

Gender Roles and Military Necessity: Women's Inclusion in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

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The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, or the Tigers) were unique in many ways, one of which being their inclusion of women in combat roles during the Sri Lankan Civil War. This paper applies Jennifer Eggert's 'factors influencing women's inclusion in terrorist organizations' theory to the LTTE. Eggert proposes three factors that influence whether or not women are included in combat: the level of pressure applied by the opposing force, the availability of male manpower, and the degree of support from external actors and media. This paper considers how these three factors change over different eras of the conflict and analyzes how women's participation varies accordingly. Women's inclusion in combat during the civil war did change according to changes in pressure, support, and available manpower, supporting Eggert's thesis and opening up a new pathway of analogous research in the realm of insurgency and counterinsurgency. This research implies that gender roles, sometimes viewed as immutable or natural, can and will change when military necessity demands it. Future avenues of research include understanding the bureaucratic politics within the LTTE to determine how these changes were applied, as well as analyzing gender relations within the LTTE to understand the intersection of the personal and the political.

Introduction

The Sri Lankan Civil War raged for almost thirty years, killing 70,000 and displacing hundreds of thousands of civilians while the Sri Lankan (Sinhalese) army and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fought.¹ From 1983 to 2009, the Sinhalese (the ethnic majority in Sri Lanka, making up 75% of the population) and the Tamil (16% of the population) fought for control of ancestral Tamil territory, with four attempts at peace having failed.² The conflict ended in 2009 when the Sri Lankan army killed the founder and supreme commander of the LTTE, Velupillai Prabhakaran, and secured a complete military victory. This is a common enough story, but there are some unique aspects to it: one being that one-third of the Tigers were women.³

The Tigers included women in all aspects of their organization, from combat to naval expeditions to logistics. Although their total numbers were a military secret, some

researchers think that women may have made up as much as one-third of all forces. This article will attempt to fill a gap in the scholarship about the Tigers' organizational culture by answering the question of why the Tigers included women so readily in their forces despite Tamil cultural norms that would indicate otherwise. Tamil culture is highly patriarchal, with women's roles being primarily domestic; so why did the Tigers break with tradition and expand the roles that women could play in the organization? This paper argues that the Tigers included women in all aspects of their organization because they faced a manpower deficit and lacked steady external support in the face of a well-funded and powerful adversary. This change temporarily expanded the roles of women in Tamil culture, but did not impact the outcome of the war.

Drawing on Jennifer Philippa Eggert's work studying gender roles in terrorist organizations and Lee Ann Fujii's

framework of culture as a script to be written and acted out, this paper will argue that the Tamil Tiger leadership changed the gender script, expanding the permitted roles of women to achieve military and political goals during the conflict.⁴ I will compare the roles of women in the organization over time in the context of Eggert's three most important factors: the level of pressure applied by the opposition, the availability of male manpower, and the level of external support from potential supporters. I will review the relevant literature and describe the research methodology; discuss the case study through the chosen lens; rebut some criticisms of why women were included; provide alternative explanations for this inclusion and posit future avenues of research; and consider the end of the war and what it meant for Tamil women.

Literature Review

Women in Combat

War and warfighting are largely considered masculine institutions, but women have participated in both for all of human history.⁵ Therefore, this research is less focused on why women would choose to participate than on the factors that influence why masculine organizations choose to include women. Darden, Henshaw, and Szekely also ask, "Why do insurgencies recruit women?" in their book *Insurgent Women*, and focus on case studies in Ukraine, Colombia, and the Kurdish insurgencies in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq.⁶ This research follows in their footsteps by asking the same question in Sri Lanka.

