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## **The Role of Women in The Military: Ethnic Tamil Female Combatants In The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)**

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses various factors behind the ethnic Tamil women who decided to join the terrorist militia group, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), in the northern and southeastern parts of Sri Lanka. The feminist approach was chosen to see the involvement of women LTTE combatants and find out, why women decided to involve in a series of military actions and activities under the auspices of the LTTE militant group. In this discussion, it is known that there are three factors affect the decision of Tamil women to join the LTTE, namely: first, the existence of the Tamil community as an ethnic minority. Second, the occurrence of mass sexual violence and abuse among Tamil women perpetuated by Sri Lanka's majority ethnic group. Finally, the decision of Tamil women to join LTTE is due to the pressure that structurally and culturally appears in communities in conflictual areas. Through these three factors, Tamil women then chose to leave their comfort zone and reconstructed their

identity by joining the LTTE terrorist militia group. In this case, the involvement of female LTTE combatants in Sri Lanka is not only an attempt to eradicate negative views regarding femininity through military activities, but also a symbol of successful self-liberalization from the practice of gender oppression in conflict situations.

*Keywords:* Combatant women, LTTE, military, feminism

## INTRODUCTION

In situations of conflict and war, the general picture that can be imagined by the affected community is unsafe conditions due to the high intensity of violence and pressure from the two opposing sides. During chaotic situations, women and children are more likely to become victims of the conflicts or wars. Meanwhile, the men generally serve as fighters to end the conflict. The view of women as weak creatures and men as masculine individuals cannot be avoided. However, in some conditions the conflict occurred, this assumption is no longer valid. Many groups of women are actually members of terrorist groups or other extremist groups, such as women who are members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The LTTE, formed in 1976, is known as a militant ethno-nationalist group fighting for independence for the Tamil regions of north and southeast Sri Lanka. This militant group is considered by most of the Sri Lankan as the strongest and cruelest terrorist group in the Tamil region (Dissanayake, 2017). The tactics and strategies the LTTE applied to achieve their goals include utilizing suicide bombs, suicide belts/vests and recruiting women to become combatants (Express India, 2008). The LTTE became the first terrorist group in Southeast Asia to recruit women as combatants as well as suicide bombers. The involvement of Tamil women in this militant organization began since the inception of the LTTE. Most of them only

occupy support positions such as seeking and gathering information, playing as perpetrators of propaganda, seeking additional funds to fund provider organizations or simply working as medical personnel (Chawade, 2016).

In 1983, the recruitment of women to become new combatants was officially carried out when the Women's Front of the Liberation Tigers (WFLT) Battalion was newly formed. WFLT started their training two years later. The direct participation of female combatants in conflicts was not carried out until 1986 (Richards, 2014). Starting with the formation of the battalion (WFLT), the female combatants were further developed into two branch squads. First, a large group called The LTTE Women's Wing or Birds of Freedom which is divided into three divisions, namely an administrative division, a militant division, and a suicide division. The recruitment of women into the LTTE also aims to spread a campaign on women's empowerment in the Tamil region through propaganda. This is a task carried out by the administrative division. Meanwhile, the militant division functions to organize war operations. Likewise with the suicide division (Black Tigers) which has the responsibility to determine suicide attacks (Chawade, 2016).

The second group formed by the LTTE was Sothiya and Malathi aimed to train and create a women's military brigade. Similar to any country's military forces, this brigade is composed of several troops, namely anti-tank troops, heavy weapons troops, and anti-aircraft troops (Ann, 1993 in Dissayanake, 2017). Although the number of female soldiers who joined was only one third, the majority of the female troops actually more contributed than the male troops. Apart from suicides, bombings and killings, propaganda, campaigns, and efforts are also conducted to promote gender equality (Alison, 2003). The presence of female combatants in the LTTE has become a major stepping stone for women living in the midst of

independence from the government. The LTTE women became an inevitable symbol of this new dimension of women's roles.

The participation of female combatants in the LTTE has become a turning point for women living in the midst of efforts to become independent from the government. LTTE women have become irreplaceable symbols of this new dimension of women's roles. In other cases, women can fight for their interests through participation in the political chair rather than going directly to the battlefield like the LTTE female combatants. The history of women who were directly involved in military activities is an interesting thing to discuss because of its incompatibility with the role and stereotype of women in general. This paper is written to discuss the reasons that led women to decide to involve themselves in a series of military actions and activities under the auspices of the LTTE militant group. In this case, the author also tries to add how the feminist approach, especially regarding women in the military, views the involvement of LTTE female combatants.

### *Participation of Women as LTTE Combatant Members*

The word militarism has been heavily identified with war. Scholars define war by limiting the number of victims who die in a battle. If the number of victims reached a thousand people, then the battle can be categorized into warfare. Also, war can also be defined as an act of structured violence against an opponent. Through these two definitions, Goldstein (2001) states that war can be interpreted as an act of violence carried out by a group of people, whether structured or not, which is carried out based on certain interests. Usually, war is synonymous with militarism which is dominated by men, even the culture of war has perpetuated male domination (The Culture of Peace Dialogues, 2006). However, the

emergence of female members in the LTTE membership structure provides a new dimension to the role of women themselves.

