policemen continue to harass them… the women drew from a well of strength which many didn't know they possessed… (Sunday Weekend Argus, 21 April 1996, reproduced by Sunday Independent as cited by Ross, 2003:20).

In reaction to this, gender experts, such as Sheila Meintjes and Beth Goldblatt highlighted the importance that this article gave to the recognition of women's involvement in the fighting against the injustices of the apartheid regime. They pronounced the importance of identifying experiences of women beyond conventional roles.

> 'In their resistance to this system, women were tortured, imprisoned and horribly abused. They [suffered] not only as mothers, wives and daughters, but were also leaders and sources of strength in their families and communities. Women were also perpetrators of injustice and cruelty' (Ross, 2003:20).

Both of these authors struggled to advise the Commission to embrace a gender approach in order to acknowledge that violent conflict has different effects for women than for men. They also stated that violence against women' should be specifically recognized as a *political* act and not only a *domestic* one. In their opinion the Commission was not sensitive for women participants and did not understand the stigma attached to publicly speaking about certain issues, sexual violence, that inhibited them to declare in public.

Additionally, Ross (2003: 52) made an interesting distinction of the participation of women activists in the hearings of the TRC. Her findings on this regard are of particular importance for my research. She defined activists as "those who were members of and actively involved in sustained anti-apartheid protest or clandestine anti-apartheid activities". Based on her experience, not only as a researcher but as a witness herself, she concluded that women activists spoke more openly than other women testifiers, often blaming the state for their suffering; however they remained reluctant to do so. Women activists frequently shared their experiences during their detentions, in which they were usually measured –or one could say judged –on the basis of womanhood ideals. They were humiliated by the officers for failing to fulfill their role as the "right kind of woman", which would mean to remain in the domestic arena. As stated by one of the witnesses, the "consistency of drawing away from your own activism, from your own commitment as an actor, was perhaps worse than torture, was worse than the physical assault…" (Ross, 2013:65). These women's involvement in political activism also resulted into threats against those related to them, consequently undermining their "sense of self and called into question the consequences for others of their political engagement Ross (2003:65)."

Further on, Ross discusses the common phenomenon observed in societies of armed conflict, of women's traditional roles being 'reframed' out of the domestic dimension. This modification in gender roles can have different effects. One of the effects of changes in gender roles is that women activists involved in activities of resistance can be condemned for being bad mothers. On the other hand, women can also mobilize based on their conventional roles (i.e. mothers, wives, etc). The latter has been contested by feminist scholars, who considered that women's movements grounded on the utilization of traditional roles are "inherently conservative because [they] do not challenge male authority or patriarchal power" (Walker, 1991: xxiv as cited by Ross, 2003:147). Ross discusses this sort of mobilizations, and questions whether female biological attributes can contribute to women's solidarity. Although she

concludes that gender do not forge automatic ties, she does recognize that women can endeavor to forge relations between each other while finding themselves in harsh conditions. This solidarity could be seen as a symbolic form of resistance that evolved in "a sense of ontological security and political commitment in a context marked by danger", a cohesion that entails a "nostalgic tone: temporal distance blurs ideological divisions that were powerful at the time" (Ross: 2003:70).

4. Description

4.1 The Sri Lankan post-conflict context: implications for women

The brutal military victory of the Government of Sri Lanka over the LTTE has created a post-conflict context of centralized control and heavy militarization which has exacerbated the difficult conditions for victims of war, particularly for women living in the conflict affected areas (ICG, 2011a). Feminist literature, specifically the research done by Jane Barry (2005) related to Sri Lanka, Slovenia, Sierra Leone, Serbia and Kosovo, demonstrates that different sorts of violence against women can increase throughout peace negotiations and during post-conflict periods. Some aspects that might contribute to this phenomenon is the increased presence of actors that can potentially threaten women (e.g. armed militants, demobilized men, criminal gangs), added to an environment of impunity and injustice that tolerate this sort of violence. Women's economic situation is precarious, and their mobility is limited. In the Sri Lankan Civil Society Monitoring Report of 2012, this condition is attributed to:

> Discriminatory policies and practices, heavy military presence, lack of authority to control their environment, limited access to basic needs combined with weak institutional protection mechanisms and breakdown of traditional support networks, norms and prejudices against women in the society and attitudes and behaviors of power players lead to a culture of violence and impunity, which exposes women to various forms of sexual and gender-based violence that compromise their dignity, security, well-being, and rights. (Interview realized to Visaka Dharmadasa, as cited by Dharmadasa, Moledina & Hernández, 2012).

The survey realized by the Association of War Affected Women (AWAW) from February to July 2012 carried out to present the *Sri Lankan Women's Agenda on Peace, Security and Development*,

reinforces the idea that continuous presence of paramilitary and military groups in the post-war zones can have a negative impact on women's security. There has been an alarming increase of sexual gender based violence (SGBV), domestic violence, child abuse, disappearances, murders, cases of harassment and assaults all over the country, since the end of the war. The country's crime records, calculate that at least five cases of rape are reported per day, bearing in mind that many cases never get reported. In the case of Tamil women in the north and east, it has become extremely difficult for them to coexist with the large number of male, military and mostly Sinhala-speaking officers that continues to control the regions (Association of War Affected Women [AWAW], 2012).

Most alarmingly, evidence has been found to ascertain the accusations of sexual violations committed by military officers against Tamil women, but the "[…] cultural stigma, decades of impunity, and the government's refusal to allow any independent investigation of the end of the war and its aftermath" (ICG, 2011a) inhibits the conduction of a research that can provide accurate data. Furthermore, the human trafficking and sexual abuse of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) has become an urgent topic. In case of human trafficking, IDPs become vulnerable targets as they are hard to track due to their lack of identity documentation (Perera, Gunawardane & Jayasuriya, 2011).

In most cases of armed conflict, once the fire has ceased, the processes of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) are carried out (Herath, 2010). This fragile period signifies a crucial moment in the 'shaping' of the country, in which women must find the way to negotiate their demands. In the case of Sri Lanka, no official processes of systematic demobilization or disarmament has taken place. This condition has allowed the proliferation of illegal small and light weapons, contributing to the condition of insecurity of the society as a whole and a direct threat to women (AWAW, 2012).

Additionally, strong modifications in the gender roles have taken place, as I will further discuss in my analysis. Traditional roles have been inverted all over the country, but mainly in the northern and eastern regions. With the increased absence of men, women have carried out jobs, which were traditionally associated with men –such as farming or fishing –in order to generate income for themselves and their families. These modifications in the social structure of Sri Lanka are influencing women's access and level of input in the process of reconciliation, as stated by Sorensen (1998), "women's post war position will be partly determined by their former position in the landscapes of conflict, as internally displaced persons, widows, single breadwinners, victims of rape or torture, ex-combatants, refugees, etc."

Cynthia Cockburn, in her book *From where We Stand: War, Women's Activism and Feminist Analysis*, makes a remarkable revision of gender dynamics since the eruption of the violent conflict towards the post-period. According to her research before the war there is frequently a process of recruitment of men –in some cases women –into armed groups, in which women are expected to be devoted supporters of their male relatives that go into battle, process in which they are "[…] reminded that through biology and tradition they are to be the keepers of the hearth and home, and men by physique and tradition are meant to be protectors" (Lidauer, 2008:8). Throughout war, Cockburn talks about the 'brutalization of the body' in the sense that both, women and men "live and die different deaths and are tortured and abused in different ways due to both physical differences and different meanings, culturally ascribed to male and female bodies" (Lidauer, 2008:8). During the peacemaking processes "[…] gender gives shape to different forms of refusal of the logic of violence […] women's engagement against war is based on different images of gender. They are mainly identified as mothers of soldiers" (Lidauer, 2008:9). Additionally, during the post war period,

> Trauma is also gendered […] There is a stigma of rape survivors, example of "ex child soldiers'' and ex-combatants. Moreover, in transitional justice mechanisms,

> women's experiences are usually marginalized or left out completely. Sometimes war helps women to change their gender or social role as they learn new skills and invent new ways of making money. (Lidauer, 2008:9).

