

CHAPTER THREE

Issues and Challenges Confronted by Women War Widows in Post-Conflict Sri Lankan Society

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Abstract

The prolonged ethnic conflict which spanned over more than two decades in Sri Lanka brought many socio-economic problems, one of which is the crisis of the war widows which is significant. Women were severely affected and victimised by the armed conflict. This research study analyses social issues faced by women war widows in post-conflict Sri Lankan society living in the Manmunneipattu Divisional Secretariat (DS) Division in the Batticaloa District. There are 24,800 war widows in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka and among them 16,000 war widows live in the Batticaloa District. This study utilised qualitative methods to research the issues and challenges confronted by women war widows in this area. Primary data was collected through key informant interviews and case study methods. For the case studies, 20 war widows were selected randomly from the Manmunneipattu DS Division in the Batticaloa District. The findings of the study revealed that war widows face severe social and cultural challenges. As far as the war widows are concerned, women continue to struggle with the bad effects of the prolonged war, multiple displacements and social insecurity. Land and property ownership issues are some of the main problems that women face. They struggle to deal with basic rights and livelihood issues equally. Lack of opportunities for

their economic empowerment has worsened the plight of these war widows and has pushed them in to backward social tier. The study confirms that male domination in the researched Tamil community hinders the independent functioning of the war widows. The war widows, who are mothers in the villages, have developed an inferiority complex since they are unable to bring up their children in the same manner as other women do. They have the pressure of ensuring that their children are brought up in an appropriate environment and given education and other basic facilities. However, the prevailing socio-economic conditions among the war widows prevent them from realising their actual expectations. Most of the war widows stated that their social participation level is very poor. The study also found that most of the war widows experienced chronic grief. From the overall findings of this research, it has been identified that war widows in war-affected villages encounter enormous social, livelihood related, security, cultural, discrimination and health related challenges. The research study emphasises that a durable solution should be found to the problems encountered by the war widows and that their freedom, social justice, fundamental rights and social equity should be ensured. To sum up the results of this research, it can be said that women in war-affected areas encounter enormous social issues like gender discrimination, cultural discrimination, health and society related problems. These structural causes should be addressed in order to make women's lives better.

Key words: *challenges, discrimination, society, war widows, women*

3.1 Introduction

Conflict is not an abnormal condition. It has been said that conflict is an inseparable and inherent quality of human life. The world's population increases daily but resources are limited. While trying to fulfill unlimited needs and wants with limited resources, conflict is inevitable. Thus constructive solutions are required to resolve this issue. Although many conflicts take the shape of violent encounters, there are many ways to solve them constructively. However when this conflict takes on a destructive form this opens a lot of avenues while also closing some. However the common feature of conflict is that it is a never-ending process.

Sri Lanka has experienced internal and externally forced displacement on a massive scale, as well as countless deaths and the emergence of war widows and refugees on a large scale. Sri Lanka has a population of approximately 20 million and has experienced more than 64,000 deaths due to the war. In 1996, the peak year for displacement, approximately one million people were internally displaced (NRC, 2004; Shanmugarathan, 2008, p.171). The Oxford Dictionary has defined a widow as "A woman whose husband had died and who has not married again."

All people are affected by war regardless of their gender, culture, religion, age etc. However, the way women experience this situation is different. During the last three decades, Sri Lanka faced a civil war which had a drastic impact on the society, resulting in massive displacements, killings, deaths and disappearances of civilians throughout the country. Women were victimized by the war. Conflict brought many negative effects like

displacement, migration, refugees, and the civil war also affected their livelihoods, and resulted in murders, rapes, forced migrations, insecurity, hunger and starvation, a dearth of public services and the derailing of development initiatives. Although both men and women have to face war, women suffer the most. While more men than women are killed in war, women usually experience violence, forced pregnancy, abduction and sexual abuse and slavery. Their bodies have been deliberately infected with HIV/AIDS or carrying a child conceived in rape has been used as a means of sending a message to the perceived enemy. The harm, silence and shame women experience in war is pervasive and their redress almost non-existent (Rehn & Johnson, 2002, p.2).

