

**GENDERED  
ASSUMPTIONS**  
- AND -  
**WOMEN'S LIVED  
EXPERIENCES:**

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*Interrogating 'Violent Extremism'  
and political violence from  
the standpoint of women*



**Women and Media Collective**  
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**Gendered assumptions and women's lived experiences:**

*Interrogating 'Violent Extremism' and political violence from the standpoint of women*

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**Country Research Leads:** Kamala Chandrakirana and Sarala Emmanuel

**Overall Research Lead:** Dr. Farzana Haniffa

**Overall Project Lead and Advisory:** Kumudini Samuel and Radhika Coomaraswamy

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**Women and Media Collective**

56/1, Sarasavi Lane, Castle Street,

Colombo 8, Sri Lanka.

Email: [wmcslanka@womenandmedia.org](mailto:wmcslanka@womenandmedia.org)

Web: [womenandmedia.org](http://womenandmedia.org)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/womenandmediacollecive>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/womenandmedia>

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# Women's Agency and the Gendered Impact of Political Violence in India, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka

*by* **FARZANA HANIFFA**

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# BACKGROUND

This research study was conceptualized by the Women and Media Collective (WMC) in conversation with feminist academics and activists engaged in interrogating and responding to political violence in India, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka. It was planned as a three-country study and targeted three different locations each in India, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka. The study was initially formulated using the term “Violent Extremism” (VE), the security policy language preferred by the UN and multilateral and bilateral agencies and academics studying the management of Islamic militancy globally, with little reference to other similar expressions of extreme violence by both state and non-state entities. At the outset, the research was designed as a means of exploring women’s experiences that were often inadequately taken into account in the state-centric security policy frameworks that informed inquiry into “Violent Extremism.” As the study progressed, we were also able to critique some of the assumptions with which we commenced the research.

## The rationale and justification

The initial framing, *inter alia*, justified the research on the following basis:

Reports across the spectrum from the UN to donor agencies emphasize the need for greater research and analysis to address the “drivers of violent extremism” as well as its ramifications (Fink et al., 2013). Among the greatest challenges for the world today are the new waves of VE, currently manifesting in Asia, as local groups link across borders with international violent entities such as Al Qaeda, IS, and the Taliban, resulting in cross-border fertilization, spillovers, and increase in extraterritorial responses to extremism.

At the international level, VE has been primarily addressed from a state-centric perspective of counter-terrorism focusing on state and border security, military collaboration, and punitive criminal justice (Mercy Corps, 2018). Counter-terrorism employed by states and multilaterally has also often served to suspend the normal rule of law and support perpetual crises and emergency practices, undermining human rights and fundamental freedoms (Ní Aoláin, 2018).<sup>1</sup>

The research formulated as a whole has been influenced by the following:

Revisiting the issues through a gendered lens could be especially critical in surfacing a more nuanced understanding of the drivers of VE as well as in adding to the strategies of addressing issues of violence against women and ensuring women’s safety in places of protracted contestations. In all contexts of wars and conflict, the fallout of the politics of hate and entrenched impunity for perpetrators has always been greatest on women and girls and when left unquestioned and unchecked continue to increase exponentially. It is increasingly acknowledged globally that the spread of ideologies that preach intolerance for diversity and pluralism is closely linked with heightened gender-based violence.

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1. Women and Media Collective’s proposal to IDRC, September 2019: “Women’s Agency and the Gendered Impact of Violence in India, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka.”

During the course of the research, we have seen that some of the language that we utilized required nuancing. For instance, the following:

A gendered lens can help signal the early stages of the emergence of VE through warning signs such as growing religious conservatism and intolerance, with its inevitable fallout of greater patriarchal controls over women, curtailing and crimping their rights and gender equality in both public (including social media) and private spaces i.e., the family and home.

Our research indicated that while the growth of intolerance and patriarchal controls have long been associated with the emergence of movements justifying violence, they were not necessarily associated with religious conservatism. We as a group were also sensitive to how, in a context where Muslims are in a minority, Muslim religiosity by definition was considered a “driver” of violent extremism, a position that informed anti-Muslim mobilizing in the Sri Lankan and Indian contexts. Moreover, the framing of the emergence of violence as driven by religious requirements alone belied many other structural factors that lead to violent acts being carried out in all three contexts and the maintenance of conflicts. Additionally, as has already been established in UN discourses, we join women across the world in refusing an instrumentalization and securitizing of women’s rights, where gender justice is thought of only instrumentally as possibly aiding in preventing violent extremism from emerging.

We fully stand by the following that was also claimed in the design of the research.

In addition, a woman-centric approach shifts the narrative from the heavily securitized counter-terrorism one to that of the lived experiences of women, and thereby of the community, which could then suggest local workable strategies with higher chances of success.

Our research was also influenced substantially by the position articulated in the following two paragraphs of the research proposal:

Institutions and governments including the United Nations have come out with lists of the drivers of VE ranging from the lack of socioeconomic opportunities to marginalization and discrimination, poor governance, injustices, violations of the rule of law and radicalization in prisons (UNSG, 2015). But issues of intolerance and exclusion left unaddressed, even in what is perceived as “efficiently” governed states, can also chip away at the democratic functioning of state institutions and the social fabric of society, hollowing it out and setting the stage for VE. An analysis of recent bouts of VE could provide critical insights into the costs and fallout of state inaction around issues of intolerance and non-inclusion.

An important characteristic feature of VE is a violent and arrogant disregard for civic discourse, scientific or rational thought, debate and critique, human rights and due process. These characteristics resonate well with what is happening in South Asia

and South East Asia context today. There is in fact a sense of urgency to address this phenomenon in the region, particularly in communities where long-standing conflicts have not been justly resolved and extremist ideologies are slowly but surely taking root. These violations, violence and insecurity merit careful, context-specific study and policy interventions at local, national and international levels. While this is true globally, it is particularly critical in the Asian context where international and national policies are increasingly protectionist and women's rights securitized and instrumentalized as a tool for countering extremism.

