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## **War widows in the North of Sri Lanka: Social Support, Health Problems and Economic Vulnerability in Times of Peace**

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### **Abstract**

Based on eight in-depth individual interviews with war widows in the conflict-affected region of Sri Lanka in 2013, the paper analyses the challenges faced by one of the most vulnerable groups in the country's post-conflict society. With many having to cope with trauma, family commitments and significant economic vulnerabilities, the study finds that war widows in the North face enormous challenges to improving their quality of life. Their ability to engage in regular self-employment to sustain their families is low, and they would face further economic difficulties if not supported. Coping mechanisms have mainly been based on family and friends providing moral support, but given the overall poor conditions of the region, external economic and psychological support is essential. With a high likelihood that the children of these war widows will face very difficult times ahead, supporting these widows with economic and psychological assistance would not only bring hope and strength to them, but would also help to sustain peace in the country.

**Key words:** War widows, Sri Lanka, Trauma, Self-employment, Social Capital

### **Introduction**

With the end of the three-decade conflict in Sri Lanka in May 2009, a sizeable portion of the population in the previously conflict-affected region remains vulnerable to the newly emerged socio-economic environment. Young war widows arguably face the greatest difficulties amongst the general population of the conflict-affected region given the loss of their husbands due to war-related circumstances, potential social vulnerabilities and high economic burdens. Sri Lanka's three-decade conflict was one of the bloodiest in Asia. The LTTE had evolved over the years to become one of the deadliest rebel groups in the world, and by the end of the war, the government forces had the largest armed forces per population in Asia. Those who fought the war came from the poorest regions of the country. Poor youth from the North and East often had little choice than to join the LTTE, whilst those in the adjoining districts joined the armed forces of the Government. The war led to massive loss of life and assets, and in addition to these losses, most of those remaining were either directly or indirectly affected by the conflict. During the past thirty years, the people of the North and East of the country were significantly squeezed economically and had to cope with multiple

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displacements and traumas. The final stages of the war resulted in enormous loss of life on both the Government forces and LTTE sides, as well as amongst the civilian population caught in between, with total deaths from the three decade war at over 100,000.

Amongst those in the North that survived the final stages of the war, some were left with multiple physical and health problems, and nearly all were affected psychologically. The loss of family members and friends were felt to be universal experiences amongst those in the LTTE held areas. Moreover the “collective trauma” of the breakup of community life in that region left significant challenges for people to restart their lives<sup>2</sup>. Somasundaram and Sivayokan note that the ability of communities to cope with the war situation depends on the social support systems and economic opportunities available<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, they note, despite heavy losses, many families benefited from family structure systems, “the corner stone of Tamil culture”<sup>4</sup>. The social fabric was also affected by the fact that the North and East also witnessed significant *intra*-ethnic violence between the LTTE and other Tamil militant groups/opposition politicians throughout the war period. In fact, whilst the Government was able to finish the war due to political will, its adoption of combat tactics similar to the LTTE in the final few years and overpowering it with a large number of troops, the final collapse of the LTTE is also partially credited to para-military Tamil groups providing intelligence and infiltrating the LTTE and killing its supporters. Some of the women in this study were widowed due to such rivalries.

The purpose of this paper is to provide insights into the lives of, and highlight the socio-economic challenges faced, by war widows in the Jaffna district of Sri Lanka<sup>5</sup>. Many of them lived in the Vanni (region outside Jaffna predominantly occupied by the LTTE) during the years prior to the war, and their lives most likely reflect the difficulties faced by other war widows throughout the Northern Province. Jaffna is the most populous district of the Northern Province and was the district in which the war started over 30 years ago. Given that this remains one of the most vulnerable groups of people in the conflict-affected arena, efforts have been made to understand the different socio-economic factors that affect these women whilst being sensitive to their psychological and health issues. The paper argues that these women have varying circumstances, but all require significantly more assistance than what they currently receive. Trauma, poverty, family responsibility and poor skills have left many in very difficult circumstances. The sample for this research was not meant to represent the views of, and challenges faced, by all war widows in the conflict-affected region, but the diversity of the individuals interviewed and their circumstances suggest that the difficulties of others are probably similar. The study finds that age, social situation, economic circumstances, family support, and physical and mental health all combine to affect their overall wellbeing. The difficulty in finding respondents also suggests other concerns, and more research is needed to study this group in greater detail.