This study aims at investigating the impact of war on women whose husbands have died in the war and who are identified as war widows. It is not possible to get the actual number of war widows in Sri Lanka, but the estimated number of war widows can be found in government reports, and using other internal resources. Some NGOs and government officials have conducted surveys about war widows and have released some estimates. However, none of them were able to provide an exact or accurate number. According to reports released by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office on Human Rights and Democracy in May 2012, there were up to 900,000 Tamil war widows in the North and East of the country. The Deputy Minister of Women's Affairs of the Provincial Council of the East, has revealed recently there are approximately 86,000 widows in the North and 46,000 in the East. According to him, these war widows can be categorised, such as young, old, sick and disabled (Iqbal, 2011).

Thus, the conflict generated a large number of war widows in Sri Lanka and a large number of female headed households. Many such women are living in poverty and despair. These women are still waiting for the return of their husbands in the unrealistic hope that they are still alive. As the civil war has created many families with female headed households, a widow with children has to play the role of both father and mother and fulfill the needs of her children. This becomes a challenge, to engage in livelihood activities while looking after young children. These women also need a strong sense of security in this tragic situation, especially for girls. There are thousands of war widows who have been subjected to various threats from government forces. Many widows are young and with the death of their husbands they have become a psychologically and socially vulnerable group. With widowhood they experience problems such as a loss of identity, difficulties in role adjustment and a declining social status. These are common problems faced by war widows. When considering the above factors it can be stated that war widows face a range of problems which are (but not limited to) social, economic, political, and cultural in nature.

3.2 Literature review

Sri Lankan society faced three decades of ethnic conflict. To date, only the violent part of the conflict has been put to an end by the Sri Lankan forces. Ending this ethnic conflict requires building a view among people that the ethnic conflict, in its totality, can be ended. Currently people in war torn areas go about their daily activities with the feeling of safety. There is no argument that this ethnic conflict has affected not only people in war torn areas but also people all over Sri Lanka. A socially protracted conflict

can affect human society in direct and indirect ways. The conflict resulted in the loss of many lives and caused disability among many people, while also resulting in most of the people in war torn areas becoming internally displaced persons. In addition, resources were destroyed as was infrastructure within the war torn areas as well as in the rest of the country.

Many studies have been carried out to investigate the impact of war on widows in relation to the post-conflict stage. It is mostly the Eastern and Northern parts of Sri Lanka which have been the focus of many studies. One such study which was conducted by Maunaguru states that “Women have been affected by the Sri Lanka conflict, particularly in the North and East in the ‘border areas adjacent to the Eastern Province. Women have lost family members and they have been forced to leave their homes for living impoverished lives in camps. They have been subjected to the worst kind of violence. They have been displaced, compelled to live as war widows and taking the responsibility of their households” (Maunaguru, 2004, p.142).

Women headed household have increased during the time of conflict. While women have become vulnerable, they have taken on new roles and power due to the conflict situation. However, they are not passive vulnerabilities of the conflict. As single parent households they protect their families. However, traditionally defined roles for men are not considered suitable for women, except in this conflict situation (Maunaguru, 2004, p.129). Livelihoods, conflict and a policy of an armed State are combined factors in conflict areas. Most women have become war widows after the death of their husbands during the war. They are responsible for earning an income for their family, providing child care and ensuring the security of their family

members. Especially in the Tamil communities, women have taken on new roles that are different to the traditional Hindu social roles. Their lives had been drastically changed by the existing political power. Due to these reasons, it is not only their personal lives which have changed but also their common or social lives as they take on new responsibilities to face new challenges.