The following paragraph from the research proposal indicates the work that we promised to carry out:

This project responds to the need for a woman-centric approach as well as to the need for a greater context-specific understanding of VE in the Asian region. The project is therefore designed to address the emergent trend of VE in South Asia and South-East Asia (Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka) with special reference to its triggers in protracted and intractable contexts. It will study the emergence of VE from a gender perspective and through the lived realities of women and the role of women as they create safe spaces, strategies and mechanisms to prevent, mitigate, and respond to the causes and consequences of VE.

Our initial research proposal only makes a brief reference to actions of the state in fostering violence in the societies we studied. We reference state as failing to adequately address "intolerance and non-inclusion." However, we worked to emphasize in the research that the state was often complicit in the violence faced by communities. Histories of state violence and repression as well as the capture of the state by those espousing exclusionary ideologies impacted movements and incidents of ongoing violence and exclusion that we studied in all three contexts.

The teams carried out research in the three countries amidst great existential and logistical difficulties due to the COVID-19 pandemic and also in the middle of difficult political developments. Therefore, how terms like "violent extremism," "triggers," and "prevention" were understood was not uniform across the contexts – this will be more fully explored below.

## Feminist understandings of violent extremism

We recognized in the initial research proposal that there is an emphasis at the level of the UN and the Global Counter-terrorism Forum on making women critical stakeholders in both global and local counter-VE strategies. Research is also making a link between the protection and fulfilment of women's rights and the low incidence or decrease in VE (Coomaraswamy, 2015). However, as Coomaraswamy cautions, the use of these findings in "counter-terrorism" strategies has unintended consequences that lead to an increase in securitization for women. Women are recruited into militarized counter operations or are trained to gather intelligence at the community level, putting them at risk and alienating them from families and communities (Coomaraswamy, 2015). We too caution against the instrumentalization of women for ends determined by a security discourse



only. Within the women's movement and in feminist discourse there are different understandings of how to deal with both countering violent extremism (CVE) and counter-terrorism (CT) and its underlying politics. Endorsing Nesiah's call for a "critical and self-reflective praxis on the global stage," (Nesiah, 2013), this research study hopes to encourage a broader engagement with the issue that takes history, context and the actions of the state more seriously.

We framed our Objectives and Research Questions as follows:

Understanding violent extremism and its gendered dimensions, particularly from the perspective of young women and developing policy directives for national and international intervention, while strengthening women's leadership with particular reference to young women.

The expected research Outcomes were

1. Young women's understanding of violent extremism and its transformations –particularly young women from the nine sites of research in the three countries under study.
2. Developing pathways out of violent extremism to inform a shift in policy intervention, based on and reflecting young/women's experiences as victims, participants, and resisters of violent extremism.
3. Increasing the effectiveness of young/women-led community-based strategies to combat violent extremism beyond a state/security-centred approach, applying feminist analysis to social and cultural engagement processes.

# THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

## Overarching question

*How have young women experienced and navigated the forces of violent extremism in their lives, personally and in relation to marriage, family, community, and nation?*

## Specific questions

*What are the pathways in which violent extremism developed and spread? What are its means and milestones at the national and local levels? How are they linked to previous or existing conflicts?*

*What are young women's perceptions of violent extremism, and what do they consider its drivers? What is the impact of violent extremism on their lives, including how they have borne its effects? What are their sources of vulnerability and strength, including the social movements they have accessed? How have young women participated in, resisted, or mobilized against violent extremism? Are there inter-generational and inter-sectional connections and/or disconnects that influence their sense of options?*

*In what ways has the state empowered and/or disempowered these women who are dealing with violent extremism in their daily lives?*

Designing the research was done in keeping with the expected research outcomes of the study. However, the definition of the term “violent extremism” was different in each of the contexts, since the histories and the politics that impacted each location were quite different. Therefore, the approach to the category “violent extremism” as well as the research focus was country specific. The most important insight into this engagement emerged therefore at the outset. Categories such as violent extremism that drive uniform policy positions are wholly inadequate to address the specific experiences of the countries in which violence driven by religious and political ideologies continues to exist. This point will be addressed once again in the concluding section.

# METHODOLOGY

The research was planned as involving fieldwork in three locations in each of the three countries: India, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka.

## Country level

Analytical research on the pathways in which extremist ideologies developed and spread, including narratives on women's position and role in the family, community, and nation

Study on the role of social media in the spread of fundamentalist-extremist ideologies, including its gendered manifestations

Local-level empirical research in three study sites per country: An incident will be studied per site (three sites per country) through life stories of women affected by fundamentalist-extremist ideology. The case studies will feature five women per site.

## The question of terminology

The question of terminology preoccupied the research team from its inception. As discussed above, the research proposal was formulated using the language of preventing and countering violent extremism and the initial conversations within the team were about engaging with that language – as it was gaining ground in Sri Lanka as a policy response to the threat of Islamic militancy – but also critiquing its emergence and use in the Euro-American context through which its specifically Sri Lankan usage seemed to be filtered.

While the language and its mode of use in the Sri Lankan case were still evolving, in the Indonesian case, the language of violent extremism was having its most sophisticated use in Indonesia's anti-terrorism legislation. There, in keeping with the recommendations of the special rapporteur on Human Rights in counter-terrorism, the language of violent extremism was qualified. The new language asked that the terminology read as "violent extremism leading to terrorism."

