

SRI LANKA WAR WIDOWS: STORY OF FORGOTTEN VICTIMS OF UNFINISHED WAR IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract

“When a barrage of artillery slammed into Sivalingam Maheswary's town in Sri Lanka's northeast, her husband and son were among those killed. Sivalingam was one of the few survivors, but she lost her right arm in the shelling on the frontline of the country's civil war...”

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- Al Jazeera

After the sudden communal wage war, nearly after the three decades the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) left the thousands of women as war widows to poverty by brutally killing their husbands/ soldiers who were serving the nation. LTTE is the ruthless tribal and terror outfit of Tamils living in Sri Lanka since 1983. They target basically women and children as part of their crimes and are also in UN's list of shame for using children as war soldiers. Since at that time, the husbands were considered as a sole earner of the family but after the brutal Attack by the group left the women in grief, sorrows, and so much emotional pain that they are not completely recovered from that trauma and moreover, the income of the families stopped as a result many families were moved into below poverty line.

According to the statistical report by Newcastle University, Australia, it is found that the depression, grief, etc. are still occurred to the women suffered from wars that few women also committed suicide as soon as they found that their husband is dead. In the typical Asian society, widows generally face legal, social and economic distress. They are considered as bad omen in many rural areas.

Besides that, there must be rehabilitation policy for the women suffered in the war at a national level so that the women can make a new life, new world out of it and capable for regaining communication. Not only women, the children were also protected for the same.

When a barrage of artillery slammed into Sivalingam Maheswary's town in Sri Lanka's northeast, her husband and son were among those killed. Sivalingam was one of the few survivors, but she lost her right arm in the shelling on the frontline of the country's civil war. The guns have since fallen silent but 90,000 widows like Sivalingam are now struggling

to earn enough to feed themselves and their children. The number of widows is almost as high as the death toll caused by the decades-long war.”¹

The above excerpt is taken from **Al- Jazeera**. After the sudden communal war (also known as the civil war) which occurred from 23rd July, 1983 to 18th May, 2009 by The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) which took three decades for the end of the war, although resulting in SriLankan government victory and re-establishing total control in the entire island, The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) left the thousands of women as war widows to poverty by brutally killing their husbands/ soldiers who were serving the nation. LTTE is the ruthless tribal and terror outfit of Tamils living in Sri Lanka since 1983. They target basically women and children as a part of their crimes and are also in UN’s list of shame for using children as war soldiers.

The women who were left widows due to the result of Sri Lankan conflict faced many Difficulties, many widows in their initial stage of marriage i.e. between 22-35 age groups felt distressed and grieved by the death of their husbands. Many women are now the victim of pathological grief, i.e. they are unable to concentrate even after many years, after the end of the communal war in accordance with the passage of time. Since at that time, the husbands were considered as a sole earner of the family but after the brutal attack by the group left the women in grief, sorrows, and so much in emotional pain that they are not completely recovered from that trauma and moreover, the income of the families stopped as a result many families were moved into below poverty line.

As per the statistical survey conducted in 2005 by the University Of Newcastle, Australia it was found that the women or the war widows are facing tremendous mental trauma to the people and society as a whole. Besides that many war widows are facing mental problems, it is truly and well said by Ed Payne in one of his works in *Collateral Damage*, “If men were the principle casualties of the war, the widows represent its collateral damage.”² Many suffered widow’s carry the memories of their husbands/soldiers who sacrificed themselves so much that they are emotionally troubled by the loss, grief and disparity. This traumatizing incident left women in fear and uncertainty of the future, self-pity, low self-esteem, sleep disturbance, etc. Some women also committed suicide as they can’t face the traumatic distress of the loss of known one’s. Not only pain and sorrow which is inflicting the brain of

¹ Source- Al- Jazeera took on 23th April, 2015

² Works of Ed Payne in his work on collateral damage civil war widows

the suffered women, now being alone and sole earner of the family, they are forced to bear multiple burdens due to poverty, conflict, displacement and climate change. These women are in constant search for a sustainable source of livelihood. Many women who are now the head of the families after the death of their husbands are working as daily laborers and leaving their children without adequate care and protection.³ According Tissa Karaliyadda, the Child Development and Women's Affairs Minister in *Colombo Page* which is the prominent internet newspaper in Sri Lanka on 13th August, 2011 stated that, *The government has identified over 59,000 war widows and proposed to launch various programs including counseling programs to support women.*⁴

According to Ms. Nisha Bhalla, Journalist of Thomson Reuters Company with the interview with group of women known as Dishany who suffered with such mass effect which left women in confused state of mind, stated that, *"Their husbands went missing during the war. Their families lived in a camp for displaced people... and they never came back from the war. They were in search of the jobs to support the family."*⁵

The International Humanitarian Law aims to govern the conduct of the war as well as aims to protect the people suffering from the war. After the Battle of Solferino, Henry Dunant found the need to safeguard the people who were involved in the war directly indirectly. Hence Geneva Conventions were formulated for the same briefed as follows:

1. Geneva Convention I : Protection of soldiers fighting on the land.
2. Geneva Convention II : Protection of soldiers fighting for wounded, sick and shipwrecked Persons, medical personnel and chaplains, and for their relief.
3. Geneva Convention III: Protection of Prisoners of War.
4. Geneva Convention IV: Protection of Civilian persons in times of War.

And The Hague conventions which mandates the conduct of the war. Both the conventions run simultaneously in accordance with the additional protocol.

Violation of laws in the war

After the end of communal war which longed for 30 years between Government of Sri Lanka and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ended lead to loss of 80,000 to 100, 000 lives, during the ongoing fight, both the groups violated serious International Humanitarian Laws in the inspection of Human Rights Watch. In this scenario,

³ Daily FT newsletter cover for Sri Lankan news

⁴ Colombo-page; Sri Lanka Internet Newspaper, 13th August, 2011

⁵ Thomson Reuters Report on 22nd September, 2011

both the groups violated the Geneva Conventions (III and IV) and because of all this the human rights situation in the country continued to deteriorate. The main reason felt for this was that the government adopted repressive policies.

Government forces repeatedly and indiscriminately shelled densely populated areas, using heavy artillery and other area weapons incapable of distinguishing between civilians and combatants.

Conclusion

The ICRC has been operational in Sri Lanka since 1989. It serves as an essential link between the government, the LTTE and the Sri Lankan people.

In accordance with the principles of impartiality and neutrality, and acting as an intermediary, in 1996 the ICRC:

- protected road convoys carrying government supplies (medicines, food and other essential goods) to the north and east;
- Chartered a ship which served as the only non-military means of communication between the Jaffna peninsula and Trincomalee;
- handed over the bodies of fallen combatants across front lines;
- accompanied officials from the Ministry of Education in conflict areas to enable them to Supervise school examinations;
- Provided logistic support to the Ministry of Health in LTTE controlled areas for its national immunization campaign against polio.

References

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⁶<https://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/report/57jnc5.htm>