Throughout the entire period of armed conflict, according to the study realized by the Austrian Study for Peace and Conflict Resolution in 2008, there are common traps related to gender which are exhibited through discourses and diverse sort of publications. For instance, those assumptions related to gender traditionalism in which women are seem as 'victims' and men as 'perpetrators' based on the idealized conceptions of men being combatants and women being peace-makers. Moser (1993) does argue however that the experiences of women and men are different as victims and perpetrators; women and men have different access to resources (in terms of power and decision-making access); they both play different roles and have different identities during the construction of peace; and they have different interests and needs.

4.2 War affected women in Sri Lanka

In this section I will use Asoka Bandarage's framework based on her comprehensive research on the different roles that women have played during and after the conflict in Sri Lanka, which I completed with my own research. Important is to reaffirm that these roles are not mutually exclusive. In her article *Women, Armed Conflict, and Peacemaking in Sri Lanka: Toward a Political Economy Perspective* she talks about 'women as victims', 'women as perpetrators', 'women as peacemakers'.

4.2.1 Women as victims

> They are the mothers grieving for sons dead and missing. They are the widows or half widows struggling to survive in female-headed households bringing up orphaned children. They are refugees displaced from homes. They are raped and

> murdered in war. Essentially, women are visible as the overwhelming victims of war. (Manchanda, 2001:15).

'Women as victims' of war is not surprisingly, the most common conceptualization used in mainstream analyses. As stated by Manchanda (2001), they are usually portrayed as the "grieving mother". Even though both –women and men –are intensively affected by violent conflicts, women remain more vulnerable in the sense that they can become subjects of additional risks such as sexual violence (Cahn, 2006). According to the research realized by AWAW (2012:12), women find themselves in "situations that exacerbate existing inequalities in relation to women's personal security, bodily integrity, health and well-being, and violation of socioeconomic as well as civil and political rights."

In Sri Lanka, cases of well-known murdered, tortured and raped women, stroked the country and mobilized women activist movements to demand justice. Nevertheless, most cases, for instance of rape, committed by high-ranking members of the Sri Lankan Army, LTTE cadres, or other armed groups, are rarely ever known or convicted. Those cases which do get processed often prosecute ordinary soldiers which cannot afford skilled lawyers and can be subjected to unfair trails (Bandarage, 2010).

Furthermore, refugees and IDPs are amongst the most affected in Sri Lanka, from which the majority are women. Most of these victims come from very poor environments, and differently from those of wealthier families, they did not afford to move south or to join their families abroad in the diaspora. The change of gender roles within refugee camps and in war affected areas has been particularly dramatic. Family values and social structures are modified in refugee camps; and women must carry on new roles due to the reduce presence of men, either because they went on battle, have been killed, injured or have become disabled (Bandarage, 2010). The increased number of female headed households is perhaps one of the most revealing facts that expose the redefinition of gender roles that conflict often entails. The study realized by CARE International

(2010, as cited by Silva, 2012) estimates that the percentage of female headed households, in the northern and eastern provinces is found between 15% and 30% from the total. Silva (2012:44) considers female householders affected by the war –and in the case of Sri Lanka, also by the Tsunami –are particularly vulnerable because of the low income they often obtain and due to the "potential risks and abuses and prevailing social attitudes and prejudices against women who had lost their husbands […]". Nevertheless the escalations of this percentage in women headed household cannot be only attributed to the consequences of war, as other factors also influence this phenomenon, like family separations.

Several studies related to women victims of war in Sri Lanka are clearly leaned to highlight the suffering of Tamil women, particularly in western literature. However, it should be consider that many other Sri Lankan women were also victims, such as Sinhalese and Muslims, mainly in the bordering regions between the LTTE controlled areas and the rest of the Sri Lankan Army supervised regions. For instance, there is the story of Seetha Kumari, one of the interviewees (I will later come back to her story) who lived in the Ampara[10] district. During the last stages of the war, the police had promised Seetha's family to safeguard their home, as they were the last Sinhalese family there. Unexpectedly, the police left the village one night without notifying them. It was then that the LTTE cadres attacked her house. They broke into her home looking for weapons and shot her father and brother. From there on, the women of her family took on the responsibility of securing their own welfare and protection.

4.2.2 Women as perpetrators

Fascinating literature has been published on women as perpetrators in the Sri Lankan conflict, particularly regarding the *Vituthalai Pulikal Munani* –Women's Front of the Liberation Tigers – also known as the "Birds of Freedom", who allegedly constituted up to

[10] See Sri Lankan map in the Annex section.

30% of the LTTE. Interesting debates have been held discussing whether the female wing of the LTTE represented a form of women's emancipation, or if their inclusion was merely a propaganda strategy of the Tamil Tigers campaign (Bandarage, 2010; Jordani & Denov, 2007). The underlining statement of this debate is the shift questioning of the misleading binary of women-victims and men-perpetrators.

Women have actively participated in many international conflicts, in which their roles have been multidimensional and at some point contradictory. Their involvement has been subjected to the context, the structure of the armed groups, their age, their physical capacity and other variants. We can observe cases of women being "perpetrators, actors, porters, commanders, domestic servants, spies, bodyguards, human shields, and sex slaves (Veale & Stavrou, 2003; Fox, 2004; Zedalis, 2004, as cited by Bandarage, 2010)." In the case of Sri Lanka, LTTE female cadres were mostly very young women who came from low casts. They were renowned for being fearsome combatants trained at the same level of exigency as their male partners, who contributed significantly to crucial military operations such as ambushes and suicide bombings (Jordani & Denov, 2007; Keairns, 2002).

Interestingly, the Tamil Tigers developed a "suicide cult of martyrdom and immortality", under which they did not only encouraged their combatants to sacrifice their lives for their nation of Eelam, but urged Tamil mothers –including those unmarried –to hand in their children to the LTTE in name of their liberation struggle. According to Bandarage (2010) the LTTE allegedly created the suicide bomb belt and were known for regularly using women in their suicide bombing operations, as they often appear to be less suspicious than men. After their deaths they immediately became martyrs and their families received abundant monetary rewards. Women composed one third of the suicide unit of the LTTE, the famous "Black Tigers".

Female 'liberation', 'empowerment' and 'emancipation', became a distinguished element of the LTTE's public discourse, to which Ann Adele –also known as Adele Balasingham –greatly contributed. Mrs. Balasingham is the Australian-born wife of the now dead Anton Balasingham, who was the main political ideologists, strategist and negotiator of the LTTE. Adele developed a crucial role as the main trainer of the female cadres, she participated as a representative delegate of the LTTE in the peace talks held in 2002, and she has written interesting materials related to the Tamil resistant struggle and female emancipation. In her words:

> The emergence of the Liberation Tigers on the Tamil national political scene has provided Tamil women with opportunities and horizons that would never have entered the minds of Tamil women a decade ago. The very decision by young women to join the armed struggle – in most cases without the consent of parents – represents a vast departure of behavior for Tamil women. Normally, young women remain under the control of the father and brother…the decision to break-out of this cycle of suffocating [male] control is a refreshing expression and articulation of their new aspirations and independence (Ann, 2003:17-18).