After LTTE recruited special female members to become war combatants, there were several stages of adjustment carried out by the LTTE. One of the stages was building a military training facility for new members. In this case, the cadres of Tamil women who were first trained had to participate in the training for a period of one year, namely between October 1986 and October 1987. The training of female Tamil members was initially considered futile and its success was doubted due to the emergence of the negative stigma towards women among communities (Balasingham, 1993). By joining as a combatant member, Tamil women do not only represent the opposite attitude that has been interpreted by most people through the feminist theory, but it also forced them to live under military pressure they had never experienced previously. The extreme decision chosen by Tamil women to join as combatants was not without reason. This was triggered by several factors which then prompted them to decide to become a combatant military force.

*Tamil: One of the Ethnic Minorities in Sri Lanka*

At first, the Ethnic Tamils were a group of refugees from the southern region of India which at that time was still under British government. They then moved and settled in the north and southeastern part of Sri Lanka. The majority of ethnic Tamils living in India work as laborers or manual laborers for the British in the fields of agriculture. During British imperialism, Tamils still had the right to become residents in India, but after the British government granted independence to India, nearly 500,000 Tamils chose to go to Sri Lanka and obtain citizenship status there (Minority rights group international, 2018).

Starting from the request for citizenship status, there was a conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese who dominated the ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. Sinhalese argued that they are the ethnic group most entitled to the area based on their cultural origins long before the arrival of the Tamils. The feud between the two ethnic groups became highly intense when the two of them held a dispute over an area. In this regard, the refusal of the Sri Lankan government—which is dominated by the ethnic Sihala—to bestow the area of north and southeast regions to the Tamils has further stoked the flames of a feud between them. This then sparked a territorial dispute in 1980, in which there was armed conflict under the leadership of Velupillai Prabhakaran, the founder of the LTTE (Perera, 2016). This armed conflict lasted for 26 years.

In that long period, violence, killings and oppression were carried out by both parties, namely the Tamils and the Sinhalese<sup>1</sup>. Because of the number of Tamil tribes tends to be less than the Sihala tribe, to achieve their goals, the LTTE needed a lot of militant manpower during the conflict. Many men of ethnic Tamils died both on the battlefield and guerrilla operations, hence militant manpower and human resources are required. This was a significant factor for the LTTE to recruit and carry out propaganda to attract Tamil women to become members of LTTE combatants.

### *Violence and Sexual Harassment of Tamil Women*

During a conflict situation, Tamil women have become the main target of discriminatory and oppressive attacks from the Sri Lankan government, particularly the government military forces. Human Rights Watch—an international non-governmental organization—found new facts that show that one of the efforts to expel and defeat the ethnic minority Tamils is to commit mass rape and sexual torture of Tamil women who are

considered closely associated with the LTTE. For 26 years, the Sri Lankan government has taken full responsibility for sexual violence against men, children, and women of ethnic Tamil. From the series of cases that have been collected, acts of rape and sexual violence committed by the Sri Lankan government are not the only acts of human rights violations. The act of sexual violence and rape was accompanied by cruel and inhuman torture. Furthermore, victims who were raped did not get medical protection or services after reporting the incident to the authorities. Most identified sexual violence cases show that the majority of rapes and sexual violence were committed while the victim is in a public place. The modus operandi used by the Sri Lankan authorities usually involved arresting and kidnapping Tamil women for interrogation in inhuman means to obtain information regarding the LTTE (Human Right Watch, 2013).

Tamil women are once again victims of the conflict situation that occurred between the two parties, Tamil and Sinhalese.<sup>1</sup> As a victim of sexual violence and rape, the LTTE emerged as a militant organization that not only fought for its political interests but also tried to restore their justice, dignity and rights. The efforts to do so were carried out by Tamil women by making propaganda and campaigns for women's empowerment and emancipation. The results of the campaigns carried out by the LTTE were not only effective for reconstructing individual identities regardless of how women should behave, but also successfully recruited female members who would later be trained as combatants. Therefore, the women's empowerment campaigns and propaganda were also beneficial for the organization because it eventually acquired additional human resources (Dissanayake, 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> Sinhalese is the name for people or ethnic groups who originated from Sri Lanka.

### *Discriminative Social Culture and Norms against Tamil Women*

The majority of Sri Lankans, both Tamil and Sinhala, are Hindus, which adhere to the caste system. It is undeniable that this forms a social hierarchy in society as a result of the social and caste status of each individual. For the ethnic Tamil community, they are seen as refugees who occupy the marginal areas of Sri Lanka so that their social status is at a lower position or classified into the Sudra caste (Tamilculture, 2018). On the basis of this caste system, discrimination and oppression cannot be separated from the social life of the Tamil community, especially women. For those with low status, being treated arbitrarily and inhumanely has become daily issues. Tamil women live as a part of an ethnic minority and low caste. The situation is exacerbated by a patriarchal system which also has a strong influence on Sri Lanka's social norms and culture. In daily life, Tamil women find it quite difficult to get access to education, especially when the conflict is at its peak. Apart from the difficulty of accessing education and their limited space for movement in the public sphere, Tamil women are also sexually exploited through early marriage. In addition, as a result of the chaotic situation, the economy of the Tamil community became unstable so that many Tamil women were then trafficked so that their families can survive amid economic hardship (Chatfield, 1997).

