

Women as Agents of Political Violence: Gendering Security

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This article challenges the idea that women are necessarily more peaceful than men by looking at examples of female combatants in ethno-nationalist military organizations in Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland. Anti-state, 'liberatory' nationalisms often provide more space (ideologically and practically) for women to participate as combatants than do institutionalized state or pro-state nationalisms, and this can be seen in the cases of the LTTE in Sri Lanka and the IRA in Northern Ireland when contrasted with loyalist paramilitaries in Northern Ireland. However, the role of the female combatant is ambiguous and indicates a tension between different conceptualizations of societal security, where female combatants both fight against societal insecurity posed by the state and contribute to internal societal insecurity within their ethno-national groups.

Keywords gender • violence • security • ethnicity • conflict

FOR FEMINISTS ENGAGING with the field of security studies, the question of whose security is being discussed is important, and a focus on the individual and non-state collectivities as well as the state is favoured. Whose experiences are brought into analysis and the construction of knowledge is also significant. Since security has traditionally been conceptualized in masculinized, military terms and women have been excluded from this, the experiences and roles of women have rarely been of interest in literature on security. This article, although concerned with 'hard security' issues in the sense that it is focused on war and political violence, also diverges from traditional security studies approaches by drawing on the experiences of women. Specifically, it examines the experiences of one particular group of women who present a challenge to traditionalist ideas about war, peace and gender roles: female combatants. Indeed, the mere fact that it is necessary to specify 'female combatants' indicates their historical rarity and symbolic position as unconventional figures. The assumption that

women are more peaceful and less aggressive or warlike than men is a familiar one to most of us. The expectation of women as being nurturing and non-violent (and therefore not appropriate as soldiers) is held in many different societies, though this has not been universal temporally or geographically. This article challenges the idea that women are necessarily more peaceful than men through an examination of female combatants in non-state ethno-nationalist military organizations, focusing on case studies of Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland.

The study of ethno-national armed conflict provides an interesting theoretical arena in which to examine gender roles, expectations and experiences in war. Theoretical analysis suggests that anti-state (working against the existing state authority) so-called 'liberatory' nationalisms often provide a greater degree of ideological and practical space for women to participate as combatants than do institutionalized state or pro-state nationalisms. The cases discussed here were chosen because they provide productive ground for further exploring this issue. After briefly outlining the context of the respective wars in Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland, the present article then examines the relationship between gender and nationalism in regard to female combatants, drawing on new empirical material from the case studies. Both the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the LTTE, or the Tigers) in Sri Lanka and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland are anti-state groups that conceive of themselves as liberatory, fighting to protect the societal security of their respective nations against their respective existing states. Both have also been notable for their significant involvement of women in military roles. In contrast, loyalist paramilitaries in Northern Ireland, while also being non-state organizations, have constructed their purpose as being to bolster and protect the UK state and to protect Protestant people from the security threat posed by Irish republicanism. They occupy an uneasy pro-state British nationalist or subnational ethnic position and have not aimed at being revolutionary or liberatory. In the light of the above theoretical suggestion, it is no mere coincidence that women have been much less involved in military roles in loyalist paramilitaries than in republican ones. In this section of the article, some of the tensions and ambiguities attached to the role of the female combatant are also discussed. Women fighting in nationalist conflicts sometimes face resistance from male comrades who feel the security of their masculinity is threatened. In addition, while undertaking non-traditional gender roles, these women have also frequently utilized existing conservative gender constructions and stereotypes to pursue their objectives. The article then briefly addresses the fact that the expanded space some women attain in the context of war does not necessarily translate into postwar social changes beneficial to women; indeed, the postwar remarginalization of female ex-combatants suggests that they ultimately figure as a threat to the nation's ideological and political

security and cohesion. The article ends with some general theoretical conclusions and highlights further necessary research.