It is mainly young women who have become war widows (CARE, 2003). During the conflict, both women and men were killed. After the death of their husbands, women had to take on the traditional roles and new responsibilities of their husbands who were killed. Women also had to contend with physical insecurity, instability of the economy and mental shocks. They had to fight against social attitudes which oppose them taking on new roles. They had to fight nothing concerning of as breadwinners, new status and roles related policies and infrastructure (Kumuduni, 1997, p.30).

In war situations anywhere in the world, it is the women and children who are the most victimised group. Often there is an increase in the number of war widows in such tragic situations. These war widows often have children to take care of and after their husbands' death some of these women are left to fend for their families alone. There are approximately 400,000 war widows in Sri Lanka and among them there are 18,000 in the Jaffna District and 41,000 war widows in Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Ampara, and Mullaitivu Districts (UNDP, 2009).

According to Care International, there are 24,000 war widows live in Batticaloa District alone. War widows living in the southern areas of the country have economic stability, but they too have

to face many difficulties in their day-to-day life. There are occasions where getting the death certificate of their deceased husbands and receiving their husbands' monthly salary/pension have been very difficult. Most of these war widows are between 19 to 35 years of age.

Shanthi, now a 70 year old lady, became a widow due to the war when her husband died in 1989. Komalamma is a 40 year old woman. She became a war widow in 1990. A woman by the name of Shanthini became a widow when she was only 19 years old. Her husband disappeared during the war (Samavimarshi, 2001). Thus, there are war widows of all three generations due to the war.

Most of the married women in the Sorivila Village are currently living as war widows. In this village 75% of the women are war widows due to three decades of war. When considered as statistic that is over 100 women. Factors such as joining the Tamil military groups and (suspected) passing of information to police and other military groups caused the deaths and disappearances of these women's husbands.

These war widows have to live alone with their children with little chance of being freed from their responsibilities. Therefore they are bound to continue their husbands' livelihoods, such as fishing, cutting canes, and carrying heavy things as labourers. Instances where war widows become sex workers are very common. Sometime these sex workers have to fulfill men's sexual satisfaction without earning even one rupee (Samavimarshi, 2001). There are many such war widows in war torn areas. Not only mothers but some daughters have also been forced to engage in sex work for their livelihood.

This is an emerging culture which was created by the war situation. As in Sinhalese society, Tamil society also looks down on war widows. However, although they are discriminated they are able to build up their lives with dedication and self-confidence.

3.4 Statement of the problem

The key research problem of the present study is to find out what are the social issues faced by women war widows in post-conflict Sri Lankan society.

3.5 Significance of the study

Information generated in this study is useful to various parties at both national and institutional level. At national level, any government may require inputs to rebuild society in a postwar context. In such a situation identifying the current needs and priorities of various war affected parties such as internally displaced people, refugees, and war widows, is important. Among these parties war widows have become one of the core sections of the war-affected society. However in the post-conflict phase, government authorities need to pay immediate attention to the current needs of these groups. In this regard, the findings of this study and similar interventions will be important.

There is a lack of research on many problems faced by war widows in post-conflict society, especially in war torn areas. Thus, this study focuses on war widows in war torn areas, and is based on primary data collected in relation to affected areas.

Therefore, this study will pave the way for creating research interests in diverse areas related to the development needs of war victims.

3.6 Objectives of the study

This study aims at investigating the following key objectives related to social issues faced by women war widows in post-conflict Sri Lankan society.

- To understand the socio-economic and cultural conditions of war widows in Batticaloa District.
- To analyse the livelihood, security, cultural and health related issues of these war widows.
- To investigate possible measures for overcoming the conditions of marginalisation and depression among war widows in the study area.

3.7 Methodology

This research is a descriptive study and details related to the collection of data and data analysis are discussed below.

Study Area

Batticaloa is one of the three districts in the eastern coastal area of Sri Lanka's Eastern Province. Batticaloa District lies between the other two eastern districts, Trincomalee to the north and Ampara to the south, and consists of a land area of 2,663 sq. kms. The internal water bodies located in the area, such as lagoons and reservoirs, occupy approximately 230 sq. kms.