All cases of discrimination and oppression that occur are used by the Sri Lankans government to create fear among Tamil women. Seeing their own relatives and neighbors become victims of injustice is a heavily traumatic scene that Tamil women constantly experience as part of a narrative of oppression and suffering. Continuous exposure to oppression has a profound effect on young Tamil women, both physically and mentally.

In the case of women LTTE combatants, the forms of violence they experienced can be categorized as structural and cultural violence. As



an ethnic minority, the Tamil community, especially women, experience discrimination from the social environment which can be categorized as a form of cultural violence. Not only that, the caste system and patriarchal culture that are deeply rooted in the Tamil and Sri Lanka regions are also a form of cultural violence that Tamil women cannot avoid before joining the LTTE. Meanwhile, the oppressive and inhuman attitude shown by the Sri Lankan authorities towards Tamil women constitutes violence in the structural category. It is based on a form of oppression that occurs massively through mass rape.

*The Theory of Feminism in Viewing LTTE Female Combatants in Sri Lanka*

In international relations, there are two groups of perspectives that develop through different points of view, namely traditional perspectives such as rationalism, liberalism and Marxism, as well as alternative perspectives such as critical theory, postmodernism, also gender and feminism. Talking about femininity, of course most people identify it with something related to the female side, which actually contradicts the concept of masculinity which is identical to that of men. Because of the difference between femininity and masculinity, this has led to the emergence of several groups that recognize themselves as feminists, where they observe various aspects of the world through an unfair view. In this case, feminists also see that spaces of social, political, and economics involve too many unjust gender differentiations that prevent women to participate in strategic positions in societies. Due to the existing culture of patriarchy, many practices prioritized masculinity, such as political affairs, war, and anarchy (Burchill and Linklater, 1996: 301). In this regard, the issue of female LTTE combatants in Sri Lanka is an example of how then emancipation in gender is discussed from the point of view of feminist theory.

Steans and Pettiford (2009: 338) argue that the theory of feminism began to emerge after the end of the Cold War, namely after an evaluation of traditional perspectives that were rationalist and materialistic. Feminism finally emerged as a view that raised certain aspects that were less elevated and marginalized, one of which was related to gender and femininity. In practice, women are often marginalized and subordinated in many ways, including in the global scope because the majority of society thinks that women are less competent in managing masculine matters, such as war. However, the civil war that occurred in Sri Lanka shows that the involvement of women from ethnic Tamils can be involved in the civil war, which is very masculine. Through this phenomenon, feminists are trying to change the view of femininity in warfare in Sri Lanka (Steans and Pettiford, 2009: 321).

Furthermore, it is known that the theory of feminism that is developing in the world according to Steans et al. (2005: 155) can be divided into several types, including: first, liberal feminism. The agenda of liberal feminists began to be carried out a lot around the 1960s, when feminists started efforts to equalize the position of women and men through women's emancipation and liberation campaigns. The second type is feminist Marxism, where this view has a lot to say about the emancipation of women, especially in the 20th century. Meanwhile, the last type of perspective is radical feminism. According to Cyntia Weber (2005), radical feminism rejects all kinds of cooperation and advocates for women's freedom by trying to put women inside the oppressive patriarchal system. According to the radical feminism, oppression under patriarchy doesn't benefit for anyone (Vukoicic, 2017).

In this case, radical feminism also looks more realistically related to the prevention of gender subordination which needs to be studied

domestically before leading to things that can be avoided in the global realm (Jackson and Sorensen, 2005: 337). Based on the explanation of the various types of feminism, in general, the assumptions made by the three are about the relationship between knowledge and power (Steans, et al.: 2005, 165). For example, a knowledge that builds perceptions of men as a stronger class than women, so that men tend to obtain the main positions in the labor force.

Meanwhile, on the global scale, the arguments developed by feminists are: first, women have never been the main subject in a globalized world that has been focused on discussing masculinity, for example, conflict, politics, war, and anarchy (Grant and Newland in True, 2011: 216). Thus, international relations tend to ignore femininity in both practice and theory. Thus, feminists think that the state has manipulated gender issues so that the existence of a country or an "authority" can be maintained. For example, the role of ethnic Tamil women who become LTTE militant soldiers with the aim to be no longer marginalized as a group and can avoid various forms of violence and harassment (True, 2001: 224). Tamil women's participation in a militant group is a proper example of how women's emancipation can often inhibit an authority to be effectively maintained.

## **CONCLUSION**

The main theme discussed in feminism is about the country and its power which tends to be masculine, for example on the issue of the LTTE in Sri Lanka as has been explained. As an alternative perspective, radical feminism seeks to raise the issue of LTTE issue in a complex and deeper way, especially in terms of looking at gender inequality. For this reason, the international order that feminism seeks to achieve is not only to look at

everything coherently, but also to pay attention to every actor and their role in the international order.

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