The article draws on fieldwork carried out by the author in Sri Lanka in 2002 and 2004 and in Ireland in 2003, which utilized in-depth semi-structured interviews with female combatants and ex-combatants. The women are viewed as agents making their own choices, though acting within multiple hierarchical structures and specific contexts. The combatants investigated are non-conscripted, non-state military members or ex-members who have engaged in combat or are/were trained and prepared to do so. 'Combat' is conceptualized broadly to include terrorist tactics like bomb-making and assassinations, as well as more conventional forms of battle. In the case of Northern Ireland, some loyalist women are included who were involved in more supportive roles (such as moving and hiding arms and ammunition) and who did not necessarily formally join a paramilitary organization. In Sri Lanka, most interviews were obtained directly through the political wing of the LTTE; although necessary, this meant that the organization selected my participants. Two, however, were arranged through a community group contact, and two through a chance encounter. In Northern Ireland, the majority of interviews were obtained through ex-prisoner organizations, with some accessed through other community groups.

Context: The Conflicts in Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland

Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland are culturally and structurally very different, yet they share a history of British colonialism that has contributed to their respective late 20th-century conflicts (beyond the scope of this article to discuss). Both conflicts can be viewed as being ethno-nationalist; both have a pattern of violent conflict breaking out after a failed civil rights movement; and each is interesting in regard to the issue of female combatants and, in particular, societal security.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has an ethnically diverse population of about 17.5 million. Around 74.6% of the population are Sinhalese, 12.6% Sri Lankan Tamil, 7.4% Muslim and 5.5% Indian Tamil, with other small minorities (Samuel, 2001: 185).¹

¹ 'Indian Tamils' are the descendents of south Indians brought over as indentured labour by the British to work British-owned plantations in the central hills in the mid-19th century. 'Muslims' are considered a separate ethnic group in Sri Lanka.

Sinhalese are largely Buddhist and Tamils Hindu, though each group includes a Christian minority. Since the late 1970s, ethnically Tamil groups have been fighting against the predominantly Sinhala-Buddhist state (and Sinhalese and Muslim civilians) for an independent state in the north and east of Sri Lanka. The war is considered to have begun in 1983. The most powerful militant Tamil separatist group, the LTTE, attained hegemony in the mid-1980s by destroying its competitors. Around 70,000 people have died as a result of the conflict, and thousands more have been displaced or left the country as refugees and migrants. An agreement on a ceasefire was reached in December 2001 between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, and negotiations on a political settlement began, mediated by the Norwegian government, though this process has now been stalled for over a year. The peace process has been further challenged since November 2003 by serious internal divisions within the Sri Lankan government and, since March 2004, violent disputes between the LTTE's northern leadership and dissenting elements of its eastern faction. In July 2004, a serious threat to the ceasefire was presented by a female suicide bomber in Colombo, who killed four policemen as well as herself. The LTTE denies culpability, but is widely believed to have been responsible.

Although women have participated in the Sri Lankan state's armed forces, they have only very recently begun to be trained for combat and therefore have not played a significant role in the conflict in this way. In contrast, it has been widely noted that women have been pivotally involved as combatants in the Tamil groups, particularly in the LTTE. Initially, LTTE women were involved in propaganda work, medical care, information collection, fund-raising and recruitment, but they were soon given military training. In 1983, the organization founded a special section for women called the Vituthalai Pulikal Munani (Women's Front of the Liberation Tigers), which began battle training in Tamil Nadu (India) in 1985, also being trained in Jaffna (Sri Lanka) from 1987. Its first battle was against the Sri Lankan military in 1986. By 1989, the unit had its own leadership structure (Ann, 1993). From the mid-1980s, the Tigers have aggressively recruited women into their fighting cadres; until 1990, the proportion of female fighters was small, but it then increased rapidly. The women's military wing is a well-organized and highly disciplined force. The LTTE's naval force, the Sea Tigers, and its suicide squad, the Black Tigers, contain large numbers of women. The number of female combatants is naturally a military secret, but estimates vary from between around 15–20% to one-third of the organization's core combat strength, with some estimates less realistically claiming 50%.

Northern Ireland

From the 1969 outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland until the 1994 cease-fires (the period known as the 'Troubles'), 3,400 people were killed and over 20,000 injured (Ruane & Todd, 1996: 1). The current population is almost 1.7 million, of which around 53% are Protestants (or descended from Protestants) and almost 44% are Catholics (or descended from Catholics).² The conflict has been over the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. Political conflict has, broadly, been between British unionists and Irish nationalists. The primary armed parties to the conflict have been republican paramilitaries,³ a variant of Irish nationalists that want Northern Ireland to become part of an island-wide Irish republic; loyalist paramilitaries, a variant of British unionists that want Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom; and British military forces. Although there has been a ceasefire of the major militant groups since 1994 (on and off) and a political settlement was reached in 1998, there is no guarantee that this will provide the foundation for a lasting peace. The peace process has been strained and precarious since it began, and in 2002 the Northern Ireland Assembly (the devolved government established under the 1998 Good Friday Agreement) and the peace process became severely deadlocked over, among other things, the issue of IRA decommissioning of weapons. The Assembly was suspended in October 2002, and direct rule from London was reintroduced. The future of the Assembly, and of the peace process as a whole, remains unclear.