Manmuneipattu DS office area is located in the Batticaloa District. People of Tamil ethnicity form the majority in this area, with Muslim people forming the next most common ethnic group. Most of the people in this area are Hindus by religion. Although Sinhalese people lived in this area, during the war they have moved to other safer areas in the country.

The livelihoods of the vast majority of the people have traditionally depended upon agriculture, livestock rearing, and sea and lagoon fishing. Approximately 80% of the people depend on the agricultural sector in this area. Around 40% to 60% of these farmers have not been cultivating in this area due to interruptions during the war period. When their normal livelihood activities were interrupted due to the war, they looked for alternative livelihoods to make a living. Even after the end of war, displaced and resettled people in this area have migrated to other areas of the country looking for wage labour.

As this area was affected by three decades of war, inhabitants have suffered and their livelihoods have been derailed even in the post-conflict period. Many of them have been displaced and many women in the area have become war widows. Although resettled in the area their basic needs have not yet been met. Some of these women war widows have migrated abroad to earn a living as housemaids. Manmunneipattu DS office area has a large number of women war widows, which was the main reason for choosing this area for this study.

Sample of the Study

The study used a random sampling method for the sample selection. Using this sampling method, the research selected 20 respondents (war widows) for this study.

Source of Data

The study is based on both primary and secondary information pertaining to the study area. For the purpose of collecting primary data, the sample of 20 war widows was incorporated. Secondary data of this study was collected using previous reports, published books and internet sources.

Data Collection

The study mainly used two types of data collection methods. For the purpose of collecting primary data, case study method was used. Accordingly, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 women war widows and focus group discussions were held with key informants in the area. The researchers also used observation as one of the primary data collection methods.

3.8 Key findings

3.8.1 Livelihood related problems

In this study, the researchers mainly paid attention to the social issues faced by women war widows in post-conflict Sri Lankan society.

Widowhood is a situation where the marriage bond has been dissolved - where one spouse becomes isolated breaking down the livelihood they previously established. When considering livelihood related issues, it is evident that women have been facing a multitude of difficulties after they become widows. Normally, married women have been assigned household work and child related responsibilities prior to the death of their

husbands. Husbands were the breadwinners of the family who engaged in economic activities outside home. Therefore in Sri Lankan society, men occupy a dominant role in the family. However, with widowhood, women confront issues related to changes in personal identity, role adjustment and a change in the social status previously held. In this context these women have receive new responsibilities as breadwinners of their families. Women who have been recently widowed often have no experience of engaging in income earning activities outside the home, as they were not required to engage in such work previously while their husbands were alive. Accordingly, they confront diverse difficulties when compelled to find and engage in income earning activities. The overload of household chores along with their undiminished grief create severe constraints to their involvement in income earning activities outside the home.

In the study sample, 91% of female household heads were found to be economically inactive at the time of their widowhood. However, becoming widows, many of the Tamil women were forced to engage in economic activities mostly in the informal sector of the economy.

Following the demise of their husbands, many women were bound to many responsibilities hitherto unmet. They play a dual role which includes both household chores and involvement in subsistence economic earnings outside the family. The provision of economic as well as social security of the family became an increasing burden and came with challenges which were laid upon their shoulders.

This study also revealed that the war widows had lost the support of their immediate family members. For many of the

women in the study (after the death of their husbands) the socio-economic support system which had been provided previously by their in-laws has been declining gradually. Since these women lacked the professional and educational skills required to be employed in the formal economy they opted to be involved in lower paying jobs available in the informal sector in order to provide for their family. Thus, many of them were employed as unskilled labourers while also engaging in unpaid household chores.

Another finding was that while these women engage in certain livelihood activities, they were subjected to various criticisms by the village folk. Some men were found to be helping them with the expectation of soliciting sexual favours from these women.