Even though many girls joined the LTTE voluntarily, abductions also took place (Inbaraj, 2012). However, the cases of those who joined voluntarily are often overseen in reports of the war. A study conducted by Yvonne E. Keairns (2002) allows a remarkable insight to the experiences of girl soldiers from the Philippines, Colombia, Angola and Sri Lanka. For those girls who joined voluntarily, poverty, the movement's propaganda and sexual abuse and mistreatment at home, became strong incentives to join the armed group. In the majority of the cases, the girls expressed that they had learned valuable skills as combatants and that they had acquired a strong sense of identity. The cases of the Tamil girls differed from the others in one particular way. Their experiences contested the general assumption that "all girl soldiers are sexually abused". All of them–except for one of the interviewed girls in this study –

highlighted that sexual contacts and love affairs were considered a major offense within the LTTE, for which serious sanctions were applied. Their training was also particularly strict and demanding. Once they were prepared to go into battle, the girls received the famous cyanide capsule necklace, taken in extreme cases to avoid being captured or tortured by the enemy. This capsule became the trademark of the LTTE and acquired significance for the Tamil Tiger girls, one of them mentioned: "The day I was given the cyanide (capsule) I was very happy because no one would catch me alive - abuse or harass me" (Sri Lankan Child Soldier, as cited by Keairns, 2002:6). Today, many of these girls find themselves in extremely difficult situations caused by physical injuries, lack of education, trauma generated by violence, lack of safety needs or support services, and in some cases rejection from their own family members. All these conditions often limit their integration back in their communities (Inbaraj, 2012).

4.2.3 Women as peacemakers

Women's peace activism has been widely documented and women have shared and reproduced experiences across the world. According to Barry (2005:27), women from the Balkans and Sri Lanka have been for long involved in efforts of resistance by "running public workshops; organizing rallies; meetings; conferences and discussion groups; and researching and publishing literature on feminism and women's position in society […] also provided special services to support women who had survived violence or were imprisoned". Such activities have been influenced by other women's movements. She also considers that one of the assets brought by these women's mobilization is that their responses were grounded on the complex reality, in which at moments of crisis they "simply did what needed to be done to the best of their ability" without training or preparation (Barry, 2005:28&29).

Women's movements were not a new phenomenon in Sri Lanka during the war. Sri Lankan feminist and historian, Kumari Jayawardena, reconstructed women's political struggles from diverse

countries in her transcendental work, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, in which she questions the idea that feminist movements in these countries were merely a reproduction of western theories. She sustains that in spite of the influence that western paradigms might have had in women's activities "feminism had endogenous roots in third world countries" (Walby, 1992:84) and was often reflected throughout nationalist struggles. Prior to the country's independence from the British Empire, women were actively involved in anti-imperial demonstrations. In comparison to other South Asian countries, Sri Lankan women obtained socio-economic rights, such as voting, relatively early. Even after the independence struggle, they remained mobilized "[…] been amongst the harshest critics of the dominant nationalisms […]", to seek for equality in terms of citizenship (De Mel, 2001:21). The strategic mapping realized by Women and Media Collective of women's peace activism in Sri Lanka, demonstrates how most of the women civil organizations and movements initially struggled to fight other injustices –bad salaries, lack of maternity benefits, no protection for domestic violence, etc. –but once the war prompted, they also started demanding peace.

Diverse movements of mothers, on both sides of the enemy division, organized themselves to "protests arbitrary arrests, disappearances, abductions, and killings of their sons by Sri Lankan state forces, the LTTE, the IPKF[11], the JVP[12], and other armed groups"(Bandarage, 2010: 659). Women at the grassroots levels resorted to diverse

[11] The Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) intervened as a peacekeeping operation force in Sri Lanka between 1987 and 1990. Its role was very controversial as they ended up engaging militarily in the hostilities fighting the LTTE, who has accused the staff of the IPKF of gross human rights violation. For further information on the impact of their engagement, see the International Crisis Group Repory: International Crisis Group. (2006). Sri Lanka: The Failure of The Peace Process. (Asia Report N° 124).

[12] The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), in English the People's Liberation Front of Sri Lanka, is a communist Sri Lankan political party which has been engaged in political armed uprisings. For further information, see: http://www.jvpsrilanka.com/en/

strategies in the middle of the war to demand peace. Mothers of combatants were able to convince both, the Sri Lankan Army and the LTTE, to use identification tags in order to identify the bodies of their sons. Furthermore, the opportunity for women at the grassroots level to work together and to be included in the peace-building process was limited by challenges that they had to overcome. For example the lack of means to travel to the place where peace negotiations take place – which were often held in secret places due to political reasons –and the language barrier that limited women that could not speak the official language in which peace talks were discussed. Dharmadasa (Interview, 2012) argues that the importance of including women in the post-conflict reconstruction relies on the fact that men are often not aware of the specific needs that women have, therefore women's concerns fail to be addressed. Additionally she has stated that the inclusion of women opens a window of opportunity to address inequalities in a society and to increase women's participation in politics. (Lidauer, 2008).

Women also called for the help of religious leaders, which played a significant role as mediators between both parties. For instance, Catholic priests were usually respected by both belligerent sides and in several occasions they managed to convince the rebel groups to release abducted child soldiers and returned them to their families. Moreover, among the greatest achievements of the joint effort of diverse women NGOs, was to gather 70,000 signatures to suggest Norway's involvement as a mediator in the peace talks held in 2002 (Agustin, 2007). During the peace rounds, two women were involved as representatives of the LTTE delegation and the GOSL, Mrs. Adele Balasingham on behalf of the Tamil Tigers and Mrs. Kumari Jayawardena representing the Sinhalese faction. Their participation contributed to the creation of the Sub-committee on Gender Issues (SGI), which at the moment symbolized an accomplishment to address the needs of the war affected women (HIMAL, 2003).

4.3 Sri Lankan discourses on reconciliation: the 'victor', the 'vanquished'… and the 'woman'?

As mentioned during the introduction, reconciliation is the leading buzzword in the Sri Lankan headlines. So, what is being said about reconciliation and by whom? In what follows, I briefly review the discourses on reconciliation which are promoted by different groups in Sri Lanka. As it will become evident, women have not been considered as a primary concern in any of the mainstream political discourses, and their needs remain barely addressed. Throughout my research I have perceived a lack of sensitive appraisal of studies on reconciliation that are specifically focused on the Sri Lankan context. Therefore I will frequently recall some of the remarks made by Dhammika Herath, who is one of the few Sri Lankan authors who has extensively discussed reconciliation.

Herath (2010:59) conducted a research in the northern and eastern areas of Sri Lanka, as part of the International Center of Ethnic Studies (ICES) series of publications on reconciliation, to scrutinize the local understanding of the often evoked buzzword, from which he concluded that:

> […]as regards the local context, it seems, *social reconciliation is a process in which people may not always forget and forgive immediately but start to interact with ethnic other accepting each other's rights to exist and with the hope that they can gradually build trust, friendship and reciprocity, and consolidate linkages to guarantee future security* (Herath, 2010:61).

The results of his study deliberated stimulating results. According to his analysis, the starting point for the process of reconciliation in Sri Lankan is entrenched on its diverse ethnic groups –i.e. Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims –willingness to acknowledge all the ethnic communities' right to exist "where they presently are and wherever they want to be in Sri Lanka"(Herath, 2010:60). He observes though, that it is particularly important to conduct a research that examines

the willingness of the northern and eastern inhabitants of Sri Lanka to 'reconcile' with the 'ethnic other', as they have suffered extreme violence in a more direct way and they continue to live in the war affected areas. His research demonstrated a high level of disposition from the northeastern inhabitants to interact with the ethnic other. However, those who had been worst injured or had experienced the tragic loss of close family members, stated that they would be capable of intermingle with other ethnic groups without seeking for revenge, but they would not be able to forget or forgive. In any case, forgiveness will be very hard to conceive without first acknowledging that injustices, perpetrations and suffering were in fact experienced during the war.