The remaining part of this paper is structured as follows. Firstly, a short background on the literature available on war widows is presented. This is followed by a description of the methodology used for this research. Thereafter, a paper describes the lives of each of the eight women interviewed, which is then followed by an analysis of the social and economic challenges they face.

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<sup>2</sup> Somasundaram and Sivayokan, “Rebuilding Community Resilience”, 5

<sup>3</sup> Somasundaram and Sivayokan, “Rebuilding Community Resilience”, 3

<sup>4</sup> Somasundaram and Sivayokan, “Rebuilding Community Resilience”, 11

<sup>5</sup> See Miriyagalla, “Socio-economic Reintegration of Former LTTE Combatants” for insights on challenges faced by rehabilitated LTTE combatants in reintegrating into society.

## **Background**

Since the end of the war, it appears that the government has shifted its “war for peace” policy to one that focuses on “peace through development”. For example, in 2010 the President, Mahinda Rajapakse stated that “there will be no development in the absence of peace, nor peace in the absence of development”, and “our expectation is to modernise all areas of employment so as to make them more productive and provide more revenue”<sup>6</sup>. In May 2012, three years after the end of the war, a clear sign of the continuation of the policy of “peace through development”, the Foreign Minister remarked:

This is the result of a deep conviction of ours that there is an intimate connection between reconciliation and economic development. We believe that any realistic process of reconciliation must consist of economic factors. There must be a threshold of economic contentment, an access to economic livelihoods and incomes.<sup>7</sup>

In the aftermath of the end of the war during the early recovery stage, all resettled families were provided with a package valued at Rs 35,000 to meet the immediate requirements of livelihood. Furthermore, by May 2012, a total of 1,319 sq. kms had been demined<sup>8</sup>. The revival of the agriculture and fisheries sectors was given prominence. In the North, 80% of the population depend on agriculture for food security and livelihood and by 2012, 90% of the abandoned paddy land had been brought back into cultivation. With regard to the fisheries sector, production trebled to over 48,000 metric tons in 2011 and was expected to further increase<sup>9</sup>.

The government has invested in development of large infrastructure including the reconstruction of national-level roads and bridges as well as houses, and also improved the water and electricity distribution to the region. Between 2009 and 2011, the investment in the road network in the North and East was approximately \$0.76 billion<sup>10</sup>, and the government had spent \$0.33 billion on resettlement and housing, other infrastructure, livelihood support, poverty alleviation, and capacity building<sup>11</sup>.

The government’s post-conflict approach of “peace through development” may have been because the lack of economic opportunities was a decisive factor in leading to and sustaining conflict for three decades. Indeed, the conflict was largely fought by those “employed” by the military and rebel forces due to lack of alternatives for youth. A recent study into suicide bombers in Sri Lanka showed that the lack of economic opportunities was a key driving force in youth’s decision to join suicide mission<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, prior to the war, development policies related to large-scale infrastructure and investment were discriminatory, leading not only to interethnic disharmony, but also negative repercussions for long-term growth of the country<sup>13</sup>. As benefits continued to reduce particularly amongst Tamil youth, this perceived economic and social injustice came out of dormancy into sporadic violence. The government of the time had little development policy response to these violent uprisings resulting from a

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<sup>6</sup> Rajapakse, “Vital Speeches”, 473

<sup>7</sup> Pieris, “Speech made by Minister of Foreign Affairs”

<sup>8</sup> Presidential Task Force, “From Conflict to Stability”, xxiii

<sup>9</sup> Presidential Task Force, “From Conflict to Stability”, xxii

<sup>10</sup> Presidential Task Force, “From Conflict to Stability”, 203

<sup>11</sup> Presidential Task Force, “From Conflict to Stability”, 243

<sup>12</sup> Somasundaram, “Suicide Bombers” p. 424

<sup>13</sup> Athukorala and Jayasuriya, “Macro-economic Policies”, 109–110

reduction in education and employment opportunities, and therefore violence escalated with Tamil youth targeting politicians and security forces.