### **"Countering Violent Extremism" – deciding on the terminology and language for the research**

The language of "Countering Violent Extremism" (CVE) is a product of the US "War on Terror" politics. The term emerged as a corrective to the politics of the term "terrorism" but essentially refers to a continuation of the same project. "Terrorism" is well known for not having an internationally agreed-upon definition regardless of its use in policy documents and in much international relations research. "Violent Extremism" that replaced the term also does not have an agreed-upon definition and continues to be used despite this lack of definition.<sup>2</sup> In many cases, authors offer their

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2. See Randy Borum (2012).

own – usually problematic—definitions.<sup>3</sup> It is sometimes used as accepted terminology that does not require a definition.

The teams agreed that we should begin our journey with an acknowledgement of this fact that the terminology of violent extremism has a problematic history and is closely associated with the framework of reactive counter-terrorism violence that was unleashed by the “war on terror.” Although arguably a frame of reference to address violence perpetrated by different groups globally, in practice, it has been primarily used to deal with Muslim communities and “Jihadist” violence. As one commentator stated, it could also be relevant for addressing other sorts of violence such as Buddhist or Hindu nationalist extremism. However, so far, it has not been used for that purpose.<sup>4</sup> One of the few exceptions is its use in the 2015 Global report on Resolution 1325 (Coomaraswamy, 2015).

Some usages of the language of Combating Violent Extremism also mirror the assumption that the political ends that VE militants have are illegitimate as opposed to those espoused by other violent militant movements. For instance, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka would not be considered a violent extremist movement and neither would the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, or the Kurdish Nationalist Movement. Al Qaeda, Al Shabab, the Islamic State are certainly violent extremists.<sup>5</sup> (In another article there is a reference to the fact that groups like the Black Panthers and the revolutionary movements in Cuba etc., are never referenced with this language because they are seen to be having a legitimate political goal.<sup>6</sup>) There is an implication of a lack of rationality and therefore a lack of political legitimacy to the project of “violent extremists.” Such a discussion we soon discovered was eminently unsuited when concerning a country like Indonesia. The country was a hotbed of “violent extremist” interventions – the Bali Bombings, and the bombing of several churches on Christmas eve are cases in point. Also, Indonesian fighters leaving to join ISIS was a well-documented phenomenon. Furthermore, many Indonesian Islamist groups that worked to bring about an Indonesian Islamic state had violent wings and Indonesian Islamist commitment to violence dated back to the formation of the modern Indonesian state. The politics animating the Indonesian research was quite insistent, in fact, that what was of interest was the larger political project of Islamism and its exclusionary imperative. Its use of violence to achieve its goals was only one part of its organising strategy.

The operation of assumptions regarding “politics” and “legitimacy” within this terminology was therefore an indication of its weakness for our purpose. It was essential that we use language that erred on the side of being too descriptive rather than being not descriptive at all of the specificity of each case that we discuss. In the Indonesian case, the usage of the term violent extremism to refer to Islamic militancy did not indicate a lack of political rationality. As the research showcases,

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3. For instance, the following definition from Defining the concept of violent extremism: Geneva paper 24/19 (Geneva Center for Security Policy.)

Violent extremism is a violent type of mobilisation that aims to elevate the status of one group, while excluding or dominating its ‘others’ based on markers, such as gender, religion, culture and ethnicity. In doing so, violent extremist organisations destroy existing political and cultural institutions, and supplant them with alternative governance structures that work according to the principles of a totalitarian and intolerant ideology.

4. See The Concept of Countering Violent Extremism: CSS Analyses in Security Policy, 183 (2015).

5. Defining the concept of violent extremism: Geneva paper 24/19 (2019), Geneva Center for Security Policy.

6. See Borum (2012).

there are a wide variety of Islamist movements in Indonesia with a similar ideological commitment – that of Islamization of the state – that operate with different logic. Therefore, violent extremism in the Indonesian context seems to reference Islamist groups who have a commitment to violence as political action. Under no circumstances then, could the use of the terminology in the case of Indonesia be considered as referring to groups engaged in “senseless” violence. Arguably, the position that other groups described as “violent extremists” are themselves engaged in senseless violence itself seems somewhat suspect. Our research indicated that it was a policy position adopted as a refusal to see the larger political claims, processes, and contexts within which such mobilising was emerging.

The entire discussion surrounding violent extremism also emphasizes individual trajectories towards “radicalization” and finds cause in personal life experiences. While such an approach can be important and was arguably used even in the current study, the research teams also embedded the personal stories in larger social contexts. Much of the current research available globally often discounts the structural features underpinning the emergence of violent groups and movements and the political histories that contributed to their emergence.<sup>7</sup> Some country-specific studies that are available reflect this methodology in the way they present their research. For instance, an interesting and informative study on the increase in numbers of Indonesian women “violent extremists” by the Indonesian think tank the Institute of Policy Analysis of Conflict, makes reference to a variety of militant groups in Indonesia in its report on female militants and female support for male militancy. The report titled *Mothers to Bombers: The Evolution of Women Extremists*<sup>8</sup> is written for an Indonesian audience that arguably is familiar with the contexts. But their reportage is about the experiences of individual women and the text makes very perfunctory references to the organizations that they are a part of and provides no analysis regarding the organizations’ emergence. The absence of an account of the history of such movements is noticeable and the emphasis placed on the analysis is telling of their preoccupation with a somewhat narrow definition of security alone.<sup>9</sup>

There are recent writings from liberal think tanks that are unapologetically dismissive of the entire project of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) as practised on the ground in the United States. In a September 2019 policy brief, the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU states that

While federal law enforcement agencies involved in CVE paint the program as a community outreach initiative dedicated to stopping people from becoming violent extremists, the reality is that these programs, which are based on junk science, have proven to be ineffective, discriminatory, and divisive.<sup>10</sup>

The piece goes on to state that American Muslim communities have been the victims of such law enforcement programmes based on “vague and meaningless” terrorism indicators. In a project

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7. The Concept of Countering Violent Extremism: CSS Analyses in Security Policy, 183 (2015).