The Mutability of Gender Roles

This research belongs to the poststructuralist tradition because it takes as given that

gender is a construct dependent upon context. Structuralism is "a theoretical approach that identifies patterns in social arrangements,"⁷ and poststructuralism "holds all meaning to be fluid rather than universal and predictable."⁸ Michel Foucault, one of the key scholars in this field, believed that "the operation of power temporarily stabilizes meanings into a discourse."⁹ In other words, gender is a pattern in social arrangements, but it is fluid, based on context, and can be manipulated. The social power that the LTTE held gave them the ability to define gender in the Tamil cultural text and then change it when necessary. Poststructuralism is notoriously controversial in international affairs, but it is important to this case study so that we may acknowledge the inherent fluidity in gender as a social construct and its importance in conflict.¹⁰

To delve deeper into the poststructuralist idea of culture as text and power-holders as writers, this research will build on Lee Ann Fujii's concept of a script as a way to understand violence between ethnicities as defined in her groundbreaking book, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda*.¹¹ She viewed "state-sponsored ethnicity not as an external force that acts on people, but as a 'script' for violence that people act out."¹² Because "the rules and expectations for normal behavior change, sometimes in radical ways" during periods of violence, power-holders can take advantage of these shifts to create new scripts that serve their political goals.¹³ Her work is specifically about the actions that individuals take when called to genocide, but I will use her theoretical framework in this research to frame the options that the Tigers offered to Tamil women: to join the Tigers or to remain a civilian.

Changing Gender Roles in Terrorist Organizations

Jennifer Philippa Eggert's article, "Women Fighters in the 'Islamic State' and Al-Qaida in Iraq: A Comparative Analysis," is crucial to this analysis. She concluded the Islamic State (IS) only changed its stance towards women's inclusion when a worsening security context demanded it. The three variables she identified as influential on whether women were included were the level of pressure by opposing military forces, possession of sufficient male manpower, and how the media covered the conflict along with the degree of support from external actors.¹⁴ While the social context and organizational goals differ between IS, Al-Qaeda, and the LTTE, the similarities between these terrorist organizations fighting a state military make this a useful framework through which to analyze the factors that influence Tamil women's inclusion. Based on Eggert's findings, this paper will argue that the Tigers changed the script for Tamil gender roles in response to these three factors.

Methodology

To demonstrate the connection between the external circumstances facing the Tamil Tigers and the gender script they followed, I will discuss three different eras of the civil war: from the 1970s to 1987; from 1987 to 1990; and from 1990 to the end of the war in 2009. In each section, I will analyze the role of women in the organization, the manpower and external support available to the Tigers, and the counterinsurgency capabilities of the Sri Lankan government.

Pre-Conflict Tamil Gender Roles

Women in Tamil culture had and have a "respected but simultaneously ambivalent and somewhat restricted status."¹⁵ They were celebrated for being "weak, chaste, shut up in the home and ignorant about the world, and shy."¹⁶ Though schools for girls were established in the 1800s, their education was for the benefit of their future husbands so they would make good wives. Similarly, women gained social standing or respect for their roles as wives or mothers to men.¹⁷ Women who later became LTTE soldiers also said that there were cultural superstitions that prevented them from pursuing certain activities in their daily lives. They were told by elders that "girls should not climb trees, go out alone or ride bicycles."¹⁸

In the script of Tamil culture from before the war, women were discouraged from masculine activities and encouraged to focus primarily on domestic and reproductive pursuits. This script was left unchallenged by the Tigers in the first phase of the war. Subsequent sections will discuss how this script was changed over time based on the needs of the Tigers.

Phase One of Women's Inclusion (1970s-1987): "Nice to Have"

Women were recruited and trained in the LTTE during this era (known as Eelam I), but only in limited numbers because it was not a military necessity. While the Tigers were not going to turn down women who wanted to fight for Tamil sovereignty, the leadership was in a strong enough position so as not to require changing the gender script at this time.

This first phase of the civil war began in earnest in 1983 when the Tigers killed 13 Sri

Lankan soldiers. This violence resulted in 400 to 2,000 Tamils being killed in response.¹⁹ After this original catalyst, the Tigers issued four principal demands: “first, that the Tamils of Sri Lanka be recognized as a distinct nation; second, that the north-east of the country be recognized as their historical homeland; third, that the Tamil population be allowed the right of self-determination and finally, that all Tamils be granted Sri Lankan citizenship.”²⁰ These terms were unacceptable to the Sri Lankan government, and so the violence ensued.