Despite the government's belief in the effectiveness of their post-conflict development strategy, Goodhand (2012) argues that the government's development policy of "peace through development" was in fact a continuation of its previous "war for peace" policy, which resulted in the military end to the conflict. This was especially the case because of the continued military presence and the "securitised development"<sup>14</sup>. The presence of the military had been a major source of resentment by the Tamils prior to the end of the war<sup>15</sup>, and it is thus not surprising that this issue remains contentious. The armed forces have been involved in infrastructure development, providing humanitarian aid, health education, as well as economic assistance<sup>16</sup>.

### **War widows in the post-conflict region of Sri Lanka**

Academic research on war widows is scarce, and this research will help to fill the gap. Whilst there have been some reports about widows in the conflict-affected region, most have not focused on war widows. There is a dearth of literature looking at the inter-relationships between their health, social support and their ability to ensure economic stability for themselves and their families. Moreover, the recent ad-hoc reports that are available have not based their analysis on direct interviews with this group of women, but rather secondary information. Overall, more research on this group as a whole is essential to understand the multiple factors affecting them and what needs to be done to improve their lives. Bruck and Schindler purport that the biggest constraints faced by Rwandan's war widows were difficulties earning a livelihood that require physical strength and often culturally considered as done by men, vulnerability to threats and intimidation, and health problems<sup>17</sup>. These widows were also more cut off from social networks, and remarrying was often based on a careful decision of the benefits and costs<sup>18</sup>. Some widows came together and formed groups that could help to support each other especially if they had no other family members<sup>19</sup>. Overall, they faced very difficult challenges to get on with their daily lives. Research from Mozambique suggests that promoting wage-employment rather than self-employment would significantly improve the economic situation of widows<sup>20</sup>. Moreover, living in rural areas with little prospects for employment generation provides few choices to women<sup>21</sup>.

Women in conflict affected regions often face more difficulties than men with regard to improving their economic wellbeing. Indeed, Ruwanpura suggests that the conflict promoted oppressive roles for women, particularly through promotion of motherhood and sacrifice. She maintains that "ethnicity remains an under-explored category in feminist economics"<sup>22</sup>. Ruwanpura and Humphries found in their study of women-headed households in the East, that conflict-related deaths of husbands was highest amongst Tamils, and those who died due to the conflict were generally younger than those who died due to natural causes<sup>23</sup>. They note

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<sup>14</sup> Goodhand, "Sri Lanka in 2011", 130

<sup>15</sup> De Silva, 2010, "Post-LTTE Sri Lanka", p. 239

<sup>16</sup> Presidential Task Force, "From Conflict to Stability", 275–283

<sup>17</sup> Bruck and Schindler, "The Impact of Violent Conflicts", 301

<sup>18</sup> Bruck and Schindler, "The Impact of Violent Conflicts", 303

<sup>19</sup> Bruck and Schindler, "The Impact of Violent Conflicts", 303

<sup>20</sup> Oya and Sender, "Divorced, Separated, and Widowed Workers", 1

<sup>21</sup> Oya and Sender, "Divorced, Separated, and Widowed Workers", 1

<sup>22</sup> Ruwanpura, "Matrilineal Communities, Patriarchal Realities", as quoted in Ruwanpura and Humphries, "Mundane Heroines", 179

<sup>23</sup> Ruwanpura and Humphries, "Mundane Heroines", 183

the importance of viewing each woman’s circumstances uniquely and that the needs of a young poor widow with children who lost her husband due to the war is very different from one who is older, or better off or without children, or lost her husband due to other reasons<sup>24</sup>. Tribe and de Silva, in their paper on displaced widows in the Eastern Province, note that “women’s construction of the world as a reasonably safe, dependable place may have been shattered, and their perception of themselves as influential or in charge of their lives, destroyed”<sup>25</sup>.

There were an estimated 27,756 widows<sup>26</sup> in the Jaffna district alone in 2012, but not all were “war widows”. Whilst it is uncertain how many of them are “war widows”, the Government of Sri Lanka estimates that 2,804 have lost their husbands as a result of “violence”, which mainly includes direct war-related incidents. Thus, the majority are non-war related widows, including those who died due to “accidents”, “disease/natural causes”, “natural disasters”, “suicide” and “other”. It should be noted that some war widows might also be in the “other” category. Moreover, and importantly, it is unclear if those women who do not have death certificates of their husbands were included in the list of widows. Details of numbers of widows known are given in Table 1 below:

**Table 1: Number of war widows in Jaffna District**

Reason for death of husband	No. of widows
Violence	2,804
Accident	1,515
Disease/Natural	17,652
Natural Disaster	2,731
Suicide	666
Other	2,388
<b>Total</b>	<b>27,756</b>

Source: Jaffna District Secretariat database

Government statistics indicate that a vast majority of widows were not young as 25,396 (91.5%) of the widows were over 40 years<sup>27</sup>. Thus, young war widows comprise a very small overall percentage of the total number of widows. Whilst it is difficult to estimate how many of the young widows were ‘war widows’, one could assume that most young widows may have lost their husbands due to war-related reasons. 9,620 (35%) of all widows have at least 2 dependents. Only 2,989 (10.7%) earn a monthly income above Rs.5,000 (~ \$40), though it is uncertain whether this figure includes additional income from self-employment schemes such as poultry farming. 17,721 (64%) widows have not yet received any relief assistance from the government<sup>28</sup>, and it is important to note that there has not been direct and systematic support for improvement of the economic situation of widows, despite their high vulnerability.

### **Social Capital and Economic Vulnerability**

Gain in economic capital (i.e employment, wages, profits, economic opportunities) is the ultimate outcome of social capital accumulation, but the means to this is not solely economic<sup>29</sup>. So, it is not just skills that open doors to economic opportunity, but rather the

<sup>24</sup> Ruwanpura and Humphries, “Mundane Heroines”, 187

<sup>25</sup> Tribe and Silva, “Psychological Intervention”, 186

<sup>26</sup> Jaffna District Secretariat database

<sup>27</sup> District Secretariat, Jaffna

<sup>28</sup> District Secretariat, Jaffna

<sup>29</sup> Portes, “Economic Sociology”, 4

quality of the social relations to which one has access. Indeed, as Loury (1977) suggests “The social context within which individual maturation occurs strongly conditions what otherwise equally competent individuals can achieve”<sup>30</sup>. The importance of networks as well the levels of hierarchy in social relationships cannot be underestimated. Putman describes how more horizontal relationships that encourage greater collaboration have lasting impacts on the ability of individuals to contribute to the development of their regions<sup>31</sup>. This situation creates a path dependence enabling and preventing economic opportunities. As Bourdieu suggests, much of what we are today is based on our past<sup>32</sup>, and thus cultural issues can create “lock in” effects reducing or increasing employment and underemployment. Also, if people have lived in a disadvantaged location for many years, poor networks handicap them from linking with potential employers<sup>33</sup>.

It is not a case of having or not having social capital; people have different types of social capital. Granovetter (1974) brought to the literature the concept of “strength of weak ties”, which suggests that it is necessary to go beyond the immediate circle of known persons that brings in economic opportunities. Building on that, Putnam (2002) also purported that there are two types of social capital – Bonding Social Capital and Bridging Social Capital. Whilst the former is based primarily on relationships within a group and helps the individual to “get by” in life, the latter help build bridges to other groups and helps the “get on” in life<sup>34</sup>. It has been argued by some researchers that the very existence of high levels of bonding social capital can be a significant disadvantage leaving people isolated from opportunities<sup>35</sup>. Indeed, Burt (1992) argued that it was the lack of confined social capital norms that allowed people to move into other relations<sup>36</sup>.

Bonding Social Capital brings a higher level of social interaction between people who have similar backgrounds. High levels of bonding social capital are the norm as such interactions are easier and involve less effort. However, often it is the very presence of bonded social capital that reduces the possibility of gaining bridging social capital. Coleman was instrumental in bringing out the concept of ‘closure’, which he identified as the presence of such strong ties as to ensure that those belonging to the group based on strong social capital behave in an agreed manner, typically an enforcement of norms<sup>37</sup>. At one level, greater closure will provide better information with greater trust, but at another level the isolation from more valuable information reduces one’s opportunities<sup>38</sup>. Indeed, Waldinger (1995: 557) point out that “the same social relations that...enhance the ease and efficiency of economic exchanges among community members implicitly restrict outsiders”<sup>39</sup>. Often, people are “stuck” in ethnic based communities that are meant to provide both the opportunities, but instead result in barriers for future opportunities. If the immediate circle of contacts has access to information or opportunities, people will have access to job opportunities.