Women have participated in both republican and loyalist paramilitaries in Northern Ireland in a variety of roles, but have been much more militarily active in republican groups than in loyalist ones. The experience of community resistance in the 1970s helped to politicize many nationalist/republican women and bring them into community activity. Women in nationalist areas have played an active role in community protests since the civil rights movement and are still, on the whole, more active in political and community groups than Protestant women. In the late 1960s, younger women joining Cumann na mBan (the IRA women's auxiliary organization) began expressing disillusionment with their subsidiary role and argued for their integration into the IRA itself; sympathetic male IRA officers eventually gave them military training. When the Provisional IRA movement formed, it maintained Cumann na mBan but allowed women to be seconded into the IRA – militarily active, but without status as full members. With the later IRA restructuring, women were accepted into the organization on an equal basis with men (Ward, 1989: 258–259). Much less is known about female

² See Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency: <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/Census/Start.html>.

³ As Adrian Guelke (1999: 31) has noted, outside Northern Ireland 'paramilitary' usually designates state security forces lying between the police and the military. However, in Northern Ireland it is used to designate non-state organizations that have used or threatened to use political violence.

loyalist paramilitary members. Loyalist women's activities have primarily been in the realms of 'welfare work' (support for male prisoners and their families), first aid, and cleaning, moving and hiding weapons. A minority of women have been involved in more directly combative roles. The scale and extent of women's presence and involvement in loyalist paramilitaries is very hard to gauge, and I found gaining access to women willing to talk about their involvement to be extremely difficult.

Gender, Nationalism and Female Combatants

As Spike Peterson (1998) and others have noted, women are neither homogeneous nor necessarily united, and the various ways in which they are situated shape the allegiances they have in the context of nationalist mobilization. In contrast to conventional wars, many contemporary conflicts 'privatize violence', with more civilians being drawn into conflicts and the separation of (male) belligerents and inhabitants breaking down. Concomitantly, the stereotype of aggressive men and pacifist women is disrupted; particularly in civil wars and wars of liberation, women are also combatants (Turshen, 1998). The breakdown of the home front/war front boundary in contemporary conflicts seems to be significant in resulting in increased numbers of female combatants. Nothing could be further from the truth than Martin van Creveld's (2001: 227) claim that in contemporary intra-state 'low intensity' wars women are staying away from combat roles. Many of the examples he gives of such conflicts, where he maintains women have *not* been present in combat roles, are in fact examples of quite the opposite – the Tamil movement in Sri Lanka being a case in point.

Valentine Moghadam (1993: 71–72) differentiates between two models of revolution: a modernizing type that includes ideas of the equality and emancipation of women, where women are linked to progress and modernization, and a form where women and their acceptable behaviour and appearance are viewed as central to cultural rejuvenation or religious orthodoxy. Also highly significant is a distinction some make between institutionalized state nationalisms and 'liberatory' nationalisms (Abdo, 1994; Sharoni, 2001). Both forms involve assumptions about masculinity, femininity and gender relations, yet there are often important differences between their gendered assumptions. The suggestion made here is that 'liberatory' anti-state nationalisms are more likely to be receptive to women's non-traditional involvement, and possibly more open to feminism, than institutionalized state nationalisms or related pro-state nationalisms (though this is far from being assured in specific contexts). Nira Yuval-Davis (1997: 98) suggests that incorporating women into militaries in national liberation movements conveys

the message that women are (symbolically) equal members of the collectivity, and that *all* members of the collectivity are symbolically incorporated into the military. 'Liberatory' forms also usually incorporate fairly wide-ranging goals of social transformation as part of their political programmes, while state or pro-state nationalisms do not. This distinction between such nationalisms is significant in relation to the two case studies under examination here, where both the LTTE and the IRA construct themselves as liberatory movements in contrast to pro-state unionist/loyalist organizations. Both Tamil nationalism and Irish republicanism have programmes for social and political change as well as military goals, while loyalism does not in more than a nascent and marginalized way. The LTTE project is more wide-ranging and highly developed than that of the IRA, however, which following the theoretical suggestions above may help account for the greater level of women's participation within it.