The government of President Rajapaksa might not have created a truth commission, but it did establish the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) in May, 2010. After 18 months of investigation, the LLRC published the "Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation" on December 2011. The report represents a milestone step taken by the government as it does cover some relevant topics concerning post-conflict reconstruction, but it fails to address some of the most critical issues. Several international and local human rights organizations have accused the report of being *bias* and limited in terms of responsibility and accountability of the crimes against humanity and war crimes committed at the culminating phase of the war (Amnesty International [AI], 2011; ICG, 2011; EU, 2012). Issues which if fail to be addressed, might negatively affect the process of reconciliation (AI, 2011). Furthermore, out of the 407 pages of the LLRC report, only six short paragraphs are related to women. The paragraphs are limited to recognize the difficult conditions for women house-holds in the post-conflict reconstruction phase, but do not paint a tangible path for the implementation of a project which can tangibly improve their lives' conditions[13].

[13] For more detailed information see the paragraphs 9.86 to 9.92 from the LLRC. (2011). Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation. Available at:

The government's discourse on reconciliation has been noticeably disjointed from accountability, justice, let alone truth, as the main objective has been clearly stated since the end of the hostilities: the economic reconstruction of the northeast. The political campaign from President Rajapaksa, "An Auspicious Future" –in Sinhala *subaanagathayal* –circumscribes this message of 'economic prosperity' and the formation of a utopian state in which minorities will no longer exist (Wickramasinghe, 2012). Although the promotion of economic development could contribute to the rebuilding and maintenance of peace, it can also hinder other issues such as social reconciliation; in words of Uyangoda (2012:28) "[…] Sri Lankan Tamils live not only by roads, highways, bridges and harbors alone. They clamour for devolution and dignity too."

Jayadeva Uyangoda (2012) identifies two main political approaches in Sri Lanka, the 'victor's peace' and the 'peace of the vanquished'. They are deeply rooted in what he identifies as the "two solitudes" of post-war Sri Lanka: the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. The 'victor's peace' approach is sponsored by the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), whose leader if President Rajapaksa himself. Therefore, tone can observe the government's lean towards this wing. This approach drives the attention towards economic integration and strengthening of the state by reinforcing national security. Their understanding of the war is based on the assumption that the conflict in Sri Lanka was "a terrorist problem and a security challenge to the sovereignty of the state [rather] than a political problem arising out of minority grievances" (Uyangoda, 2012:23). This explains the militarization of the north and the lack of attention drawn to the demands of the minorities. This attitude is intrinsically rooted in a Sinhalese nationalist framing; the Sinhalese dream of one nation, one language, one religion. It is under this Sinhalese military triumph that the government has obtained its 'veto power' on deciding how reconciliation will be achieved, as stated by Father

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http://www.defence.lk/warcrimes/lessons_learnt_and_reconciliation_commission_final_report.html

Praveen, who has for long worked with Tamil victims of war, "Reconciliation is dictated by Colombo" (Interview Praveen, 2012).

The alternative and less successful via is the one promoted by the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the 'peace of the vanquished', the story of the 'defeated' and the 'victim' (Uyugonda, 2012). The TNA's main concern is to address the roots of the ethnic conflict in order to prevent future violent eruptions. They argue that the majestic reconstruction of the northeast infrastructure fails to include the Tamil's community needs. Nevertheless, they considered that the military defeat "[…] has not obliterated the Tamil community's political aspirations for power-sharing in an advanced form of devolution", reason for which a political solution is still viable in which dignity can be returned to the Tamil population. Nevertheless, in of spite the fact that the TNA has managed to maintain a solid political presence it has not being able to uphold a strong bargaining position. It has obtained a very low response from the government. Furthermore, it is still perceived by the UPFA, as a demand of secession.

5. Analysis

5.1 Women between the kitchen and the battlefield

> In a way, revolution, war, right's rebellions, anything, women come forward and that fosters much more equality. They are given a lot of freedom, space and recognition, sometimes they are armed, they fight, they get guns and so on […] After the war though, what happens is that they are pushed back into their homes, and get married, have babies and all that. (Interview Kumari Jayawardena, 2012).

As previously discussed, women in Sri Lanka developed diverse roles throughout the war which have become determinant to the position they uphold in society nowadays. All of the interviewees coincide with the idea that women and men have been affected by the war in different ways and that this has been projected in the change of gender roles. This difference influences the extent in which women and men are included in the post-conflict reconstruction project of Sri Lanka. Furthermore, all of the participants agreed that the northern and eastern population was the most affected one from the country, as they were the direct inhabitants of the war zone. But, women from the south also lost family members, mostly husbands, sons or brothers from the military service and expressed that they lived in constant fear of a terrorist LTTE attack. Two of the interviewees, Prof. Neloufer de Mel and Kumari Jayawardena identified two interesting phenomena on regards of women's emancipation as a consequence of their encounter with war and in response to nationalist discourses of war. First of all, young women, mostly Tamil, had a tremendous transformation which shifted them away from traditional roles. On the other hand, there were women who decided to "stay behind, and became even more conventional because of nationalism. You had a regression on views of what is the woman's primary role" (Interview Neloufer de Mel, 2012). I will begin by analyzing the first phenomenon: women leaving their traditional roles behind. According to my research, this transformation enhanced from

women's mechanisms of survival during war times and their coping strategies to deal with the pain of their lost relatives. I will use a couple of examples to clarify this statement.

Seetha Kumari evokes the strategies from her Sinhalese family to survive at the center of a majoritarian Tamil village in Ampara, during the heights of the war. A group of fifteen Sinhalese families took turns to protect each other; they had each received a gun by the Sinhalese police for their protection. They would move every night to a different home. Men would go on patrol around the village, while women would stay home and remain awake to look after their sleeping children. "We would not light candles, we would only remain in silence in the dark, we [women] were helping each other" (Interview Kumari, 2012). She mentioned that Tamil women would do the same, but they would not help each other. After the bitter experienced lived by her family (mentioned in the description section) Seetha ended up working for Sewalanka, a development organization, as it was one of the few options of employment for a woman. In Sewalanka she got to know women from different backgrounds, such as Tamil and Muslim, who were also affected by the war. Listening to others' experiences made her realized that her family was not the only one who suffered. "It's not fair to actually keep the hate, if we all got through the same things" (Interview Kumari, 2012). That opportunity led her to her actual job at AWAW. Due to her profession, she has learned about other women's coping mechanisms during the war. For instance, she explained me that a common practice for young Tamil girls was to get married at a very young age and to get pregnant as soon as possible. In this way they could prevent being recruited by the LTTE. Although her family and her community has question Seetha's work with Tamil people – because in their eyes all Tamils are supporters of the LTTE, therefore the assassins of her father and brother –she struggles today to demonstrate to her mother that Tamils are as human as they are.

In 2005, one thousand women from diverse parts of the world were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, which lead to the creation of

the global network "Peace Women Across the Globe"[14]. That year eleven Sri Lankan women were nominated, from which I was able to interview four: Dulcy de Silva, Visaka Dharmadasa, Kumari Jayawardena and Radhika Coomaraswamy.

Visaka's experience, is another story of transformation such as Seetha's one, which illustrates women's reactions during the war. Prior to 1998, she had enjoyed a relatively peaceful life in the city of Kandy, until the day that her life changed radically.