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<sup>30</sup> Loury, “A Dynamic Theory”, 176

<sup>31</sup> Putman, “Introduction”, p121

<sup>32</sup> Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital”, 79

<sup>33</sup> Polk and White, “Economic Adversity and Criminal Behaviour”, 297

<sup>34</sup> Putnam, “Introduction” 23

<sup>35</sup> See for example, Shirlow and Murtagh

<sup>36</sup> Burt, “Structural Holes”

<sup>37</sup> Coleman, “Social Capital”, 599

<sup>38</sup> Lancee, “The Economic Returns”, 668

<sup>39</sup> Waldinger, “The Other Side”, 557

### **Methodology**

Bruck and Schindler note several challenges of studying the plight of war widows<sup>40</sup>. Firstly, widows are a diverse group, and not all widows in conflict-affected countries or regions have lost their husbands due to war-related incidents. Secondly, data is hard to come by which often prevents their study. Thirdly, the individuals themselves are hard to find. They note that there are very few studies on widows in conflict-affected regions, especially ones that focus exclusively on them. For this research, a war widow is one who has lost her husband as a direct result of a war-related incident. Therefore, women who lost their husbands during the war period or conflict region for a reason other than a war-related incident is not considered a war widow for this study. It must be noted that the LTTE often did not allow its combatants to marry and therefore it is rare to find war widows who lost their husbands due to direct battle.

Eight war widows were interviewed for this qualitative research study in October 2013. Initially, given that war widows were considered very difficult to locate, a purposive sampling of 15 individuals were chosen based on statistics available at the Jaffna District Secretariat, leaving a buffer for possible absentees. The exact locations were found by asking neighbours and community leaders. Whilst the final selection was eight, it was previously hoped that 10 would be interviewed out of 15 names chosen. However, a total of seven could not be located. One had remarried and left, and two had left without leaving their new addresses with neighbours. Some names did not match locations. All were interviewed in Tamil with the assistance of a translator in-confidence outside their homes with family members and trusted neighbours often also present.

The eight women roughly fell into three groups based on when they became widowed. In the first group, two women have been widowed for more than 10 years and have older children. In the second group, three women lost their husbands about 1-3 years before the war ended. In the last group, three women were widowed during the final stages of the war in Mullaitivu in 2009. Out of the eight war widows, seven were with children. Five out of the seven had three children each indicating a very high dependency ratio for these single mothers. Though none of the eight husbands had died because of direct engagement in battle, four had died due to shell attacks and the other four had been killed by unidentified persons (or went missing) due to links with armed groups.

The focus of this research was to provide insight on the war widows' current socio-economic situation and their hopes for the future. Thus, no questions were asked about political preferences or difficulties faced during the last stages of the war. As the interviews were undertaken in-confidence, names of interviewees have been altered to protect their identity. Full addresses have also not been divulged though their general locations are given in the next section.

### **The Eight War Widows**

Of the eight war widows, five had three children, which indicated a high dependency ratio. Their ages ranged from 28-43 years, and six out of the eight were employed (either self or wage). Monthly incomes were very low, with only one making ends meet with her own effort. All widows were also highly dependent on their families and communities for support.

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<sup>40</sup> Bruck and Schindler, "The Impact of Violent Conflicts", 294

Table 2 below gives a summary of the eight war widows interviewed, and further details are provided thereafter.

**Table 2: Summary of Eight War-widows interviewed in Jaffna District**

	Name	Location in Jaffna district	Age	No. of Children	Year Widowed	Employment	Monthly Income (Rs)
1	Janaki	Kokuvil	31	3	2006	Selling milk	Rs.5,000
2	Mahalakshmi	Kokuvil	33	3	2009	Packing herbal medicines	Rs.8,000
3	Padmaseeli	Ariyalai	28	1	2009	Making and selling fried snacks	Rs.5,000
4	Dushyanthi	Chunnakam	34	0	2008	Unemployed	Rs. 0
5	Sofia	Chunnakam	30	2	2008	Making and selling clothes	Rs.15,000
6	Vijitha	Navanthurai	41	3	1995	Unemployed	Rs. 0
7	Nirufa	Kaithadi	37	3	2009	Poultry farm	Rs.5,000
8	Kavitha	Chavakachcheri	43	3	2003	Selling firewood	Rs.9,000