State of Manpower of the LTTE

When Tamil-Sinhalese violence began in the 1970s, there were five main Tamil separatist groups on the island—the Tigers, the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization, the People’s Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam, the Eelam People’s Revolutionary Liberation Front, and the Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students.²¹ All of these organizations recruited women in the 1980s for propaganda, medical, and logistical roles.²² During this time, the LTTE committed fratricide against the other organizations to consolidate control over the available manpower.²³ The LTTE recruited men from the other organizations as they disbanded, making themselves the only group left to join. The broad availability of experienced Tamil men made recruiting untrained women unnecessary.

Economic Support for the LTTE

After the Tamil killings in 1983, thousands fled to India. The Indian government and the Tamil diaspora both provided support to the LTTE. They provided “money, sanctuary, and training camps” for the Tigers, with over 20,000 militants trained in Indian camps.²⁴ This level of support, both from their own people and a foreign government, ensured that the Tigers did not have to

change their strategic outlook at this time. This support continued through the end of Eelam I.

Strength of the Sri Lankan Opposition

The Tigers also did not originally need to recruit women because of the ineffectiveness of the Sri Lankan government. First, the government did not take the threat of the LTTE seriously, and it underestimated how serious the demand for independence was and how willing the Tamils were to join the organization. Second, government forces were untrained in counterinsurgency tactics, relying instead on ineffective conventional warfighting means. Third, the military’s reliance on collective punishment strategies, such as the forced displacement of Tamils from the capital city, only made LTTE recruitment more effective.²⁵ Even with only half the available population participating as combatants, the Tigers were able to easily hold off the Sri Lankan soldiers.

Outcome

Due to the ineffectiveness of the Sri Lankan army, the ongoing support from diaspora Tamils and the Indian government, and the plentiful manpower available from the Tamil community, the LTTE leadership did not need to consider changing the gender script at this time. Although they did make the organization open to women—the LTTE women’s corps was officially created in 1983—they did not focus on women’s recruitment. In response, only a few women joined in the first phase of the conflict. They were trained in mining, explosives, weapons technology, and other combat-related skills,²⁶ but their numbers were limited.²⁷ This would all change during the next period of the conflict: the occupation by the Indian Peacekeeping forces.

Era of Change: 1987-1990

This brief interlude changed the strategic calculus of the Tiger leadership: the loss of Indian support after the Indian withdrawal from Sri Lanka and the deaths of LTTE soldiers without any competitive Tamil militant groups from which to poach new ones created a new need for support and manpower. During this era, the LTTE leadership institutionalized the Women's Front and created a new script for Tamil women to follow: they could support their people and the fight for their homeland by joining the Tigers as combatants.

Although the Indian government was originally a staunch supporter of the Tigers, this sentiment shifted during the Indian occupation of Sri Lanka.²⁸ In 1987, the Indian government pressured the Sri Lankan government to sign a peace agreement with the Tigers, which was enforced by Indian troops left on the island as peacekeepers. The Tigers, who had started to run a quasi-state in Tamil-majority lands, refused to cede control of land or institutions to the Indians. The Sri Lankan army resented the foreign interference, and the Indian government's domestic audience did not support the expenditure of blood and treasure.²⁹ This phase of the war ended in March 1990 when India elected a new government that opposed the campaign and the peacekeepers were recalled home.³⁰

Changes in Manpower

The Indian Peacekeeping forces, which previously had been on the side of the LTTE, lost control of the Tigers and were unable to disarm them. During the occupation, the goals of the Indian forces changed from peacekeeping to counterinsurgency by attrition.³¹ This new policy was considered a success solely because the Indian army was able to wear

down the LTTE; however, the LTTE countered by sliding between conventional and guerrilla tactics as well as refilling their ranks with women.³² In 1987, the Women's Front was given its own training camp by Prabhakaran and was large enough to have its own leadership structure by 1989.³³ The change in allegiance by the Indians and their ability to use conventional warfare, alongside their effective counterinsurgency campaign to kill Tamil soldiers, made recruiting and training women necessary for the survival of the LTTE.