8. *Mothers to Bombers: The Evolution of Women Extremists*, Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (2017), <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/gdc/gdcovop/2017344162/2017344162.pdf>

9. This article on the Indonesian case is also of interest because the language of violent extremism is adopted wholesale and is even used to describe militancy and resistance to the state in the 1980s.

10. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/why-countering-violent-extremism-programs-are-bad-policy>

run by a non-profit organization in Maryland, on a USD 500,000 Justice Department grant to identify American Muslims vulnerable to becoming terrorists, the organization included “ideology beliefs and values” and “political grievances” as factors that made persons vulnerable to becoming terrorists. In Massachusetts, a 2016 CVE grantee listed criticism of U.S foreign policy as a terrorism risk indicator. As the report indicated, all of these “indicators” were protected by foundational American freedoms.

The research team discussed the implications of the language of “Countering Violent Extremism” and took a decision that we will not be replicating this language without critique in our research since it is heavily informed by racism against Islam and against immigrant Muslims in the countries where it is part of policy. Its usage in the context of India and Sri Lanka validates the racism and political opportunism of our own states and political actors who are continuing the minoritizing of Muslim and other vulnerable communities. Moreover, the violence that we critique and want to mitigate through the recommendations made in our study is perpetrated by a variety of groups that have various levels of state-endorsement and support. The violence by Muslim groups is often instrumentalized in the service of the latter as is the case in Sri Lanka. In the Indian case, the deterioration of civic space, the capture of state institutions, and the capture of the popular imagination by state-endorsed Hindutva ideology motivated the Indian team to actually utilize the categories of violent extremism to address state violations. It was further used to name ideologues that held the state captive at this historical moment. In the Sri Lankan case, all ideological projects in operation at this time were named “violent extremism.” In the Indonesian case, the state has instrumentalized the emergence of Indonesian Islamists organising to enhance its security capabilities, and to heighten its repressive hold on the population. We need our language to be adequate to the task of reflecting the politics of those varied contexts. While our research must inevitably be informed by the fact that there are groups functioning in all our respective contexts who are acting within an ideology espoused by violent Islamic militancy, the research made clear that we must understand such phenomenon as driven by forces and factors not limited to the phenomenon of Muslim community culture and religiosity alone.

In the case of Indonesia – a majority Muslim state – there is a longer history of organizing for violent political action based on Islamic religious tenets. The Indonesian team was committed to understanding their context in terms of the threat of state takeover by Islamist groups who were agitating against the maintenance of the Indonesian state as secular, and further as erasing the ethno-linguistic plurality of the Indonesian context by emphasizing religion alone. In the Indonesian case, we studied three contexts that have very different engagements with the Islamist project for different, locally-specific ends. Therefore, a question that is worth asking is whether the language of violent extremism is the one that we want to use. Arguably, in a Muslim majority context, it is not anti-Muslim mobilization that is of concern but the selective mobilization of the corpus of Muslim religious references by different groups to use violence (but not just violence) for political ends. This question of language and usage was informed also by the research team’s realization that the term had no local equivalence and was not used by communities. However, the language was important because, influenced by the global discourse, it was being utilized for the formulation of Indonesia’s newest laws made to control Islamist militancy.

In recognizing that the literature on violent extremism helped streamline a selective understanding of “pathways” by which young people may become “radicalized” or involved in movements for change that espouse violence, the research has foregrounded exploring local contexts as well as economic causes that underlie the ongoing conflicts. In the cases of both Sri Lanka and India, the “violent extremisms” that we want to understand are not confined to Muslim communities or militancy that draws its justification from an Islamic corpus of knowledge. These forms of violence – state-sponsored, state-endorsed, as well as violent anti-state agitations by marginalized communities (and not just Muslim) – do not easily fall within the language that the violent extremism framework provides. We also raised the point that the discourse’s unproblematized adoption of the term “extremism” needed clarification. For instance, when using the term extremism, the “norm” in relation to which something is considered “extreme” needs to be clarified.

The Global Report on 1325 also makes an important point regarding violent extremisms that is noteworthy:

Extremism must only be of concern to the global community if it ends in violence, hate or violates the rights of others. Freedom of speech in a democratic state requires that different points of view, no matter how extremist, should be allowed expression – except for hate speech. We cannot insist that the whole world has one ideology. Growth and change in a multicultural world will only occur if beliefs are challenged and questioned in light of the very ideals held dear. Fighting extremism cannot be a license to remake the world according to individual understanding of what is correct for any society. Global concern must only be triggered if there is violent extremism that destroys communities and violates the rights of others as set out in international laws and standards. (Coomaraswamy 2015, 222)

The fact that in much of the literature the norm is considered to be self-evident and universally shared is problematic. And as we do in the Indonesian case, simple disagreement with an approach is inadequate. In the Indonesian case, the political position of opposing Islamist organizing is posited on the basis that the Islamist worldview includes a dismissal of Indonesia’s religious and ethnic diversity through the introduction of blasphemy laws for instance, its commitment to gender roles that restrict women’s freedoms, and its criminalization of sexual minorities.

A question that was approached at the inception discussion regarding the research was as follows: Do we use the term “violent extremism” and expand its meaning because we think it has its uses, or critique the term in our writing and adopt our own? Or conversely, do we produce a critique of the term, flag the dangers of the term as used in some of our contexts, and work with different terms?