> September, 27th, 1998, is the day the war came to my doorstep. I received the news that my second son, an officer in the Sri Lankan Army, was missing in action from the battlefield. From that day on I have never looked back. I wanted to see an end to the armed conflict that engulfed my country. (Interview Dharmadasa, 2012; Hernández, 2012).

Inspired by the Argentinean "Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo[15]", Visaka Dharmadasa and Dulcy de Silva travelled together with other four women to enemy territory in search for their sons, members of the Sri Lankan Army, who had been lost in combat. Dulcy shared with me how she tried to encourage other women to join their search by telling them "You are doing this for your country, for your children, for your children's future" (Interview de Silva, 2012). They both narrated during our dialogues that going to the Tamil north for the first time in the middle of the war, was an eye opening experience. Dressed in their indistinguishable Kandyan *sarees* –the emblem of their Sinhalese identity –they described how their willingness to find their children undermined their fear. They both admitted that they had been treated with the upmost respect by the

[14] For further information on this regard, see Women Across the Globe http://www.1000peacewomen.org/eng/friedensfrauen.php

[15] Originally called "Madres de la Plaza de Mayo" in Spanish, this is an association of mother from Argentina whose children had disappeared during the Dirty War under the military that took place from 1976 to 1983 in Argentina.

LTTE leaders, "because we were mothers and that particular encounter with this person called Murti, who was a local leader, really paved the way for us to work with them to break the ceasefire" (Interview Dharmadasa, 2012). This experience made them sensitive to the reality of the Tamil people, particularly mothers, wives and daughters, who had also suffered the loss of beloved ones during the conflict.

In her work, Ross (2003:70) mentions how women's political agency was only recognized by the TRC, when this one took place within the scope of traditional roles. Under her perception, women's mobilization, based on the use of conventional roles, took place during severe circumstances of war in which solidarity became a form of resistance and an "ontological security and political commitment in a context marked by danger." The case of the Mother and Daughters of Lanka and the Association of War Affected Women, endorses this observation. In response to the feminist criticism to this sort of mobilization (because they considered that they do not challenge patriarchal structures), Dharmadasa argues that stereotypical conceptions of women play an important role in conflict transformation due to the authority that these roles gave them in both ethnic sides of the conflict. Based on her experience, women can join forces across the enemy line because they can relate to each other's experiences lived through these roles.

Furthermore, I recognized Ross's observation in relation to the power and significance of those nostalgic moments in which women temporarily leave aside their ideological differences to work aside one another. The Sri Lankan women engaged in the peace process of 2002 whom I interviewed, expressed a sentiment of nostalgia when recalling their years of activism. Radhika Coomaraswamy (Interview, 2012) clearly remembers her participation in the Women for Peace Movement during the 80s and 90s:

> […] we were very much closed, and Kumari's [Jayawardena] leaving room is where we would meet. We would all gather there, whenever there was an issue or at any

> other time, we would all gather in her leaving room and work and talk. It was very important, and people, women would come, very strong activists. But now, that has disappeared.

Kumari Jayawardena herself recalls the achievements that originated from those meetings. After years of struggle, with the support of the Norwegian representatives in the peace process, women got the attention of the government and established the Gender Subcommittee. The idea was for all Sri Lankan women, Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim, to be able to work on common gender issues that would be discussed in a monthly basis. She flew up by helicopter to Kilinochchi and met the Tamil women representatives. Unfortunately a few weeks later the war prompted once again nothing concrete was achieved. Sinhalese and Tamil women lost contact during the years, and today only few joint efforts of peace and reconstruction remain.

During this encounter, Jayawardena made a remarkable observation. She explained me how at a first glance LTTE female representative seemed impressively emancipated, riding jeeps and carrying weapons. Moreover she soon noticed how they remained subjected to the commandment of their male leaders when important decisions were to be taken. "In the north, the women were part of a political group, so they could only do what their leaders allowed […] many times during the discussions they would get on the phone with the leaders to confirm what they would say" (Interview Jayawardena, 2012). This observation takes me to evoke Rajasingham-Senanayake's (2001:128) article, *Ambivalent Empowerment: The Tragedy of Tamil Women in Conflict*, in which she suggests that Tamil women were unintentionally empowered throughout a radicalized response to the LTTE's ethno-nationalist discourse. Her main argument is that female combatants that integrate movements of nationalist struggle, such as the LTTE, Palestinian or Irish groups "are imbricated in ultraconservative 'nationalist constructions of women' and tend to subordinate their gender identities to the nationalist cause." With this statement I do not wish to undermine

the emancipation achievements by Tamil women, particularly combatants; however, I do wish to illustrate how this emancipation is only one form of reaction to a nationalist discourse. The participation of women in peace movements as well as in armies, are both forms of coming forward as more emancipated and free women, as a form of response to nationalist discourses of war.

Once the conflict ended though, Rajasingham-Senananayake (2001:106-107) observed the following: "Hence, often a return to peace is indexed in the return to the traditional gender status-quo – and even women revolutionaries are pushed back into the kitchen". In Sri Lanka a phenomenon of regression for women has been clearly heightened in the post-war era. According to a study on masculinity, which Prof. de Mel conducted in four districts of Sri Lanka to a sample of 600 women, she observed a high percentage of women reporting that their roles were to take care of their houses and children. Moreover, they stated that a woman deserves to be beaten if that helps to maintain the family's cohesion. She concluded that these "aggressive stand points" have originated from a process of nationalism. "There has been a going back for women, into more domesticated spaces, and what is a good women, the nation of the good women, the patriotic women, that also has its influence" (Interview de Mel, 2012).

5.3 Reconciliation through war affected women's eyes

> Listening is a practice, an art, similar to that of reading or speaking. It is not passive but interactive, involving soliciting, questioning, and weighing competing accounts, as well as hearing. Listening can be learned and cultivated, and some individuals are far better at it than others. I am suggesting here that we rethink the very practice of listening—both what should be listened for, and who might be the best practitioners of listening after violent events. (Borneman, 2002:293).

In spite of the utilization of the buzzword 'reconciliation' for different purposes in the process of reconstruction, one should not disregard thoughts on what reconciliation *signifies* for people; particularly the thoughts of those have historically been overlooked in reconstruction projects, such as women. In this section I do not intend to *give voice* to the oppressed Sri Lankan women that have been *silent* in the reconciliation process. First of all, because they have not been silent, they have been amongst the most vigorous agents of peace, and those who have not been *heard* does not mean that have not been active at other spheres, for instance in the domestic domain. Secondly, I do not wish to do so, because nothing authorizes *me* as the spokeswoman of women's concerns. Nevertheless, I do wish to portray in this section the interviewees' personal understandings of reconciliation, because I consider that it is this understanding, and the way in which they perceive themselves throughout the process of reconciliation, what will determine the scope of their work and input in the construction and maintenance of peace.

In the course of the interviews, women expressed what reconciliation means for them, and they also gave their opinion regarding the current government's efforts to promote reconciliation I identified three main tendencies. First, definitions given by Tamil women –regardless from their geographical location –were inclined to associate reconciliation with concepts of 'truth' and 'justice', while those given by Sinhalese women, recalled a desired to 'return' to what Sri Lanka used to be before the conflict. Secondly, there was a clear consensus between the interviewees to call for a political solution, social accommodation and power sharing. This standing point resembles the discourse of 'the vanquished' endorsed by the Tamil political faction. The third tendency –clearly link with the previous one –was a strong dissatisfaction with the current efforts made by the administration of President Rajapaksa's to promote post-conflict reconciliation. Herein, I will explore these findings.