As noted earlier, the LTTE has actively recruited women into its military force only since the mid-1980s, though almost all the Tamil militant groups emphasized women's participation in the national liberation struggle and made appeals for them to enlist. The change in LTTE policy towards women's participation appears to have been the result of (1) a strategic need for more fighters in the face of an insufficiency of men, as the young male population was increasingly decimated through combat and the refugee flow; (2) the ideological need to demonstrate the LTTE was an all-encompassing mass social movement; and (3) pressure from young Tamil women. My research indicates women and girls themselves have had a variety of interconnected motivations for enlisting in the LTTE, in which their perceptions of the societal insecurities of their ethno-national community, their own individual insecurity and, for some, the gender-specific insecurities associated with being a Sri Lankan Tamil woman in the context of the war all interrelate: nationalist commitment; the death of a loved one and/or other experiences or perceptions of suffering and oppression at the hands of the state (including experiences of displacement); educational disruption and restrictions; poverty; sexual violence against women; and ideas of women's emancipation.⁴ As Pinar Bilgin (2003: 211) has noted, 'the security needs and interests of the state and society do not always coincide'. In this case, it is the Sri Lankan state itself, even more than the broader Sinhalese ethno-national community, that is seen to pose the greatest threat to the cultural, political and economic security of the Sri Lankan Tamil community.

⁴ An unknown number of cadres have also been conscripted into the movement, but my focus is on voluntary recruits. There is a debate over whether or not the LTTE conscripts any members. I interviewed one woman who said she was conscripted, though she was held for less than a year and was not sent into battle, but the LTTE denies conscription, saying it wants only people dedicated to the cause. Others claim forcible conscription is widespread.

The impetus for women to be allowed into the IRA as full members seems to have stemmed from pressure from young women themselves in the late 1960s, in conjunction with a recognition by the leadership of the need for having some militarily trained women (Ward, 1989: 258). The same strategic pressures of a non-state organization fighting against a state applied, as did the ideological pressure of needing to demonstrate that the group represented a mass social movement. In terms of iconography and ideology, the IRA, like the LTTE, has emphasized the importance of women to the movement and constructed one role for women as being that of the 'freedom fighter'. This image has been celebrated in a number of republican street murals (Sales, 1997a: 144; Coulter, 1999: 240–241). My work suggests a range of motivations for enlisting in the IRA, many of which echo those of LTTE women, but in a culturally specific way, and equally clearly reflect an interconnection between the women's perceptions of societal (again, the ethno-national community) and individual insecurity, though a sense of specifically gendered insecurity was not obvious: nationalist commitment; experiences or perceptions of discrimination and injustice (particularly harassment by the security forces and/or anti-Catholic discrimination in employment); loved ones killed, injured or imprisoned; the impact of the civil rights movement; the impact of the prison protests and hunger strikes; and growing up in strongly republican families. In the case of republican women, it is again the state (in this case, the UK) and to a lesser extent the unionist community that is seen as representing the biggest threat to the cultural, political and economic security of the Irish nationalist community.

'Peter', a loyalist ex-prisoner and community worker, made the point to me that loyalists and republicans were 'fighting two different wars'. Republicans viewed the conflict as a revolutionary war of resistance against the state, so there was a role for many people to play, including women. In contrast, 'loyalist paramilitaries were never about buildin' a revolutionary movement. They were involved in a low-intensity counter-terrorist war against republicans. Now, what role is there for women to play in that?'⁵ The implication was that since loyalism was much less of a cohesive movement than republicanism, and was not a revolutionary movement, there was not the same perceived strategic or ideological need for women's involvement. In stark contrast to the heroic images of female paramilitaries (and women in other public, active roles) in republican street art, there has been no equivalent Protestant symbolic role for women; in the iconography of loyalist political murals, the images are almost entirely masculine (Coulter, 1999: 240–241). My research suggests that a great many (though not all) loyalist paramilitary women were introduced to this through male family members – usually husbands or partners, though sometimes brothers or fathers. Those

⁵ Interview with the author (in English), June 2002, Northern Ireland; not the interviewee's real name.