Changes in Economic Support

The end of support and training from the Indian government drastically undercut the resourcing capabilities of the Tamil Tigers. This shift from government-funded external support to relying only on the diaspora for support created a new need for domestic recruitment. This reduction in funding stressed the leadership, causing them to lean on the Tamils in Sri Lanka for more support. One way that they asked for support was for families to give at least one member. Whereas before they only asked for sons, they now asked for anyone.³⁴

Changes in Opposition Capabilities

During the period of Indian occupation, it was less the capabilities of the Sri Lankan army than the presence of the Indian army that created the need for more manpower in the LTTE.³⁵ The LTTE had to prepare to fight its former ally, which was blocking them from achieving their aim of political independence by trying to force disarmament before the LTTE deemed it ready to do so. Relative to the period before, the LTTE was under much more pressure and needed new options to continue fighting.

Outcome

These contextual changes provided an impetus for the LTTE to update the Tamil gender script: they decreed that women can and should fight for their homeland against both the Indian and the Sri Lankan armies, which had violated them and stolen their freedoms. It was an effective strategy: the number of women in the LTTE dramatically increased from the 1980s to 1990 and beyond.³⁶ This change was visible in the newly published goals of the Women's Front in 1991: "to secure the right to self-determination of the Tamil Eelam people and establish an independent democratic state of Tamil Eelam; to abolish oppressive caste discrimination and divisions, and semi-feudal customs like dowry; to eliminate all discrimination against Tamil women and all other discrimination, and to secure social, political and economic equality; to ensure that Tamil women control their own lives; and to secure legal protection for women against sexual harassment, rape, and domestic violence."³⁷

One brutal but effective example of the way that LTTE changed the gender script is with regard to sexual assault. The traditional Tamil gender script called for women who had been dishonored through rape to isolate or kill themselves because they could no longer be a virgin or get married. Instead, the LTTE gave women the opportunity to get revenge.³⁸ The LTTE also changed the script for men: in the 1980s, male leaders spoke out against sexual violence only because the shame of it made Tamil women unfit to marry Tamil men. However, when the Women's Front was established and institutionalized, things changed: the leadership encouraged LTTE veterans to marry women who were raped to ensure their social inclusion, and told women that there was no shame in being raped because it was not their fault.³⁹ This dramatic and

progressive change may have been partially inspired by the LTTE's Liberatory principles, but it had strategic military benefits as well.

Phase Two of Women's Inclusion (1990-2009): "Need to Have"

Through the last four phases of the conflict from 1990-2009 (Eelam II, Eelam III, Ceasefire Agreement, and Eelam IV),⁴⁰ the LTTE relied heavily on women to fill its ranks, especially in the Black Tigers (the suicide bombers) and the Sea Tigers (the navy).⁴¹ This reliance persisted through the end of the conflict. Try as they might, the Tigers were unable to overcome the superior funding and manpower of the Sri Lankan army, especially in the face of defection and the destruction of the tsunami in 2004.

With the departure of the Indian army in 1990, the LTTE returned to fighting the Sri Lankan army for the next nineteen years. The two sides took turns holding, losing, and reclaiming territory. It was only after the Sri Lankan army outspent and outmanned the LTTE on the heels of a huge defection and the 2004 tsunami that the conflict came to an end with a Sri Lankan victory. The number of women who participated in the Tigers remained steady at around one-third of the whole organization through 2009.

State of Manpower of the LTTE

Manpower became a serious issue for the Tigers; with the Indians gone and the other Tamil separatist groups decimated, they running out of new soldiers after seven years of conflict. However, they might have been able to hold their land and maintain the stalemate had there not been two disasters in short succession: a massive defection and a tsunami.