In the Indonesian case, the research team responded as follows:

In conducting the empirical research in Indonesia, the term “violent extremism” required reconsideration. This was raised as an issue among the local researchers when they started seeking out women to interview who had experience engaging in Islamist

movements. They found the term politically charged, particularly for those who are not aligned with government policy, and risked a priori judgmental labelling that would discourage open conversation with their resource persons. In contrast, women who were participating in internationally-sponsored programs on countering violent extremism were familiar with the term and had no problem engaging with it. Earlier that year, in January 2021, the Indonesian government took up the term as part of its international engagement, particularly with regard to the push for national action plans on violent extremism. The presidential regulation outlining Indonesia's National Action Plan for Preventing and Overcoming Violent Extremism that Leads to Terrorism 2022-2024 defines this phenomenon as "a belief and/or action that use violent means or threats of extreme violence with the aim of supporting or committing acts of terrorism." This research team ultimately agreed not to use the term "violent extremism" when introducing the study at the community level and in the individual interviews unless its acceptability was ensured. As a result, the research question on women's perceptions on violent extremism was obtained from some of the resource persons but from not all.<sup>11</sup>

In the Sri Lankan context, where enemies were easily identified if not clearly defined, we were unable to always have research teams spell out what they meant by "extremism." In many ways the use of violence for particular political projects was considered adequate to define violent extremism. In the field interviews, the researchers attempted to ascertain women's understanding of the term and received several interesting responses. The male-centric nature of radical politics and religious "fundamentalism" was identified in these conversations. An activist in Kurunegala stated the following:

Fundamentalists have a constructed ideology that they follow. Radicals are changing and challenging hegemonic ideologies. However, in all these movements, there is a *jathivadaya* (racism) and strong patriarchal elements. You never see a woman leader in these movements. Radical politics also protects patriarchy.<sup>12</sup>

Two of our background papers on Sri Lanka's past violence discuss the use of violent means for political action. In a context where state violence is so pervasive and excessive, more attention needs to be paid to how violence that is considered illegitimate functions in society today. Given that the dismantling of the popular uprising earlier this year (2022) was also done on the basis of it descending into violence, more thinking is required about what is considered legitimate violence and illegitimate violence in the context of a political crisis.

The research did not engage in a discussion regarding the place of violence in the various contexts that we studied or the legitimacy or lack thereof of violence perpetrated by actors other than the state. We left this question open. Instead, we discussed the manner in which women's lives were impacted by the ideological projects that espoused violence, including the state.

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11. Women and Islamism in Indonesia: Navigating the Ideological Battlegrounds, Women's Agency and the Gendered Impact of Violence in India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka: Indonesia Country Report (2022).

12. The Marriage of State Structure with Divisive Identarian Politics: Layers of Resistance and Sites of Struggle, Women's Agency and the Gendered Impact of Violence in India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka: Sri Lanka Country Report (2022).



We must and should be careful about unwittingly endorsing problematic political positions adopted by groups. However, we should clarify the specificity of each group's emergence and not erase that specificity and the history through the usage of a category like violent extremism. For instance, the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), the group that first publicly professed a commitment to spreading anti-Muslim sentiment, would be, to us in Sri Lanka, an unquestionably "extremist" organization that endorses violence. However, the descriptive power of terms like Sinhala Buddhist supremacy and the anti-Muslim movement – which the BBS initiated – are arguably greater than the term violent extremists.

Ultimately, within the research project, each research team was asked to define what, in their work, was considered "violent extremism." In the Sri Lankan case studies, and in the Social Media paper we have a slippage where the term is used to refer to all violence perpetrated by groups attempting to marginalise weaker groups and vulnerable others. While we were committed initially to a critique of the terminology, research-based usage has attempted to broaden the limited usage that was made when we entered the study in 2019. In the Indian case, as already mentioned, the attempt has deliberately been made to push the discourse of violent extremism towards an analysis of the state as perpetrator. The acceptance, endorsement, and institutionalization of anti-minority sentiment by the Indian state and the normalization of the violence accompanying such sentiment have been the focus of the one piece of research, based on secondary sources, done by the Indian team.

While the conversations regarding the terminology were progressing, it was also clear that the language use at the international policy level was changing. At the inception workshop, we shared a document formulated by the UN Special Rapporteur Ms. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism. The document contained many of the issues discussed here and also pointed to the need to qualify the term "violent extremism" and indicate that it be used in the formulation – violent extremism leading to terrorism. According to the Special Rapporteur's report:

The category of "extremist" crimes is particularly vague and problematic. Absent the qualifier of "violent extremism conducive to terrorism", the term remains broad and overly vague and may encroach on human rights in profound and far-reaching ways. The Special Rapporteur takes the view that the term "extremism" has no purchase in binding international legal standards and, when operative as a criminal legal category, is irreconcilable with the principle of legal certainty; it is therefore per se incompatible with the exercise of certain fundamental human rights.<sup>13</sup>

While the special rapporteur's attempt to bring about a more sophisticated terminology to a process that has such profound effects on countless communities worldwide must be commended, it must also be noted that there is no acceptable definition of terrorism. The special rapporteur's preferred usage for this term is "an act committed with the intent to kill, cause serious bodily injury, or take

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13. Report of UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism Ms. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/report-special-rapporteur-promotion-and-protection-human-rights-and-fundamental-1>

hostages with the aim of intimidating or terrorizing a population or compelling a government or international organization.” However, the sloppy usage of the term in international policy dialogue and among international agencies has resulted in the permissibility of ever more egregious definitions to enter the law books. In the Indonesian case, as Human Rights Watch has pointed out,<sup>14</sup> terrorism is defined as “violence or threat of violence to create a widespread atmosphere of terror or fear, resulting in mass casualties and/or causing destruction or damage to vital strategic objects, the environment, public facilities, or an international facility.” Article 1(4) of the Eradication of Criminal Acts of Terrorism Law (the “CT Law”) defines “the threat of violence” as including any “speech, writing, picture, symbol or physical, with or without the use of electronic or non-electronic form which may incite fear in a person.” The instrumentalization of security architecture, especially that of the law, for greater consolidation of state power to crush dissent is a constant possibility that must be resisted.