Ex. Rate: \$1 = ~ Rs.125

#### *Janaki*

Janaki is 31 years old and has been widowed for 6 years. After many years of displacement, she was finally caught up in the final stages of the war. She returned from the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Camp to her mother's land in 2011. Her husband went missing in 2006 on his way to Vavuniya, in the southern part of the conflict-affected region, and she has no information about the circumstances related to his disappearance. As her husband had involvements with an armed group, she suspects that he was killed, especially because his body was not found. She has three children aged 10 years, 8 years and 7 years and has an injury to her leg from the last stages of the war in 2009. Janaki is unable to support her family fully and relies heavily on her brother for food. She earns approximately Rs.5,000 monthly selling milk from her only cow, which was given to her by the rehabilitation centre. She uses this for her children's education and health expenses.

“Before the end of the war, life was better because my husband was there. But now, even if I get a job it is going to be very difficult. I have my brother so there is no big problem, but I depend on him too much.”

#### *Mahalakshmi*

Mahalakshmi is 33 years old and was widowed in 2009 during the final stages of the war when a shell attack killed her husband. She was pregnant at the time with her third child, and manages with great difficulty to fend for her three children now aged 13, 7 and 4 years. Still unable to cope with her loss, she is often not emotionally strong enough to work consistently. When she can, she earns Rs. 300 per day (full-time) helping to pack herbal medicines at a nearby micro-industry. Her family responsibilities also keep her at home at times. In addition to her wage-employment, she also has a small poultry farm and manages it with the help of her 13 year old daughter. Moreover, she gets Rs.500 per child per month from the local government because she is a widow. Altogether she manages to get about Rs.8,000 per month for the family.

“We have no social problems because our relatives are around us. But they are also poor so they can't help us. My daughter helps me with the poultry



farm. Since I go to work, when she comes back from school, she has to do the housework and cook.” Mahalakshmi

#### *Padmaseeli*

Padmaseeli is 28 years old and lives with her child of 5 years and parents. She has been widowed since 2009 when she lost her husband during the last stages of the war. For her livelihood, she makes fried snacks and sells to a small shop nearby earning approximately Rs.5,000 per month. Her father brings in an additional income to the household by doing manual labour, and her mother helps to raise the child. She hopes to get a loan to set up a small poultry farm and small shop, but has thus far been unsuccessful. Her main concern is that her son would be starting school next year and would require more money to ensure that he does his education well.

“We have no one to help us because we don’t have relatives abroad. I have no brothers and my sisters are married. They have to look after their own families. My father does labour work and he helps me.” Padmaseeli

#### *Dushyanthi*

Dushyanthi is 34 years old and has no children. Since the loss of her husband, who was shot close to home by an unidentified person in 2008, she has needed psychiatric help. She is unable to care for herself without the help of her parents and does not do any form of economic activity. Her parents, who spoke on her behalf whilst she sat next to them and listened, said that the main challenges she faces were getting suitable psychiatric treatment and coping with her loss. They are worried that once they pass away, no one would be there to look after her. She has two brothers and a sister. Her sister left home after getting married, and her brothers work with their father in his plot of land. Her parents hope that the land they own would be passed on to the young widow and the brothers would pay her a sum of money for using the land.

“We are very worried about her. After we pass away who will look after her? She is unable to sleep and work. The women’s society wanted her to join them so that they can provide some support. She was asked to help with the pre-school. But she is not interested in anything.” Dushyanthi’s father

#### *Sofia*

Sofia is 30 years old and has been widowed since 2008. She has two children, aged 7 and 6 years and lives with her mother. Her husband was kidnapped and killed by unidentified persons. Unlike the others interviewed she was very positive about the future. Having got over the loss of her husband with the moral support of a close friend, she had been able to direct her time and energy to bring in sufficient funds into the household by making dresses. She had a good knowledge of Sinhala, the language of the majority population in the country and has travelled outside the district. Earning over Rs.15,000, she requires no other external support except help in securing a loan to expand her garment business. She says that the past was much better as she and her husband had had a successful business, but she sees a bright future ahead. She regrets that her relatives did not help her after her loss, but is confident that she will be able to earn enough money to buy a plot of land and build a house. She wants to work hard for her children.