What is your understanding of the word reconciliation? Women had diversely and in interesting reactions. Some of them gave fairly solid

definitions and even concrete steps to promote it, while others tended to projected their opinion on reconciliation as if they were sharing an intangible, but desirable dream. I will begin with the Sinhalese women's' responses which resonate a melancholy of the past. In different degrees, most Sinhalese women expressed how they yearn a Sri Lanka which used to be peaceful. Regardless of who they consider to be the instigators of the war, they regret the way in which violence escalated to such extend. Seetha and Visaka, who both consider themselves 'village girls', remember how in their communities they used to attend school with Tamil and Muslim girls as well, and that there was a high level of interaction between the diverse ethnic communities on a daily basis without hearted. The rest of the Sinhalese interviewees agreed on the belief that hate and violence came from wrong political decisions, rather than from ethnic differences between the people. One can observe this sense of yearning the past through Visaka's wish for a reconcile Sri Lanka:

> For me, reconciliation in Sri Lanka it's a dream. Until such time that each and every one feels that you know that they can reconcile really fully from their hearts. I believe we can bring back the golden era of this country where the Sri Lankan women adorned with jewels were able to travel alone from northern to the Southern tip securely. (Interview Dharmadasa, 2012).

In a different direction, Tamil women articulated the word reconciliation as a challenging process that has yet to come. Amongst these personal descriptions, Lalitha's response circumscribes very well the perceptions of the Tamil participants. Lalitha is a Tamil peace activist that works in Caritas Jaffna and she decided to get involved in the construction of peace after her family was shot in front of her eyes during the war. Interestingly, she was initially one of the most reluctant women to open and share her experience with me, but it turned out to be one of the most revealing and fervent interviews I conducted. In her opinion, when it comes to reconciliation:

> The important thing is justice, justice first. Reconciliation is possible, we are always for peace. The tragedy, the tragic part of it, is that *they* [Sinhalese faction] got reconciliation, *we* are being taught about what reconciliation is. They are telling us after all. For reconciliation the first thing, I would say, is that they should remove the armed forces from here, they should not interfere in every detail of people's life. They own our land. They should allow us to have freedom of speech, freedom of worship. (Interview Lalitha & Father Praveen, 2012).

A radicalized section of the Tamil population initiated a national liberation struggle, because they considered themselves an oppressed minority. Therefore, one can subtract that for Tamil women, the times before war were perhaps not as 'golden' as in the memories of Sinhalese women. Furthermore, during my visits to the northern post-conflict areas, this belief that reconciliation is being *dictated* by Colombo became as tangible as it could be. The second time I went up north I went without the company of AWAW's staff, therefore my colleagues advised me to be careful. The soldiers were not fascinated by the purpose of my visit, but were also not bothered. As soon as I pronounced that my research was related to women, I became a lesser threat to national security. As mentioned by Kumari Jayawardena (2012) "[…] there is no control over talking about women. You know gender is regarded as starting a swing club for women, so asked about women, nobody cares." What was uncomfortable for the military on regards of my visit was the topic of *reconciliation,* as most projects related to it are controlled or at least authorized by the government. Father Praveen shared an interesting story related to President Rajapaksa's reconciliation project. An organization, whose name they ignore, came on behalf of the government to collect five Tamil girls in Jaffna. They made all arrangements for them to meet the President, during which they took pictures with him. After the gathering the girls remain to ignore the purpose of their journey. Once they arrived back to their villages, the media had shown those pictures explaining that the girls were ex-cadres of the LTTE and had met the president for purposes of

reconciliation, while the girls had never joined the Tiger's struggle. "It's a lie…this is a lie. The actual use of the media is not positive for the promotion of reconciliation, real reconciliation in Sri Lanka" (Interview Lalitha & Father Praveen, 2012).

Moreover, there are two main points of consensus between the participants. All women considered that a political negotiation is the basis of the country's reconstruction and the path towards a sustainable peace. Additionally they altogether are of the opinion that President Rajapaksa's current efforts to reconcile the divided ethnic communities are not successful; on the contrary, some consider that these reinforce the differences and hate. One example of these governmental practices in the name of reconciliation are the tourist trips organized by the military to the now "open" northeast of Sri Lanka, for those southern –mostly Sinhalese –who were never able to visit the region before because of the risks of the war. In these tours "[…] the armed forces show that they are victorious by killing the terrorists" (Interview Lalitha & Father Praveen, 2012). More than in one occasion I was invited by military officers –who you can easily chat with in the trains across Sri Lanka –to visit the places in which the LTTE suicidal bombers were trained and took their last dinners before the mission. The irony of these tours is that the visitors do not even get to eat the traditional food of the region, visit traditional Hindu temples because much have been destroyed to create military camps, nor interrelate with the local population. Interaction with the locals is avoided as much as possible. The visit I made to Jaffna was the only time in which we hired a driver in Sri Lanka, for purposes of the language barrier, security and mobilization. In spite of requesting an English and Tamil-speaking driver, a series of change of plan led us to hit the road with the proudly Sinhalese, Mr. Ruwan. As soon as we crossed the checkpoint of Vavuniya, Mr. Ruwan's chatty humor turned into a tense silence. "Is there something wrong Mr. Ruwan?" I asked, to what he responded "We just entered terrorist land, here is not good." During our stay in Jaffna, Mr. Ruwan tried no Tamil dish and crossed no word with someone who was not Sinhalese.

Women's lack of support to this sort of initiative is not startling, however it is their fervent demand for a political solution suggests an interesting feature. Coomaraswamy (Interview, 2012) identified diverse dimension which the process of reconciliation implies. One is at a political sphere in which the Tamil community must seek a way to acquire a sort of political arrangement. The second would be the level of social reconciliation between the different communities, which can be endorsed for instance throughout grassroots efforts. Most of the women I spoke with are engage somehow on community scale projects that seek to promote dialogues between different ethnic groups. Nevertheless they consider that without a political negotiation and a deep examination of the roots causes of the conflict, these efforts will remain obscured or limited. Regardless of their ethnic background, women considered that there is a need for "accommodation, a combination of all the communities throughout respect […] therefore, negotiation" (Interview with Coomaraswamy, 2012).

Interestingly, this call for a political solution bears a clear resemblance with the discourse sustained by the Tamil National Alliance, in other words, the 'peace of the vanquished'. The TNA finds itself in a similar situation than women's groups in the sense that they have not been able to keep a strong bargaining position in the political sphere to push their demands forward. With this statement I do not argue that women activist support the demands or ideology of the TNA in particular. I suggest that there is a clear underlining statement which links both of them: a discourse of resistance against a repressive state. In words of Manchanda (2001:17): "A feminist peace politics thus connects with the struggle against racial, ethnic and class oppression." Jayawardena does not vacillate in making this connection when she expressed:

> Well, it is possible [a peaceful Sri Lanka], but I dream that all these other structures which are oppressive to women diminished. Specially casts determination, then poverty and class, this kind of divisions, and patriarchy, that unless you solve all that then you are just patching up a bit and things

> are going to go back to how they used to be before the war, some semi-feudal society. You know the general attitude and culture towards women hasn't change. The idea is she should be a mother and stay at home, that's hegemonic in the sense that everybody believes it. (Interview Kumari Jayawardena, 2012).

5.3 Sri Lankan women and NGOs: future challenges

Even though the two predominant political discourses do not seem to take women's demands into consideration, they have developed their own discourse on reconciliation. In this section I will analyze the discourse sustained by the women whom I interviewed and how they perceive themselves through the reconciliation process. This discourse is often revealed throughout the work realized by Non-Governmental Organizations, which they support. The importance of such analysis comes from the necessity to reflect on how this discourse and perception influences and challenges their scope of work on reconciliation, particularly at the grassroots levels.