## OPERATIONALIZATION OF THE RESEARCH DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The inception workshop for the research was scheduled to be carried out in late February 2020 but had to be postponed due to the escalation of tensions in India and the inability of the Indian team to travel and then later delayed further due to the outbreak of COVID-19. It was ultimately carried out over zoom on two days – 20–21 June 2020. Since there was a delay in taking the workshop forward, other tasks were entered into. A literature review for the larger research was commissioned, and instructions were formulated for country teams to carry out country-specific literature reviews which were to inform the country studies (May 2020). Country teams had also begun to make connections with possible partners and make decisions regarding research locations. Going forward, the research, as well as the planning workshops were conducted online in the midst of severe COVID outbreaks and much difficulty during half of 2020 and most of 2021. The study was initially conceived of as one where the three country teams would meet often and build solidarity during the research process. This was not to be. The work held together during this period given the long-standing connections and networks between the research leads in the three countries and the WMC on the basis of which the research study was initially designed. It was initially conceptualized as a three-country study with substantial empirical research in all countries that needed to also be pared down given the political developments in India which made the empirical research component no longer tenable in 2020. Thereby, a substantial element of the research as well as the possibility of comparison and cross-fertilization across the three contexts was abandoned. One essay on the theme of “radicalization” based on secondary materials was commissioned from India to contribute to the study.

The teams from Indonesia and Sri Lanka continued with the field research amidst severe difficulty. In Sri Lanka, the fieldwork sites were chosen as follows – Batticaloa, Kurunegala and Negombo. In Indonesia, the work was carried out in West Java, Central Sulawesi and West Kalimantan. Catching

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14. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/06/20/letter-indonesias-new-counterterrorism-law>

COVID, losing loved ones and colleagues to COVID, and encountering horrendous exclusionary state policies amidst COVID impacted the research work in both countries.

## The Inception Meeting and Work Plan Generation

The inception meeting spread out over three days, with a three-hour session on each day, led to the making of some substantive decisions regarding the work plan.

It was apparent from the inception meeting discussion that the three country teams were engaging in very specific political projects in their particular locations and that the design of the research would emerge from the team leaders' particular interventionist intentions. No uniformity of design, therefore, was possible at this initial conceptualizing stage. It was also clear that the research would draw from the country teams' rich and extensive political activist experiences and therefore such a centring of their interventionist intentions was essential. It was decided at that point that the research will be designed going forward with substantial autonomy for each country team to decide on their particular research emphasis and framing of the information. Uniformity was agreed upon in terms of use of categories and expected research outputs. It was also agreed by the teams that they would provide an overview background document and provide worked-out justification of their choices and framings.

It is also important that the differences in the context be understood at the outset and that the limitations of any comparison be fully incorporated into the study. India and Sri Lanka had minority Muslim communities while Indonesia was a Muslim-majority country; the scale of each location and population size were vastly different across the three countries but we were considering them for comparison because they were all nation states. The histories of the ideological projects that we were investigating were different and closely tied to the histories of the particular nation states.

The research teams also agreed that it was essential that an ongoing conversation was maintained between the three country teams so that each team is aware of the progress and direction of the others. This conversation was also to help the overall lead to ascertain what comparisons will be made across the sites. It was also agreed that the following would be done by all country teams to ensure some possibility of comparison was maintained:

1. The respective framings that each of the country teams are working with will be clearly presented in all the outputs generated.
2. How the categories that are being used for the research are meaningful in each context must be stated upfront (violent extremism, radicalization, terrorism, political violence).
3. It was suggested that we desist from using the terms violent extremism and terrorism at the level of the country studies. The final overview documents will provide a mapping of the use of such terms in the literature and in policy interventions. If country teams do use the term, the team will provide a definition of the term as it is meaningful in their context and justify its usage.

4. All teams will stick to a loosely common methodology and an agreed-upon number of products/outputs.
5. WMC will maintain an online repository for reading material and research products for team members to share. We will start with the reports of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism.

## The Products

The research was designed as taking place in three countries with three locations in each of the countries identified for strategic reasons. The methodology for the field research was to foreground the study of a minimum of five women per location, again identified for strategic reasons. The women identified must be primarily if not only young women. Case studies regarding their lives must be captured in the country report.

## The Country Reports

It was decided that the country report will be a synthesized account of the 15 case studies located in the three sites identified for research in each country. The report would provide an overview of the particular conflict, movement, violent event around which the locations of the case studies were identified and that the analysis would be informed by the local context. It was also agreed that the religious/ethnic/political issues that were relevant to each context be fully described, and the underlying socioeconomic issues included in the analysis that is produced. It was agreed that the case studies may be formulated on the basis of the following:

1. Life histories of activists.
2. Narratives of persons who have undergone a particularly harrowing experience connected to the place/event that is being studied.
3. Focus group discussions with groups (who had a particular kind of experience /were part of an activist group etc.)

Any combination of the above.

In addition to the field research, there were several other documents commissioned from each country that were understood as background research to support the country reports.

For this purpose, three other documents were commissioned as products from each country:

**The Literature Review** was a supporting document for each country team. The guidelines provided to the country teams emphasized that the Literature Review be comprehensive in gathering the contextual information required for the country reports.

**The “radicalization” paper**, which was a stand-alone output, from each country, that was designed to address the first research question:

*What are the pathways in which violent extremism developed and spread? What are its means and milestones at the national and local levels? How are they linked to previous or existing conflicts?*

The fact that the research study was designed with this paper as a special country-specific output indicates the importance placed by the researchers on ensuring that current occurrences of violence and conflict are not seen in isolation from past occurrences. It was decided that each country team will address this question depending on how the team conceptualized the entry point for each country. Generally, this paper was to be used to discuss the historical emergence of violent groups and the circumstances under which they mobilized. The paper was to discuss how group formation and mobilization has taken place in various contexts, the nature of membership and network maintenance that is taking place, and how the state is responding to the formation of such groups and networks – sometimes taking political advantage from their existence, sometimes subjecting them to counter-terrorist interventions. It was decided that the role of the state in the emergence of such groups should be a priority area for this paper. Each country team was provided with the space to develop their own criteria (laid out in the Country Research Plan) for choosing what should be the content for each country paper.