I interviewed nonetheless stressed that they themselves had conviction in the justness of their actions, most rationalizing this in terms of defence of their families and wider communities. This, again, indicates a concern with societal insecurity, though in this case it seems generally to have been a more localized societal concern than in the other two cases, reflecting the conflicted sense of ethno-national identity that many Northern Ireland unionists possess.

Tensions and Ambiguities in the Role of the Female Combatant

Yuval-Davis (1997: 101) asserts that in national liberation armies a common ideological position may help overcome some of the tensions attendant to integrating women into military forces, particularly if women's emancipation is seen as symbolizing the emancipation of the nation – as in Moghadam's 'modernizing' movements and as has been the case with the LTTE. This does seem to be true in part; yet, with women's participation in military roles, some gendered tensions and ambiguities remain. While most of the LTTE and ex-LTTE women I interviewed emphasized that they experienced total equality with male comrades in terms of respect and tasks assigned, this was not always the case, and some male members have been resistant to women's military involvement. 'Tamilachi', a former LTTE soldier (currently in an administrative position), reported that when the Sri Lankan army launched a large-scale operation at the end of 1995 to retake the Jaffna peninsula from the Tigers, many LTTE men felt female members would not be able to cope and wanted them to flee with the civilians. The women (herself among them) insisted on staying and fighting, and she felt that they proved themselves and earned a lot of respect.⁶ It is also important to note that the LTTE houses and trains its male and female cadres separately, which seems to help reduce the possibility for gender tension and satisfies local cultural expectations of appropriate behaviour. The LTTE has an official ideological commitment to women's liberation, and its female cadres are seen to symbolize this. One potentially problematic element of this is that the independence struggle invariably frames the struggle for women's rights: the Tamil struggle is prioritized, and women's emancipation is seen as depending on the struggle. Nevertheless, a concrete result has been that many LTTE women have come to be committed to women's rights and advancing women's status and position in Tamil society (see Alison, 2003), though the impact on male members is a more open question.

⁶ Interview with the author (in Tamil with interpreter), August 2002, LTTE Political Office in Jaffna, Sri Lanka; LTTE name, not the interviewee's real name.

Women involved with the IRA in the early years of the 'Troubles' seem more likely to have experienced incidents of sexism than those in later years. 'Teresa' stated that although on the whole she felt she was treated very well by male IRA comrades, she does remember some instances where a man demanded to have a better gun than a woman with whom he was going on an operation, which reflects a feeling of insecure masculinity in the face of female combatants. She also knew of some men who would not work with women – some because they did not believe women could or should be involved, but others because they believed they would feel too responsible for the well-being of a female comrade.⁷ A connection between paramilitary experience and a commitment to women's rights is much less clearcut in the case of the IRA, which has not had an official interest in feminism, though the experience of imprisonment has contributed to such an interest for some republican women (and men), as a result of education, discussions and experiences. Only a very few loyalist paramilitary women were involved in the full range of the paramilitaries' violent activities; put crudely, in general loyalist women carried the guns and loyalist men used them. Those involved in a more direct way faced tougher struggles to prove themselves in the eyes of male comrades. 'Tracey' 'got an awful stick off men for, as they said, carryin' on the way I was doin'. . . . I was a girl, I should be sittin' knittin', washin' dishes and rearin' childer'. She feels that she proved herself and earned lasting respect when she refused to talk under arrest and interrogation, while her male comrades revealed information.⁸ Tracey believes in equality for women and men, but this does not seem to stem from her experiences with the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF); most loyalist women I interviewed were reluctant to associate themselves with feminism. In the loyalist case, the presence of a few combatant women seems to have been received by many men as a significant threat or challenge to the cultural/societal security of established gender roles. In the hyper-masculine world of loyalist paramilitary organizations, military women create a fundamental unease.