In Sri Lanka, to talk about women and reconciliation, or in a broader sense, to talk about women, conflict and peace in an NGO environment, it is inevitable to evoke the United Nations Security (UNSC) Resolution 1325. This document has become the strongest tie which connects different Sri Lankan women organizations. The resolution became a breakthrough in the history of women that live in a context of armed conflict. The signature of UNSCR 1325 arose in an international scenario in which the perception on sovereignty and non-intervention took a direction towards a 'human security' approach which allowed the discussion of women's needs at a high diplomatic level (Torunn, 2009). In 2000, the resolution passed unanimously, aiming to "[…] adopt a gender perspective that included the special needs of women and girls during repatriation and resettlement, rehabilitation, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction" (United Nations [UN], 2000:p.1).

Most women I worked with in Sri Lanka argued that this resolution was particularly valuable because the initiative came directly from non-western women civil organizations who understood the reality of living and dealing with war. The delegations of Namibia and Bangladesh were the ones that took the baton at the Security Council to introduce the draft resolution, pressured by the demands of their national women NGOs. Therefore, the approval of 1325 signified a 'victory' –after years of female struggle –to 'voice' women's particular needs in conflict and post-conflict societies. The NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security was organized by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), who participated in the drafting and provided state members information regarding women's issues (Torunn, 2009).

According to the *Women's Manifesto* (2010:5) –publication that resulted from the joint effort of Sri Lankan women's organizations, researchers and scholars –women have been "invariably excluded from decision-making processes in relation to peacebuilding"[16]. Based on this perception, they urge a gender approach in the process of reconstruction, as advised by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, in order to:

> […] support and develop local capacities of women and men, while working to transform structures of power previously dominated by violence and militarization into ones that promote a just and sustainable peace protective the rights of all people irrespective of ethnic, gender, class or religious identities (Women's Manifesto, 2010:4).

Specifically on reconciliation, most women organizations considered that the protection and promotion of human rights are crucial. Therefore they call for the investigation and prosecution of human rights abuses committed by the SLA and the LTTE. Most importantly, they point out the urgent need to address the root causes

[16] A copy of the Women's Manifesto is available at the Social Scientists Association, on request at http://www.ssalanka.org/contact.htm#

of the conflict and the "long-standing grievances of the minorities" (Women's Manifesto, 2010:5).

While working at AWAW I was initially reluctant to believe that such a top-down resolution could have a genuine impact to address of women's needs, particularly the needs of women at the grassroots. Further on, I comprehended that the importance of this resolution relied more on the *significance* that it represents for the women in Sri Lanka who have struggled to achieve peace for so long, rather than on its implementation. Resolution 1325 became the foundation of their work and the underlining statement of their discourse. Far beyond being a legal and political framework, UNSCR 1325 has become the armor and spade for the women in Sri Lanka to legitimize their work in the field. An interesting sub-culture has emerged from it. I would often hear about meetings of 'team 1325', a group of Sri Lankan women from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, who for a variety of reasons believe women's particular needs in conflicts are worth fighting for.

There are three important statements that come to surface when analyzing this 1325 discourse. First, women believe that they can contribute in different ways than men to the process of reconciliation. Secondly, women consider themselves amongst the most affected population from the armed conflict, therefore the 'greatest victims of war'. And third, they consider that a model of reconciliation should be created on human rights paradigms. I will discuss now these statements from an anthropological spectrum.

From all the interviews conducted, only one person was of the opinion that women cannot contribute differently than men in the process of reconciliation. Prof. Neloufer de Mel considers that the inclusion of women in the decision-making process is determinant and that the absence of women's participation in politics is alarming. However she does not believe that women have an inherent natural tendency towards peace, or that they are intrinsically calmer. The rest of the women I spoke with, consider that women *do* have a different input in reconciliation "because they see further" or "know

how to deal with things differently". Furthermore, they consider that these conventional roles that women represent –i.e. as mother, wives, widows, daughters. –are determinant for their mobilization and are the basis to identify themselves with other women who have similar experiences, for instance losing their children in the war. Based on the analysis made by Fiona Ross, I consider that this argument defended by war affected women in Sri Lanka should be carefully revised, as it can misleadingly limit their own capacities, or it can end up strengthening patriarchal structures which have historically oppress them. War affected women must be careful to not reinforce the prototypes of the right kind of women, "which would mean to remain in the domestic arena" (Ross, 2003:65), particularly in this post-conflict era in which a regression in terms of emancipation is so evident. The risk of having these ideals reinforced represent a threat to their own activism and an even worse threat to other equally valid forms of female activism which are not circumscribed within conventional paradigms of womanhood. For instance, initiatives coming from single women who decide not to get married. As Ross mentioned in her work, "Although motherhood was important in mobilizing women, it would be misleading to suggest that political consciousness was derived solely from children's protest activities." (Ross, 2003: 148)

The other aspect which should be reflected is their perception of being 'the greatest victims of war'. De Mel (Interview, 2012) mentioned that although women victims of war can greatly contribute to the process of reconciliation due to their personal experiences, it would be unfair to ask them to become agents. Although for some, this might be a coping mechanism that works to deal with the pains of war, for example in the case of Visaka, it is not a strategy for all of them as some women are steal coping with what happened to them and remain traumatized. Furthermore, women must be careful enough to not get trapped in the 'spectacle of the victim', in which sharing their painful experiences goes no further than the normalization of violence and a strategy of emotional catharsis. NGOs of women which implement projects on

reconciliation must bear in mind the implications that encouraging victims of war to dialogue can entail, for instance reinforcing trauma.

Women's support for a human rights approach must be cautiously endorsed, particularly when it comes to the classification of human rights violations. Based on the experiences of other post-conflict societies and particularly on the experience of South Africa's TRC, the use of human rights methodologies –such as Infocomm –to document cases of human rights violations, and the employment of a positivist approach, can have the negative impact of homogenizing valuable local realities and experiences. This process of homogenization and conception of "victimhood […] built on universalizing human rights discourses [can] overly individualize the origins of violence" (Humphrey, 2003:185) and even further, it can increasingly obscure other "hidden" discourses that take place at different spheres, which are also "powerful forms of knowledge and agency that need to be recognized and sensitively understood" (Ross, 2002:42).

6. Conclusion

The increased attention given to post-conflict reconciliation should not undermine the fact that substantial aspects remain to be revised. Anthropologist have critically studied cases of national reconciliation and they have been amongst the most fiercely critics of the impact that reconciliation models and discourses have on the most affected people at the local levels. Nevertheless, there is a limited amount of anthropological studies on reconciliation, specifically when it comes to Asia, let alone on Sri Lanka. The most influential anthropological researches continue to be related to African, Latin American and Eastern European post-conflict societies, and have been predominantly grounded on the South African model of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Although these analyses are a great contribution to the way in which reconciliation models and discourses are examined, this geographically narrow focus has also limited potential findings that could enhanced from the study of different post-conflict situations. I share Borneman's opinion that anthropologist can bring an interesting and valuable asset to reconciliation, because as he mentions, they are "professional third parties that could be trained to listen, specifically for departures from violence" (Borneman, 2002:300).

The main anthropological concerns on regards to reconciliation are: the morality entailed by the nationalistic discourses that promote it; the positivist approach of the methodologies employed to catalogue case of human rights violations; the organic prototypes used to understand this process; the use of reconciliation discourses through the 'spectacle of the victim' as a strategy of state legitimization; and the way in which reconciliation mechanisms can become simplistic models that homogenize local realities and complexities of conflict. Additionally, as highlighted by Fiona Ross, reconciliation mechanisms can become instruments that overlook the agency of some segments of the society taking place outside of the mainstream political arena. In this case I specifically refer to the active participation of war affected women in the construction of peace and

in the promotion of reconciliation. In spite of their efforts to influence in a larger way to the decision making process during Sri Lanka's period of reconstruction, their demands remain mostly unconsidered. Throughout the realization of this thesis, I have come to the conclusion that in societies departing from violence, there is a strong link between political dynamics and women's levels of emancipation or oppression, which determine the scope of their input and their access in the reconciliation processes. For this reason it is of upmost importance to examine the political events and transformations.