“Once while I was undergoing a professional training offered by one voluntary organisation, some men in the village were labelling me as a notorious person. I was unable to bear these resentments.” Woman Widow

Adjusting and adapting to the socio-cultural environment where they find employment was another challenge confronted by women widows. This is mainly due to the fact that the willingness of the parties providing work opportunities for such women is based on the extent to which they are able to assimilate to the culture of employers. Accordingly, it was revealed that while working either with Tamil, Muslim or Sinhalese groups in the vicinity, work was offered to them depending on how they accept the cultural values and living patterns of the particular ethnic group at the work place. Therefore, their survival is determined by their adaptability to the working environment. When they work with the Tamil community they have to ‘act like Tamils’. When they work with

Muslim community they have 'actlike Muslims'. If they do not, or fail to adapt to such environment, their chances of continuing at the workplace become questionable.

"First, when I worked with Sinhalese then I behaved just like a Sinhala woman. When I worked with Muslims I behaved just like a Muslim woman. Otherwise they don't give us work". (Case Study 07)

Another serious issue that the women war widows encountered was instances where when they happened to work with men, they were frequently subjected to sexual harassment. In such situations, in rejecting demands for sexual gratification they faced the risk of losing the work. The death of their husbands has compelled them to find work outside their home but lack of their educational or professional qualifications works against their employability. Many such widows were found to be engaging in odd jobs locally while some have moved to other areas to find employment, such as in the garment industry. Some of them have been able to find job opportunities in the free trade zone located in the south. Being young women whose husbands are deceased they become easy targets for men who either work with them or live in close vicinity to them.

Good health conditions are key requirements for people to be able to work hard. Thus, when marginalised groups such as women war widows deal with impoverished physical and health conditions, it hinders their ability to be actively involved in livelihood activities. Especially in instances when these women are not used to the role of being the breadwinner for their families and are new to harsh working situations, this can negatively impact their health.

“I am a cancer patient now. There was an injury in my foot. While I was working I didn’t care about it and I continuously worked hard. Finally it grew to become a cancer and then I was admitted to the Cancer Hospital at Maharagama. Doctors said that it is not advisable to work hard and need to avoid exposure to the sun. But how can we live without being engaged at work?”(Case Study 07)

3.8.2 Security related problems

One of the basic human needs is security, and it is one of the main requirements for living a decent life. In this context, it is essential to ensure that the security requirements of people with socio-economic vulnerability are met. Previous research has noted that people in lower economic classes usually prefer to win recognition from neighbours and consolidate social networks with them. In the case of women warwidows, they have to play a dual role of being the father and mother in the family. When considering the security needs of the family, it is very important for her to fulfill the role played by the father (her late husband). Usually, the husband and wife share their duties in their family life. In this context security related responsibilities are carried out by the husband. It is not only physical security but also mental security which come under the umbrella of ‘security needs’. However, upon widowhood, it is the mother who has to take the security related responsibilities of the family. When they are living at home, when they are working with others, when they engage in community activities their children also have to face security related problems. When analysing the case studies the research identified the different kind of difficulties faced by women war widows in relation to security.

“There was a STF camp near our home. Every day there were parties in it. They requested some things from our home. Due to fear I gave these things. Otherwise they get angry with us. But villagers were suspicious about this. Finally it grew to a problem of STF members coming to our home. I told the entire story of these problems to the villagers but they didn’t believe me. They thought about me in a wrong way.” (Case study 01)

Some of these widows are 30 years of age and there are others who are over 50 years. Both these categories experience security related problems. The widows over 50 years of age are the ones who have young girls in their family, and they say that they have to protect their children from becoming victims of sexual advances from the military or other unscrupulous men in the village.