In many cases, women involved in nationalist struggles, while themselves undertaking non-traditional gender roles, have utilized existing conservative gender constructions and stereotypes to pursue their objectives against the state or their perceived enemy. In Afghanistan, Algeria and Palestine, for example, women have used local cultural expectations about what clothing is appropriate for them to secretly transport small arms and explosives. In Sri Lanka, Tamil nationalist women have utilized cultural expectations related to their behaviour and dress to gain access to targets as suicide bombers, hiding belt bombs under saris or dresses – a notorious example being the

⁷ Interview with the author (in English), April 2003, Belfast, Northern Ireland; not the interviewee's real name.

⁸ Interview with the author (in English), March 2003, Belfast, Northern Ireland; not the interviewee's real name.

1991 suicide-bomb assassination of former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi by female LTTE operative 'Dhanu'.⁹ Paramilitary women in Northern Ireland have used the reluctance on the part of the state security forces to search women (because of the negative publicity attached to this) to their advantage – both republican and loyalist paramilitary women and men stressed to me that it is women who have had central responsibility for transporting, moving, hiding, cleaning and storing weapons and explosives materials, as they were much less likely to be stopped and searched. 'Ann', involved with the UVF in the early years of the 'Troubles', said that 'you used to go up the road with your pram, the child sittin' in it, and "hello" to the soldiers and they didn't know what you had under the pram!' (that is, guns hidden under the child). On numerous occasions, she took weapons away for male UVF members after they had been on an operation, as it was too risky for men to carry guns. 'Many's the time a fella just walked past you, you just opened your bag [for the weapon] and walked on, you know?'¹⁰ In the case of loyalist paramilitaries, this role was not only an example of utilizing existing gender constructions to their own strategic ends but also reflected the strongly gendered division of labour in these organizations, less marked in republican paramilitaries.

In their more conventional military capacity as uniformed LTTE members, female cadres have a fearsome reputation, and it is often said that they are more violent and frightening than male members, which is interesting in respect to gender. As P. L. de Silva (1995: 184) notes, if this is true one explanation might be that 'female cadres have to be more tough, ruthless and less-sympathetic – in a word, more macho – in order to compete for status and recognition in a traditionally patriarchal context'. On the other hand, what is perhaps more interesting is if it is only a *perception* that the women are more violent. This would suggest persistent underlying societal gender-role expectations that mean that women's involvement in violence remains more shocking and disturbing than men's involvement. An incident involving loyalist paramilitary women in Northern Ireland reveals a similar pattern. Although the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) had a women's branch in the early years of the 'Troubles', this was disbanded as early as 1974 after a number of its members beat to death Ann Ogilby, a married Protestant woman who made visits to an unmarried male prisoner. Such a murder was hardly unheard of in terms of UDA activities, yet this provoked widespread revulsion even among (male) UDA prisoners. Rosemary Sales (1997b: 71) suggests that 'the fact that it was women, acting on their own initiative, who carried out this particularly brutal murder may have contributed to the condemnation'.

⁹ For visual footage of this, see the 1991 BBC documentary *Suicide Killers*.

¹⁰ Interview with the author (in English), February 2003, Belfast, Northern Ireland; not the interviewee's real name.

Female Combatants Post-Conflict

Like male combatants, female combatants in nationalist conflicts view themselves as fighting to protect the political, cultural, economic and military security of their nation, community or family: that is, societal security at varying social levels. However, despite women's frequent involvement in nationalist conflicts as combatants, there is a recurring global pattern of their postwar remarginalization and return to traditional roles. As Rick Wilford (1998: 3, 15) notes, 'fighting alongside men to achieve independence does not provide a guarantee of women's inclusion as equal citizens', and 'even where women have been active as warriors . . . they invariably are left holding the wrong end of the citizenship stick'. Existing research suggests that female combatants are often perceived as a necessary but *temporary* aberration in a time of national crisis and need, rather than as representative of a fundamental societal change in gender roles. Their postwar remarginalization also suggests that they figure as a threat to the nation's and the state's ideological security and cohesion and the existing political culture, through their destabilization of gender roles. While this can be tolerated (and is often necessary) in a time of crisis, it is less acceptable in a post-conflict, 'normal society' context, indicating again the ambiguous and uneasy nature of the role of the female combatant.