When it comes to analyze reconciliation in Sri Lanka, I observed two predominant assumptions that often come to surface within reconciliation literature which do not apply to this case. One is the supposition that "a negotiated settlement to a violent conflict" has taken place, and the other one is that a "new regime [is] struggling to construct a new society" (Bloomfield &Huyse, 2003:12). Furthermore there is a shared hypothesis, mainly within social, political and legal literature, that the new regimes that come to replace the previous administrations are 'democratic' or at least aspire to establish democratic institutions (Mathews, 2002; Minow, 1998 as cited by Weitekamp, Parmentier, Vanspauwen, Valiñas & Gerits, 2006). In spite of the several efforts to establish a Cease Fire Agreement and the various peace negotiations attempts, the Sri Lankan ethnic war ended with a brutal military launch by the Sri Lankan army. This war finale challenges today the establishment of a political negotiation which allows the creation of a comprehensive model of reconciliation that considers the grievances of those mostly affected by war, among them war affected women. In this case the 'victor' of the war continues to be the previous political administration, which has no intention to genuinely *reconcile* the different communities that constitute the country. The publication of the report from the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission, it's a clear understatement from the Sri Lankan government of its unwillingness to neither examine the deep root causes of the armed conflict, nor to acknowledge the abuses committed by the army. Regardless of the demands of those affected by war to know *what*

happened, particularly during the last stages of the conflict, it is very unlikely that a truth commission will be created, at least for now. The almost complete elimination of the Tamil Tiger's leadership makes it very unrealistic to consider that the government of President Rajapksa will be willing to allow independent investigations related to the violations committed by the Sri Lankan Armed Forces that can open a window of vulnerability that can destabilize his regime (Herath, 2010). For this reason, the government of Rajapaksa has been clever enough to shift the focus towards his majestic post-conflict reconstruction project of the Tamil north through the use of a nationalistic reconciliation discourse that legitimizes his administration. While being in Sri Lanka one can often hear amongst its population, the echo of a hegemonic opinion of those who "are not with the president", but will always be thankful for what he is doing: "rebuilding the nation". Therefore it is not surprising that the two leading political discourses are divided between the Sinhalese 'victor' and the Tamil 'vanquished'. These two political imaginations have antagonized each other on the basis of ethno-nationalistic ideologies, in what Uyangoda refers to the triumph of ethnicity and the failure of democracy in Sri Lanka (Uyangoda, 2012:21). These "two solitudes" remain divided in the reconstruction debate, particularly when it comes to social reconciliation, even worst, their inability to dialogue persists (Rambukella, 2012).

How does this political scenario affect the situation of women? It influences their condition in several ways. Women respond differently to nationalistic or ethno-nationalistic discourses which are reinforce during war, and as in this case, even more accentuated in the aftermath. Two polarized phenomena can be distinguished in the case of Sri Lankan women. Some of them 'stepped forward' out of their conventional roles to either join the armed groups as combatants or to campaign for peace. Interestingly though, those who decided to engage in the promotion of peace, often mobilized under the schemes of traditional ideals of womanhood, for instance as the 'grieving mothers'. The other opposite reaction was that of women who 'stepped back' and circumscribed even more in their traditional roles. The latter has been intensified in the post-conflict

era. Women have move into even more domesticated spheres, grounded on what Professor Neloufer de Mel (Interview, 2012) identifies as the ideals of "[…] a good women, the nation of the good women, the patriotic women." Therefore, I can also recall in this conclusion the suggestion made by Rajasingham-Senanayake (2001:128) on regards of the Sri Lankan war which she considers has "opened up new spaces for women's agency and leadership within changing family and community structures, even as it has destroyed others, and placed a double burden on many". This thesis was particularly focused on the experiences of those Sri Lankan women, Tamil and Sinhalese, who were affected by the ethnic war, but who have also been engaged in some sort of peace activism, which for some of them this was a coping mechanism to deal with the pains of war. The women interviewed for this investigation came from different sections of the country and had diverse experiences of war and peace mobilization. The mains results of the interviews, fieldwork and study conducted in Sri Lanka in relation to my research question are enlisted in the following paragraph.

When talking about their personal perceptions on the meaning of 'reconciliation', there was an interesting contrast between the answers given by Tamil and Sinhalese women. Independently from their geographical location, the majority of Sinhalese women spoke about reconciliation in a melancholic tone, interpreting it as a dream in which they could go back to the past; the golden era of Sri Lanka in which all minorities lived in peace. Oppositely, Tamil women had a more frontward perception. They tended to acknowledge war as a disastrous event which will not be repeated unless 'truth', 'justice' and 'forgiveness' are achieved. This contrast is not surprising, considering the oppression experienced by the Tamil ethnic minority before to the war; one can recognize that Tamil women will understandably not want to go back to what *used to be*. Furthermore, there were also common findings between the responses of women when it came to the currents projects endorsed by the Sri Lankan government to promote reconciliation. All of them agreed that the governmental efforts are not sufficient, and some even argue that instead of improving the relation between the diverse ethnic groups,

the lack of a social and sensitive approach of President Rajapaksa's reconstruction plan, is worsening the tension between them. Moreover, there is an interesting resemblance between the participants' opinion–regardless of their ethnic background –with the 'vanquished' discourse from the Tamil faction which calls for a political solution and a revision of the root causes of the war. This connection should not be interpreted as an overall women's support to the grievances of the Tamil people, but as the underlining statement of resistance against a repressive regime, on behalf of the oppressed sectors of the Sri Lankan society.

The discourse on reconciliation sustained by activist war affected women is often portrayed throughout their mobilization and engagement in Non-Governmental Organizations. On this regard, I have come to the conclusion that as valuable as it is for women to circumscribe in their conventional roles as an armor of social mobilization, their discourse has not challenged the patriarchal system which continues to limit the scope of their work. Furthermore, their call for a human rights approach must be carefully carried out to avoid the homogenization of the experiences of all war affected women, and in order to not become the leading actor of the so called 'spectacle of the victim'. In this sense, I agree with Fiona Ross that there remains an urgent need of a "new language of social suffering, one that permits the expression of the full range of experience, admits the integrity of silence, recognizes the fragmented and unfinished nature of social recovery, and does not presume closure" (Ross, 2003:163). For this reason, I consider that if war affected women wish to have a greater impact in the reconciliation process of post-conflict Sri Lanka's, in a way in which their needs and demands are better understood and considered, it is of upmost importance to critically revise the moral weight that their own portrayal as victims of war entails. Without aiming to undermine their suffering, their discourse on reconciliation should be reexamined to avoid a moral narrative that leads to an undesirable deformation of justice, or even worst, to the endorsement of a project of state morality, nor to the legitimization of a repressive state against whom they have fought for centuries. I am from the opinion

that the war affected women in Sri Lanka, *can* and *should* find a way to push their demands forward throughout the process of post-conflict reconciliation. Not because they are more peaceful, not because they should do it for their children, their husbands or their nations, but for themselves. To honor the achievements they have demonstrated in their historical struggle against ethnic, class, racial and gender oppressions.

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Annex

Map 1
Map of Sri Lanka

Source: International Crisis Group. 2012a). Sri Lanka's North I: The Denial of Minority Rights. *International Crisis Group* (Asia Report N°219).