**The “Social Media” paper** was formulated as a country contribution based on the importance of recognizing the place of new media in many facets of political mobilization, spreading of disinformation and inciting inter-group tensions leading to violence. At the time of the research getting off the ground, there were a variety of global developments that spoke to the importance of engaging with social media for the study. The conversation on social media and the threat of big data was impacted by the Cambridge Analytica Scandal. It was revealed that Facebook had shared user data with Cambridge Analytica who then used that information to create user profiles and feed selected news to users on particular political campaigns. Given the manner in which disinformation is utilized in the three countries for specific political and ideological ends, it was important that the issue be explored. In the Sri Lankan case, Facebook had apologised for the role that the platform had played in the anti-Muslim violence in Digana, Kandy district, in 2018.<sup>15</sup> Social media enabled new forms of communication and connections, especially for women and marginalized groups who were kept out of established information networks. Sometimes such enabling led to connecting with Islamist groups – as was the case with apps such as Telegram and IS recruiters in Indonesia. Furthermore, the availability of smart phones and the internet meant that sharing of information regarding violations and mobilizing for political action through information sharing was quick. Cameras and social media also made it possible for authorities to target people more readily for participating in public protests as is currently happening in Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the 2022 popular uprisings. States of course have fully realized the power of social media as demonstrated by the shutting down of the internet in Sri Lanka after the violence in 2018, after the Easter bombings of 2019, and during the 2022 popular uprisings. In the case of India, as

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15. Aljazeera, (2020, May 13), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/13/sri-lanka-facebook-apologises-for-role-in-2018-anti-muslim-riots>

the current research has documented, the Indian government shutdown internet access to Kashmir in 2019, and this shutdown became the longest anywhere in the history of internet usage. The use of “cyber security” legislation to curb freedom of expression in social media is another issue that prompted research on social media in the three countries. Concerns have been raised regarding the draft of the proposed Cyber Security Bill in Sri Lanka. The use of broad terms like “critical information infrastructure” and “cyber security incidents” have been noted by civil society as possibly enabling state intervention in spaces hitherto protected by rights to freedom of expression.<sup>16</sup>

## **‘VIOLENT EXTREMISM’ IN THE THREE COUNTRIES: NOTES FROM THE RESEARCH**

The following section of the report will discuss research findings from the three countries. The Indian case is made on the basis of a desk study, including a literature review, and the cases of Sri Lanka and Indonesia include extensive desk studies as well as field research in three locations in each country. This section drawn from the Sri Lankan and Indonesian papers on “radicalization” and social media and the paper from India on the deterioration of conditions in their context.

### **SRI LANKA**

#### **Background**

The Sri Lankan fieldwork component was designed to foreground the country’s most recent encounter with mass violence – the Easter bombings of 2019 by Islamic militants – and its aftermath. It was soon established in discussions that the Easter bombings and especially their effects could not be understood without locating the event in Sri Lanka’s fraught post-independence history where different groups chose to resort to forms of violent mobilization. The complexity of the country’s history of violence was thought to require four different mappings/ background papers to adequately account for them. Four papers were commissioned where political projects that espoused violence as a means of engagement were discussed. The papers dealt with the left-leaning Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) insurrections of 1977 and 1989, the Tamil nationalist uprising in the North and East that escalated in the 1980s and was militarily defeated in 2009, the violence espoused against minority religious communities – especially Muslims and evangelical Christians – by Buddhist groups in the aftermath of the war, and lastly, the ISIS-inspired violence of the Muslim suicide bombers in April 2019.<sup>17</sup>

In the exploration into Tamil nationalism and violence and current politicians’ preoccupation with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), our researcher chose to prioritize the Tamil nationalist

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16. Freedom House, (n.d.), [https://freedomhouse.org/country/sri-lanka/freedom-net/2021#footnoteref6\\_oqzz4bl](https://freedomhouse.org/country/sri-lanka/freedom-net/2021#footnoteref6_oqzz4bl)

17. The four papers are: Tamil nationalism and violence by Ambika Satkunanathan, The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and the insurrections of 1971 and 1988 by Rosa Levi, Emergence of the recent “national liberation movement” in Sri Lanka by Geethika Dharmasinghe, and Islamic “Radicalization” in Sri Lanka? by Farzana Haniffa. The papers are available on the WMC website.