“One day in the night, a person came to our home and requested some water. I didn’t talk. He talked to me again and again. Then I told him to drink water from the well. Then he requested a glass. But I didn’t go out. I was so afraid. My children began to cry. Finally I told this story to my mother-in-law. She told me that don’t think about it, he is your cousin. Then I knew he was one of my husband’s relations.” (Case study 02)

Widows who have children have to play the roles of both mother and father. This becomes a challenging task to many of them who find it difficult to keep an eye on their children while they are away from home on work. The widows who have grown up girls at home do not leave them alone, and women with young children also have to look after their children. It is very problematic for these women as they have to leave their

children at home and go to work. As explained by one of the respondent war widows, she had no time to look after her children properly, because he has to be the breadwinner for the family. In addition, widowhood can also lead to existing troubles with children going from bad to worse. A common consequence of widowhood in the traditional societies is the early withdrawal of children from school, and the children are also more likely to become the victims of early marriages and early motherhood. This has the potential to have negative impacts on their reproductive health while also limiting their chances for economic autonomy.

3.8.3 Assets related problems

Agricultural land in the form of paddy lands and home gardens are among the most commonly held household assets in rural areas. The women owned more agricultural lands when their husbands were alive. However the widows have been unable to cultivate these lands after the death of their husbands. It has been hard for women to cultivate the land with no support from family members and relations. In particular, these women have been unable to get male labourers. Some of the paddy land has been abandoned partly due to ongoing war.

When discussing land related issues the researchers also identified another problem concerning the cultivation of land. While trying to cultivate their land, war widows have been prevented from doing so by various parties. Sometime neighbours and relations have prevented this and sometimes the military forces have also intervened.

Some of the war widows had rented out their lands to neighbours. However, these neighbours have not paid rent regularly. After their widowhood there have been tragic cases where widows have lost their lands.

3.8.4 Culture related problems

Many Asian societies operate based on cultural norms. Language, religion, and clothes are often based on culture and culture differs from person to person, community to community, and society to society. Although social rules differ greatly, all cultures have rules which govern women's lives. Across a wide range of cultures women widows are subject to patriarchal customs and religious laws and confront discriminatory inheritance rights.

After widowhood many women like to marry again. Some communities may force them to do so. Even Tamil society forces widows to remarry. There are cultural barriers to women widows for re-instating a conjugal relationship with a man. Therefore these women spend a long period of their lives in widowhood, with all its associated disadvantages and stigma. In cultures where there is no permission for remarriage they have been unable to establish a secure and social environment. In view of these cultural barriers, some of these women lead miserable lives with their children. In addition, when they become widows at a young age it is difficult to find a person to remarry. Most people think that their husband's death occurred due to the fate of the women. Therefore it has been very difficult for the women in the study to find male partners for a second marriage.

Dress pattern is also a very important form of representation. This differs from culture to culture. Even within one country, it differs from area to area, community to community. Among the Tamil community there is a very strong and strict culture. There is a dress pattern that women should follow. These women can't cross the cultural barriers.

“There is a system to wear saree for widows. According to our culture they can't wear saree perfectly. We can't wear a beauty spot [kurukkal]. And also [can't] wear bangles. One day I went to a kovil function. I had worn my saree as normal. The kovil swami asked me to change my saree style. They don't like us to live in the normal way. Those are old persons' ideas. I don't care for that story [idea].”(Case study 11)

Thus, there are cultural norms which are to be followed by women widows in the Tamil community. After being widowed they have to wear the saree in a different way and they can't wear bangles and can't wear the beauty spot. Although they put the beauty spot, at social functions they have to erase it as other women do. They are also supposed to behave in a certain way when they participate in cultural functions like weddings, puberty parties and other cultural functions. When they participate at these functions they have to follow culturally related behaviour patterns. If they don't, they will have to deal with the problems of not doing so. According to this culture there are some customs which are carried out by mothers on the wedding day and puberty party of their daughter. If the bride's mother is a widow not only she can not perform the custom, but is also not allowed to take part.

“When my elder daughter attained, I couldn’t do customs because of my widowhood. Those customs were done by one of my cousin sisters.” (Case study 04)

Women widows are not allowed to go forward in a function; not only at functions which are held in houses but also those held in the kovil. Especially women who have the beauty spot (kurukkal) on the forehead have to get permission to go forward.