In 2004, the first high-level defection broke the ranks of the Tigers. Colonel Karuna, who had commanded the Eastern theatre, defected to the Sri Lankan side along with 3,000-6,000 Tiger cadres. His defection severely strangled the LTTE's geographic reach and strategic depth while engendering a leadership crisis, and the intelligence that he provided to the Sri Lankan army gave them an advantage in future conflicts.⁴² The December 2004 tsunami disproportionately impacted the Tamils, who held much of the land on the western coast. 40,000 people died, including 3,000 Tiger cadres, and one-quarter of the Tiger's naval fleet was destroyed.⁴³ These two disasters severely decreased the manpower available to the LTTE, ensuring that they would accept anyone willing to join.

Economic Support for the LTTE

Another disaster outside of the control of the LTTE severely harmed their economic stability. Much of their funding came from expatriate and diaspora communities in other countries, but in 2002 the international community passed various domestic laws that strangled their funding sources. The global response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks was increased support for the International Convention for the Suppression of Financing of Terrorism; as the Tigers were a terrorist organization, the ratification of this convention cut them off from millions of dollars while the Chinese supplied the Sri Lankan army with over \$1 billion in aid.⁴⁴ This decline in support, both relative and absolute, also ensured that the LTTE would not alienate any of their surviving supporters by reverting to the pre-conflict gender script or rejecting the work that women did for the cause.

Strength of the Sri Lankan Opposition

The nail in the coffin for the LTTE was the increase in pressure that the adversary was able to apply in the last years of the war. By increasing the defense budget by 30% over five years (2005-2009) and increasing the size of the armed forces by almost 350,000 people, the Sri Lankan government was able to use its sheer material preponderance to overwhelm the Tigers.⁴⁵

Outcome

By the end of the war, the LTTE was so desperate for manpower that it had resorted to kidnappings and forced conscription.⁴⁶ The last phase of the war, Eelam IV, lasted from the summer of 2006 to May 2009. The Sri Lankan army was able to capture, clear, and hold territory, slowly pushing the LTTE forces back into a small corner of territory where they were outgunned and defeated, with Supreme Commander Vellupillai Prabhakaran killed.⁴⁷ In the end, the same factors that drove the LTTE to recruit women in higher numbers were the ones that led to their defeat: the lack of manpower and economic development were the two deciding factors that led to the Sri Lankan victory.⁴⁸ Changing the gender script had helped the Tigers increase recruitment in the early days of the war, but it was not enough to counteract the size imbalance between the ethnic minority Tamil and the dominant Sinhalese army. Based on these two snapshots in military capabilities and gender scripts, as well as the LTTE's willingness to transgress social rules to stave off defeat, it seems highly likely that the shifts in gender roles in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam throughout the conflict was in response to military necessity.

Feminist Critiques of Women Combatants and the Women's Response

Despite documented testimony by women fighters cataloged in the body of research, some scholars imply that joining the LTTE was not real empowerment; i.e. just because the LTTE said that women could do these things now did not mean that the women were exercising free choice. One article on women in LTTE concluded that "...governed by a rigid code of conduct, women are reduced to soldiers obeying orders which is not inherently empowering or liberating."⁴⁹

Miranda Alison, however, calls the binary of victim/agent or liberated/oppressed "unnecessary and unsophisticated."⁵⁰ These women were born into a patriarchal and restrictive society, and while they were made vulnerable by conflict, they made decisions to shape their own lives by providing for their own security. With the exception of those who were kidnapped or conscripted into service, these women authored their own destinies. Arguing that they were disempowered because they joined a male-dominated organization ignores the reality of the male-dominated lives that they had before.

Alternative Explanations for Changes in Gender Roles

Eggert's model for factors of change in terrorist organizations is a compelling theory. It does not, however, cover all the variables that might impact gender dynamics within a terrorist organization such as the LTTE, nor does this brief case study conclusively prove that military necessity was the only reason that the LTTE changed its gender roles. It would be remiss not to mention some of those here as opportunities for future research.