“We were well off before and our relatives depended on us. When we had our business in Vavuniya, things were very good. But after he died, they

(relatives) left and no longer visit. I want to succeed and I am determined. I have applied for a loan and hope to get it. I want to bring materials from outside, make dresses and sell.” Sofia

#### *Vijitha*

Vijitha is 41 years old and has been a war widow for 18 years. She has three grown-up children aged 22, 20 and 18 years. After her husband died from an air attack in 1995, her parents supported her as she was unable to undertake any economic activity with her three children. Her eldest son is now married and continues to live in the same house with his wife. The loss of her husband has taken its toll on her health and she is now a cholesterol patient. In the early days after losing her husband, she worked at a fishing sales centre, but now because of health reasons, she is unable to do much. Her elder daughter wishes to take a loan to start a tailoring business, but has not been successful in getting approval for her loan application.

“After he died, my mother supported me to look after the children. My father had a small ice cream business so we were ok. I have never worked except for three years when I was at a fishing sales centre. I am sick now with pressure and cholesterol because of stress and thinking.” Vijitha

#### *Nirufa*

Nirufa is 37 years old and was widowed in 2009 during the last stages of the war. Her husband and second son were killed from a shell attack and all other members of the family were injured. Nirufa also has an injury that prevents her from going outdoors for extended periods of time. She has a small poultry farm, but the monthly income of Rs. 5,000 is not enough for her family expenses. She used to get free food, but that has recently stopped though she is not sure why. Her three remaining children, aged 16, 15 and 13 years continue to go to school, but she is uncertain about their future. Before the war ended her husband had a business in Mullaitivu and they had sufficient money. She now lives close to the railway track, and she hopes that once the railway line to Jaffna opens up, she will be able to make some lunch packets and provide meals to passengers. Her children are supporting her with the poultry farm, but she hopes that they will study well so that their future will be better.

“We got a lot of help just after we resettled back here. Before my husband had a good business and we had a good income. My husband’s sister was in Germany and used to send some money. But she recently died of a heart attack. But things will be better after the railway line comes.” Nirufa

#### *Kavitha*

Kavitha is 43 years old and has been a widow since 2003. She has three grown-up children of 21, 20 and 18 years. Her husband was killed by an unknown person, because of his political affiliation. Whilst she does not see a big change since the end of the war, her main concern is that the cost of living is increasing. Her elder daughter is married and also continues to live in the same house with her husband. Her eldest son is unemployed. She has started a firewood business with her father and daughter and is able to get about Rs. 9,000 per month. They wish to expand the business but cannot find any guarantors.

“Everyone in the family helps with the firewood business. We go a gather the firewood together. My father does most of the cutting and my daughter will sell the firewood. We want to expand the business, but no one will give us a loan.” Kavitha

### **Social and Economic Situation of the War Widows**

All the women interviewed were well connected to their communities, and none lived entirely “alone”. Many said that they received social support from friends and family, and benefitted from close social networks. Their vulnerability was well understood by the communities, and none mentioned facing any sort of abuse due to their vulnerabilities. One was concerned about the general security situation, but on further inquiry that fear appeared to be mainly because of the memory of having witnessed her husband dying rather than the present context itself. None mentioned any personal security issue regarding the security presence. Often the communities they lived in were poor, but there was strong moral support that friends and family members provided. The two women in their early forties had children in their late teens and appeared to distance themselves from leading the household. In instances where the widow’s parents were also living in the same house, the parents often took a greater responsibility in looking after the interests of the widow’s children. Their social networks were often insufficient to help with their economic vulnerability. For example, none had contacts to sign as guarantors for loans they wished to take.

Sofia’s situation provided insights on how some war-widows have overcome their challenges. It was clear that her level of ambition was also partly because of her exposure to people and places outside her immediate surroundings. The fact that she had lived in Vavuniya and also travelled to Colombo before with her husband gave her a wider network. Despite a lower level of bonding capital than many others interviewed, her increased level of bridging capital contributed to the fact that she appeared the most likely to do well economically. In fact, she appeared to purposely shun her relatives and not allow herself to be dependent on them. The strength of the bridging capital was helping her to “get on” with her life rather than just “getting by” like the others interviewed.