“I don’t go to puberty functions on the relevant day. If I want to go there I go another day. People don’t like widows to participate at such functions. They think that we are unfortunate [bad luck]. When we go on the road, if a wedding couple comes in front of me I get to a side by the road. After the death of my husband, it’s not good to put Kurukkal. That is our cultural norm. After the death of my husband I put Kurukkal too. One day a swami of the kovil told me not to put the Kurukkal.” (Case study 06)

3.8.5 Discrimination related problems

Discrimination can be observed in different forms. It is a common phenomenon in any society. Clear discrimination can be seen in post-conflict societies in relation to gender. In present studies of women’s social issues, discrimination was apparent. War widows were firstly being discriminated against based on their widowhood, and this was followed by many other reasons like their livelihood, education, dress pattern, and cultural and social norms etc.

Losing one’s husband is tragic in any situation let alone war. After becoming a widow she has to face many difficulties. They are seen as bad luck by society. Almost all the widows who were

respondents had faced discrimination atleast once if not more. After becoming a widow, they were not invited to cultural and social functions because they were perceived by people as wretched or a bad women for the function. Even when these women participated in livelihood related training programme they had to face discrimination. This is a disadvantage for their livelihood. According to the respondents they are unable to find a livelihood without proper skill, but when they participated in training programmes they have faced discriminations.

“Sometimes my widowhood has affected social relationships. Sometimes it was a bad situation. When we participate at a function in the kovil and ceremonies at the kovil, going forward has been prohibited. After we became a widow we had to stop wearing the beauty spot. Women who have no beauty spot can’t go forward. Women who have a beauty spot have no barriers to going forward.”(Case Study 08)

In addition, when they approached State banks for loans, widows had faced discriminations because of the loss of their husbands. Respondents stated that they were not given loans by the State banks. Banks find that women don’t have legal rights to the property and their loans are rejected. As banks assess the ability to pay back the loan, the issue of adequate income generation also arises. Therefore normally banks have refused to offer the loan. Due to this reason these women had to get loans from the villagers, money lender or any other credit facilitator and they pay high interest rates.

Respondents stated that when they participate in community organisation events they have to face discrimination. This community gave priority to women who had husbands.

Commonly widows were not beneficiaries in the association. They were not given any opportunity or encouraged to participate in the association. They could only participate in a community based organisation. Women who have no husbands have not been given priority within the association. There are strict rules governing their participation in the association. If she does not attend meetings for three weeks continuously her membership is cancelled by the authority.

“One day there was a training programme in the DS office. It was a solar power training programme. I participated on the first day. But some officers asked me, you are a woman and how do you install this solar system. And how do you climb up to the roof? Then I was fed up by that training programme. And the next day I stopped participating at the training programme.” (Case Study 09)

Thus women war widows not only face discrimination for being widows but for being women as well.

3.8.6 Health related issues

Becoming a widow has negatively affected women and their lives, experiencing grief regarding the death of their husbands. These women had become a psychologically and socially vulnerable group. Though the war has ended, most of the women who were widows had some lingering emotional pain from which they had not completely recovered. Many had become the victims of the pathological grip of their widowhood as they experienced a change in identity, role adjustment and a change in social status.

The death of a close family member is a highly stressful event. From a psychological perspective the sudden death of a relative

can have long lasting effects. In a traditional society, widows face social, economic, legal and cultural difficulties, and they are considered as 'bad women' in many parts of rural Sri Lanka. In-laws often blame the husband's death on the wife saying it was because of the bad luck the wife. They are marginalised by their own communities. All these factors affect their self-esteem.