It is as yet too early to tell how the question of women's postwar remarginalization will play out in Sri Lanka. Despite the LTTE's official commitment to wide-ranging social change that includes altering gender relations and caste hierarchies, there remains a serious unanswered question about what will happen if LTTE women begin strongly pushing feminist issues that the male sectors of the leadership do not agree with. Interestingly, from my interviews with both combatant and non-combatant women, I received the strong impression that, as accepted as the LTTE women have come to be, people in the wider Tamil community do not necessarily view them as suitable wives. This may be because they are viewed as not being passive enough, though another reason suggested was the idea that if the war broke out again, the women would have to leave their families and go back to fight. It has also been alleged that women are much more represented in the military activities of the LTTE than in its political activities. In response, 'Thamilini' (Women's Political Wing Leader for the whole of Tamil Eelam) argued that this is now changing and that since men have been involved in the LTTE and its military activities for longer than women, they have had many more opportunities than women to rise to high political positions.¹¹ This suggests that it is not only in Western states and conventional politics

¹¹ Interview with the author (in Tamil with interpreter), August 2002, LTTE headquarters in the Vanni, Sri Lanka; LTTE name, not the interviewee's real name.

that military service has been seen as a prerequisite for political power. In 2002, according to 'Thamilini', there were twelve members on the Central Committee, the LTTE's top decisionmaking body, and five of these were women. There are also a number of women who are now LTTE area leaders and administrators, and a separate women-only committee on women's development. Finally, another significant issue is what impact women's prominent involvement as LTTE combatants has had on wider Tamil society. Although their example of non-traditional behaviour seems to have led to some other Tamil women behaving less conventionally, for example by riding bicycles and motorcycles and wearing less-traditional clothing, there has also been a backlash against such behaviour both from within and without the movement in terms of attempts to impose dress restrictions on women, illustrating how internal concern with the societal/cultural security of an ethno-national group can result in threats to the individual security of women.

In Northern Ireland, women are better represented in republican electoral politics in the form of Sinn Féin (politically affiliated with the Provisional IRA) than they are in unionist/loyalist politics (see Wilford & Galligan, 1999; Wilford, 1999; Galligan & Wilford, 1999; Ward, 2002). However, Wilford (1999: 197) suggests that 'although the formal claim to socialist credentials espoused by Irish republicanism creates the ideological space for a commitment to gender equality, not all women in the contemporary republican movement are persuaded that this goal is a constituent element of its project'. One contentious area in which this has played out has been Sinn Féin's policy on abortion, where feminists within the movement have struggled against traditionalists. 'Carol', a republican ex-prisoner, votes for Sinn Féin at elections but chose not to become a member or to lobby for the organization in part because she is opposed to its stand on abortion.¹² Many women in the party pushed for a liberal stance on the issue but were stymied by conservative elements and the concerns the party leadership had about alienating conservative and religious nationalist voters. Some ex-IRA women I interviewed felt that they experienced more gender equality in terms of treatment and opportunities within the military wing of republicanism than within the political wing. 'Mairead', for example, noted that 'I'm not going to say that there isn't people with sexist views in the movement, there is. But it was in a different part of the movement that I experienced sexism' (within Sinn Féin, after her release from prison).¹³ Others indicated similar views. 'Carol' reported that she did not experience any inequality within the armed side of the republican movement, 'because first and fore-

¹² Interview with the author (in English), April 2003, Belfast, Northern Ireland; not the interviewee's real name.

¹³ Interview with the author (in English), May 2003, Belfast, Northern Ireland; not the interviewee's real name.

most you were a soldier and that was it', but maintained that in the wider movement 'there was a certain amount of denial about, you know, we're gonna build this utopia – well I never seen that. I seen the same women who were struggling, who were demanding equality within every aspect of their life – and they got it within the movement, but they got it because they fought for it, not because it was the right thing to do.' She perceives a 'contradiction of fightin' a struggle for national liberation', whereby both men and women will take up arms to liberate the nation but men will likely not feel as strongly about gaining equality for women. She spoke of reading about the experiences of women in liberation struggles in Nicaragua and El Salvador and South Africa, and how in the post-conflict period they were 'still fightin' for the conditions that were denied to them . . . and it's still a struggle and it's a big contradiction for them, and I know it's the same for me as well.'¹⁴