Over half of the women mentioned said that they were not able to show any proof of the deaths of their husbands and had therefore not received their death certificates. The lack of these documents had thus prevented the widows from benefiting from any social assistance from the government. They had not wanted to pursue this as they did not know who to speak to. Even for those who did have death certificates, only one had received benefits from the government.

Those who appeared to have the most difficulty in the current context were the young injured widows with two or three children, especially if there was no parental support. However, whilst some war widows were resigned to their fate, strong friendships and a positive outlook gave some of them strength to mentally “move on” and improve their employment situation. Most war widows had not worked or undertaken any economic activities prior to becoming widowed. Thus, these individuals were unable to “think beyond their home environment” partly because of their continued home responsibilities. Janaki, for example, had a few skills such as tailoring which she could use for income generation, but with the family duties, she felt that she did not have sufficient time to do much else.

Health was a key factor that affected the war widows’ ability to improve their economic wellbeing. Some individuals had not mentally recovered from the shock of their loss and this added to the trauma of the war. Indications are that it may take a very long time for them to get over the loss, and these individuals were unable to concentrate on their daily chores. Mahalakshmi, for example, was not in the right state of mind to undertake any sort of employment. Dushyanthi was also unable to do any form of economic activity because of her

very poor mental state, but could possibly assist her father or brothers if a loan was given for them to lead. She cannot however take responsibility for payment of the loan. Those who had been widows for a long time (Vijitha and Nirufa) had clearly compromised on their health in their early widow years to make ends meet; despite being only in their early forties, they were not healthy enough to work regularly. Nevertheless, with the assistance of their children, they could possibly improve their livelihood. Physical injury due to the war also affected two women (Janaki and Nirufa) preventing them from seeking out a better economic livelihood.

The lack of stable guarantors affected several women from taking loans despite their keen interest in improving their economic situation through self-employment. Padmaseeli and Kavitha had the determination and skills to start a suitable business, but only needed two guarantors to get the loan. They mentioned that banks often wanted guarantors to be government employees and none of the war widows had any links to government officials. One young war widow was faring very well and her situation provided key insights into what was required for other women to improve their situation. Sofia has a very strong ability and determination to expand her business. She mentioned how her very close friend said to her after her loss, “Don’t feel bad. Learn to do something and you will succeed”. She now has the skills and determination to improve her self-employment business in the garment sector. Clearly, continuous counselling is essential for war widows to enable them get over their loss. The weak rural economy in the region that they lived provided few choices in terms of employment. Some women may benefit more from wage-employment, but only if the work places were close to home. Mainly because of their children, many could not aspire to engage in any work that took them away from their homes.

Overall, all women were pleased that the war was over. Though their losses prevented them from being entirely positive about their current situation, they hoped that their children would be able to move out of their difficult situation. Many felt that if the war did not restart, there was hope. As one war widow mentioned, “During the war, it was very difficult and we shed a lot of tears. When I think about the war, I think that even if we don’t have any money to eat, it is ok as long as the war does not start again.”

Whilst few thought the war time was better because of the absence of their husbands, understandably they would have been more positive about the future if their husbands were alive. For five out of the eight, the current economic situation looked very bleak and they will need significant and continued psychological, social and financial support from society. Moreover, as their hopes now rested on their children, education was felt to be the key for their children’s future. It is likely that all children of all these war widows would face very significant challenges to educate themselves and will likely have to help their mothers to make ends meet. These families represent the poorest and most vulnerable families in the north and ensuring that they are able to come out of their difficult situation would indeed be a key future marker of the success of the peace dividend.

### **Conclusion**

War widows in the North of Sri Lanka face enormous difficulties to improve their economic wellbeing. Despite social support from family members, friends and neighbours, poor mental and physical health, poor skills and poor access to finance prevented many from initiating sustainable self-employment projects. Given that some of them were also injured, grant-based financial assistance was essential for those unable to work, especially if the needs of the children were to be met. It would also be important to connect these women to social circles beyond their neighbours so that they could gain from markets beyond their immediate

surroundings. There must also be consistent trauma support. Ensuring that the lives of war widows improve will have an important impact on long-term peace as it will give hope to the next generation. It must be noted again that some individuals who were part of the sample for the research could not be located, and it may be that some of them face even greater challenges than the individuals interviewed. Thus, a comprehensive study on war widows is critical to further understand the diversity of the issues faced by them.

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