Apart from the above challenges, the war widows also faced enormous mental health problems. Their husbands' tragic death was always in their memories. In this context, they had been unable to come to terms with the past. Many of these women carried the memories of their late husband. In general a large number of women war widows suffered from various psychological problems. Some of the women in the study kept remembering their husbands and life prior to their death. Especially at the night, due to these reoccurring memories, they had been unable to sleep. At that time they can't stop thinking about their late husbands. It is a very common occurrence and respondents described it as having a nightmare.

"I saw my husband in my dream and then I wake up. Then I cry the whole night. I can't sleep again. It occurs continuously."(Case study 03)

These psychological scars have prevented them from moving forward. They require proper psychological help to deal with their situation.

3.9 Conclusion and recommendations

This study was conducted in order to identify the social issues faced by women war widows in post-conflict Manmunneipattu area. The study indicates that women war widows face various

issues which make their life difficult. Not only these women, but their children have also been affected. The study concluded that the social issues faced by the women war widows can be described in four different areas; livelihood, security, culture and discrimination related problems.

According to this research, though the war has ended, women war widows continue to face many livelihood related problems. When their husbands were alive many of the women had not engaged in livelihood related work. At that time their responsibilities were to look after the children and the household work. Therefore, after their husbands' death, they did not have the job experience or skills required to obtain a job. Due to this reason it has been hard for them to find a livelihood.

A finding highlighted from this study is that without a regular livelihood women war widows have had to earn money by working as labourers in the informal sector. Some of these widows go in search of job to other areas of the country. They get involved as cheap labourers for factories in the free trade zones and other factories. Children of these women have only their mothers for their security. When mothers leave the home in search of a job the situation for the children becomes more vulnerable. This is a tragic situation for them. In addition, without regular security they have had to face sexual abuse and harassment.

The study confirms that male domination in the Tamil community hinders the independent functioning of the women war widows. The women war widows, who were mothers in the villages, had developed an inferiority complex since they were unable to bring up their children in the same manner as other

women do. They were worried for their children, wanting them to be brought up in an appropriate environment and to give them a good education and other fundamental facilities. However, the prevailing socio-economic conditions among the women war widows prevented them from realising these expectations. In addition, most of the war widows stated that their social participation level was very poor.

The culture of the geographical area of the study is very complex. In this area women war widows were being discriminated against in social and cultural situations. Most widows were not invited to religious and cultural assemblies. Due to this reason they have been isolated by various parties. Thus they have had to live in this society as an isolated community. This situation has resulted in them being deprived of their rights, just because they are widows.

Not only these widows but also their young daughters have become victims of sexual harassment. Such abuse has a large negative impact on their lives and has affected their health care directly. Another issue faced by these widows, especially the young widows, and is a matter rarely spoken of, is that the biological needs of widows remain unfulfilled. This is a serious problem. The isolation, cultural restrictions and social stigma linked to women widows has resulted in the unfulfillment of their natural sexual needs and has prevented a healthy growth in the widows' normal lives in terms of remarriage and starting a new life. In addition, some of the war widows in the study have pursued various options to fulfill their natural desires. When they fulfill their natural desires in such ways they face dangerous situation.

Women war widows have also had to face many mental and physical health problems, particularly as they are marginalised by their own society and community. This affects their self-esteem. In some cases accusations have been made by in-laws that the husband's death occurred due to the unluckiness of the wife and that they were partially answerable for their husband's death. Widows also experienced lack of social support and loss of their social possessions in their own family circle. In addition, the widows also faced a number of mental health problems. They were often subject to extreme forms of discrimination and physical, mental and sexual abuse. The study also found that most of the war widows experienced chronic grief. Emotional memories of their husband, fear and uncertainty about the future, self-pity, low self-esteem, sleep disturbance, displacement, feelings of guilt for being happy result in many mental health issues among women war widows.

Thus, from the overall findings of this research, it was observed that the women war widows in the war affected villages encountered enormous social, security, cultural, discriminatory and health related challenges. The research study emphasises that a durable solution should be found to the problems encountered by these women war widows and that their freedom, social justice, fundamental rights and social equity should be ensured.

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