Conclusion

Examination of the cases of female combatants in Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland illuminates much more than just the fact that women bear no essential relationship to peace and nonviolence. It also shows that different contexts produce different gender constructions. These cases illustrate that anti-state, 'liberatory' forms of nationalism, such as those espoused by Tamil nationalism and Irish republicanism, provide greater ideological and practical space for women's non-traditional involvement than do institutionalized state or pro-state nationalisms, such as loyalism. However, what they also suggest, in regard to understanding security at various different levels, is that the figure of the female combatant remains riven with tension and ambivalence. The evidence presented in this article suggests that even when women participate in military roles in nationalist mobilizations, their presence and actions are experienced by some male members as threatening what we might call the psychological security of clearcut, gender-differentiated roles. Gender roles are a fundamental part of any cultural code, and these men experience female combatants as a challenge to the security of their masculinity, which is an issue of both individual and societal (cultural) insecurity. Of the cases examined in this article, this is most obvious with regard to loyalism, where few women were present in the paramilitaries, there was a gendered division of labour, and the organizations did not encourage acceptance of women; however, it was not unknown in the other two cases.

¹⁴ Interview, April 2003 (see note 12).

The widespread reputation of LTTE women as being more violent than their male counterparts, their reception in the Tamil community as at once heroic and yet unsuitable as wives and mothers, the reaction of loyalist communities to violence performed by women, the global pattern of postwar remarginalization of female ex-combatants, and perhaps even the persistence of the utilization of conservative gender expectations by combatant women (however strategic), all also indicate the potential for societal insecurity where the behaviour of female combatants is seen as threatening the cultural and political security of the social group from which they come, since it deviates from the norms established by that group. Women's participation in such non-traditional gender roles is often seen as a necessary (but temporary) aberration in response to a serious crisis of societal security presented by a state perceived to be threatening and illegitimate, yet this very participation can itself lead to a sense of internal societal insecurity for the social group. This is witnessed most poignantly in the attitudes of LTTE women themselves. While performing unconventional gender roles and contributing to significant societal changes in the Sri Lankan Tamil social formation, many of them nevertheless seem conflicted in their attitudes towards such changes and gender roles in general. While being committed to economic emancipation for Tamil women, they nevertheless have a history of promoting or enforcing dress codes for women that their organization deems culturally appropriate, and some in leadership positions reported in interviews being concerned about cultural changes in the Tamil diaspora in regard to the breakup of families and the lessening of traditional bonds of obedience and respect on the part of Tamil children (particularly girls) towards their parents. As can be seen in many examples of ethnic conflict, in the context of escalating conflict between Tamil groups and the Sri Lankan state the competing societal identities of Tamils and Sinhalese (both cause and consequence of the conflict) became more rigid and inflexible than in times of lesser conflict. Gender is centrally important here, where identity formation in response to societal insecurity can impose gender restrictions on women's behaviour, roles and dress. There is thus a tension between cultural/societal change and attempts at (potentially essentializing) preservation in the face of insecurity. The history of both republican and loyalist female paramilitary members indicates a similar conflicted sense of societal security/insecurity: both have at various times been involved in the policing of other women's behaviour, often violently and particularly in regard to sexual conduct.

For the state itself, too, female combatants can constitute both a real, physical security threat in terms of their military actions and also a more ideological threat to the security of the political and social status quo. It is interesting to note at once the fear generated in Sri Lankan state military men by the spectre of LTTE women and at the same time the general restriction of women in the Sri Lankan state military to more conventional gender roles.

The latter have only very recently begun to be trained for combat roles, their numbers remain comparatively low, and they seem to be seen by many in the military leadership as an administrative resource to free up more male soldiers for combat duty (Sebastian, 1996).

Some female fighters in nationalist organizations face difficulties 'proving' their worthiness as soldiers similar to those faced by women in state militaries. While undertaking unconventional gender roles themselves, female combatants in such conflicts also sometimes strategically utilize existing conservative notions of gender to carry out their activities more effectively. This may not be free of long-term ideological and political costs, as well as potentially contributing to the physical insecurity of other women, who may be subject to human rights abuses by state forces using such activities on the part of militant women to rationalize unjust searches and harassment of all women. This requires further investigation. The figure of the female combatant is often only uneasily accepted, and the political violence such women participate in seems still to be seen as more shocking and less acceptable than comparable violence committed by men, indicating an underlying discomfort with such a challenge to gendered expectations (or established ideas of societal security) that may be widely cross-cultural. This, too, is worthy of deeper exploration.

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