This research cannot prove causality. While it seems likely that women joined in response to public statements based on the timelines of LTTE organizational change, perhaps it was the existence of women volunteers that inspired the change. A future research question may ask: are military organizations responsive to civil society's change and demands?

The bureaucratic politics model would also be interesting to apply to this case: which of the men who founded the organization alongside Velupillai Prabhakaran pushed for women's inclusion?⁵¹ Who fought against it? Did the early women, those who contributed from 1983 onward and founded the Women's Front, negotiate for an added focus on the recruitment of women? These questions could best be answered by a scholar who speaks Tamil, has access to the community, and could interview survivors. Unfortunately, when Prabhakaran was killed in 2009, so too was the opportunity to ask him about his life's work. The same questions could be asked about the different branches; the Women's Front naturally had a preponderance of women, but the Black Tigers and the Sea Tigers were also both known for being significantly female.⁵² What level of influence did those organizations have in decision-making as a whole, and how did women come to dominate them?

Other avenues for future research would include more consistently analyzing speeches and publications from the LTTE for gendered language usage over time and mapping when women's liberation became part of the official rhetoric. Similarly, analyzing this conflict from the Sri Lankan government's perspective could provide context for other influencing variables: why did the Sri Lankan army commit so much sexual assault, when the LTTE did not?⁵³ What did the Sri Lankan government think

of Tamil women's participation, and did they ever consider offering more freedoms to both Tamil and Sinhalese women to weaken support for the LTTE? Finally, applying an overtly feminist constructivist lens to this conflict may offer keener insights into gender roles within the Tigers, within Tamil culture, and within Sri Lanka as a whole.

Military Defeat: What the Sri Lankan Victory Meant for Tamil Gender Roles

In 2004, Colonel Thamilini (real name Subramaniam Sivakami), the leader of the Women's Front, said that though the war provided significant changes to the roles of women, they could not be considered final until the peace negotiations were completed.⁵⁴ She thought that women's new role could only be cemented through a new definition accorded by legislation. She was right—but the peace talks never occurred.

There was no negotiation period for the Tigers wherein they could institutionalize the rights of women because the Sri Lankan government won outright. In the language of Dr. Fujii's framework, the Sri Lankan government got to write the script. Since Sri Lanka and the Sinhalese had not changed their traditional gender roles during the conflict the way the Tigers had, they had the power to make the female Tigers conform to the Sri Lankan script and traditional gender roles. For example, "after her release from a rehabilitation camp for former Tamil Tiger fighters in 2011, one former member of the women-only -Malathi Brigade was presented by Sri Lankan government officials with a sewing machine."⁵⁵ These women now face the cultural isolation and stigmatization from which the Tigers protected them; it will take a careful and gender-sensitive reintegration process to mitigate this issue. Though this paper has

focused on the gender script of the Tigers, terrorist organizations are not the only ones capable of changing gender roles and dynamics. Non-violent organizations would do well to challenge the dynamics that prevent them from taking advantage of all possible resources—the power and ingenuity of women included.

Concluding Thoughts

This research contributes to the body of literature on the Sri Lankan civil war and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam by considering the manipulation of gender roles as a military strategy. It also creates space for thinking about post-conflict gender roles in other situations. All eyes are on Ukraine right now, where Ukrainians (including many women) are fighting for their sovereignty against the Russian invasion.⁵⁶ Should Russia win this war without resorting to negotiation, it will write the script for Ukraine's culture afterward. Ukraine has, in recent years, come closer to the West culturally; Russia promotes itself as the last great bastion of conservatism where masculinity is celebrated.⁵⁷ What would a Russian victory mean for gender equality and the rights of homosexuals in Ukraine? How would Russian values be exported and enforced in a newly conquered Ukraine? This area of research deserves timely attention for the sake of those who might have to live under those conditions.

Though the Sri Lankan government was able to win its war, other militaries around the world face insurgencies within their own borders without the ability to spend more money or find more soldiers. Understanding the gender dynamics that shape insurgency recruitment and commitment is critical to fighting smarter counterinsurgency campaigns and in analyzing conflict.

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