LTTE and their engagement with several rounds of peace talks. The LTTE was a militant Tamil nationalist organisation that was responsible for the decades of war that Sri Lanka experienced from the late 1970s until its brutal end in 2009. The LTTE espoused violence against the state as its form of struggle and was known for perpetrating such violence against other Tamil groups as well as Tamil and Muslim groups and individuals that did not agree with its understanding of protest and liberation as well. The LTTE managed to hold the Sri Lankan state virtually to ransom for several decades while it established its supremacy as the “sole representative” of the Tamil nation and formulated a quasi-state structure in the north of the country. The paper argues that the LTTE understood its success and its ability to sit for peace talks with the government – especially in 2000 – as based on its military capability. Therefore, the paper suggests that violence was the means to possible success for the LTTE and that they, therefore, did not see the need to apologise for the violence or step back from it during peace talks. The author also looks at the post-war critiques of the LTTE mounted from within the movement and from writers sympathetic to Tamil nationalism. These critics see the LTTE as gradually losing sense of its primary goal of liberating the Tamil people. In its last years, the LTTE set up structures in the areas that mimicked the state. Then, in the latter stages of the war, the LTTE also utilized all possible Tamil bodies to fight the war. This was considered a betrayal of the people by many insiders who were sympathetic to the movement’s goals and the struggle. The paper also talks about the continued importance of the LTTE to the Tamil political imagination in both the North and the East and the way Tamil politicians continue to invoke the signage and the successes of the LTTE’s nationalist struggle to fulfil their own political goals. The transformative impact of the conflict in the North and its continued reverberations in the present are inadequately understood by academics, activists, and policymakers in the present moment in Sri Lanka.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) is a left-leaning organized political group with a working class and peasant leadership. The non-elite leadership of the party makes it unlike any other mostly Sinhala political party in the country. The JVP engaged in two violent insurrections in response to class and political animosities with the regimes in power at those particular historical moments. In the case of the southern insurrections, in both 1971 and 1989, violence was used as the means of political resistance as was practised throughout the world at that time. In both incidents, the uprising caused an upheaval in all Sinhala-speaking areas of the country but was especially widespread in the South and crushed by the state with great ferocity and loss of life. The 1980s were an especially difficult time for the country; in addition to the violence in the South, there was an Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in the North, which arrived in Sri Lanka to ensure the implementation of the Peace Accord of 1987, which brought a settlement of sorts between the Sri Lankan state and the northern Tamil rebels. The IPKF was responsible for egregious violence against civilian populations. The regimes in power have also consistently scapegoated the JVP for various incidents of violence and have practised a policy of undermining its electoral base. Since the 1990s, the JVP has entered the political mainstream and has wielded considerable influence in the country at the level of discourse, but has been progressively undermined by the larger national parties. The JVP was able to have significant showings at elections when it contested in coalition with the SLFP in 2005. However, their electoral footprint has steadily shrunk since then. There is some evidence today that they are gaining in popularity in the wake of the economic disaster of



2022; whether this popularity will translate into electoral gains remains uncertain. The JVP's violent past is constantly evoked in discussions regarding their ability to govern.

The assertion of fascist Buddhism in the post-war context in Sri Lanka has been traced by our third researcher to the emergence of militant Buddhist factions in opposition to Tamil nationalism during the war. Resistance to the violence of the LTTE and their claims to self-determination spawned a Sinhala ultranationalist camp that began its campaign through opposition to devolution proposals brought by successive governments. Southern Sinhala groups organised to push for a military solution to the conflict and opposed any form of negotiated settlement with the LTTE. At their inception, these groups espoused a project of Sinhala Buddhist hegemony for the country that has now borne fruit. Validated by the military victory over the LTTE in 2009 and supported by the Rajapaksa government's own political vision, today this ideology has become normalized to the extent that minorities are now absent from the popular imagination of the wider Sinhala polity. Our researcher traced the emergence of the anti-Muslim campaign at the end of the war to the anti-minority Sinhala supremacist ideology spawned during the 30 years of war and warn us regarding the fascist tendencies of this movement. Today, this movement continues to spout anti-Muslim sentiment and mobilizes against Muslims and Evangelical Christians. The animosity against Tamils, the basis on which the movement was initially organized, continues to thrive in Sri Lankan popular and Buddhist discourse, with an established security presence in the North, and ongoing Buddhist incursions into northern and eastern polities.

The bombings of Easter Sunday 2019 defined the country's contemporary political moment. It was exactly ten years since the violent end of the protracted three-decade long ethnic conflict. And in the intervening years, the political elite in the country had utilized the "victory" as a political platform. The Easter bombings enabled the return of the Rajapaksa political family that had been defeated in the general elections of 2015, and also made possible the reanimation of the security architecture left behind after the war. In the case of the Easter bombings and the Muslim suicide bombers, there is a lack of clarity as to how their plan was executed and who was the mastermind behind it. While the character of the main suicide bomber Zaharan Hashim was well known in his area even before the bombings, the actions of the wealthy Ibrahim brothers, who lived in Colombo and seem to have bankrolled a substantial portion of the operation, remains a mystery. Original research undertaken indicates that the ideological support for the Caliphate was high among young Muslims of a variety of class backgrounds and also that in the context of increased and violent anti-Muslim sentiment, young Muslims, both men and women, remained vulnerable to recruitment by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). There was also speculation that a young Sri Lankan Muslim woman – sister to one of the suicide bombers who detonated herself – was working for ISIS as a recruiter in Dubai and furthermore, that military intelligence was aware of all of the above. Over two years after the attacks there have been few developments in making better sense of what occurred and who had actually managed the bombers. Today, the egregious practices of the state, honed against Tamil communities in the North and East during the war, continue against Muslim communities in the East and elsewhere. Hundreds were arrested in the aftermath of the bombings and many continue to remain under arrest, while the government carried out media campaigns regarding elaborate conspiracy theories. There have been no serious prosecutions of alleged perpetrators.



The Rajapaksa regime instrumentalized the popular distrust of Muslims for the longevity of their own familial political project. Their intentions became clear to many activists and political commentators when Gotabhaya Rajapaksa declared his intention to run for president in the immediate aftermath and also as the anti-Muslim and anti-minority position of the regime became increasingly evident after his election. With the collapse of the Sri Lankan economy in 2022, and the emergence of the popular protests, such a critique of the Rajapaksas became part of the popular discourse within the country. It also became clear that mechanisms honed during the conflict – the use of the Prevention of Terrorism Act for egregious forms of detention etc. – was being reproduced with Muslims as the target. The findings also indicate that in the absence of any concrete developments with regards to locating the mastermind the “*maha mola kaaraya*” of the Easter attacks, there was widespread popular belief that the Rajapaksas were in some way responsible. Such sentiments were reflected in parliamentary speeches carried out during the debate on the presidential commission of inquiry report on the attacks. Investigations, however, have only highlighted some suspicious longstanding involvement of the military intelligence with the bombers and negligence on the part of the political and military leadership. Regardless of the lack of concrete evidence, there is widespread belief that the Rajapaksas were behind organising the attacks. From the research it was unclear if the threat of Islamic extremism could result in future attacks. Some of those developments will be dependent on geopolitics and the instrumentalization of Muslim disaffection by vested interests. There is some evidence of SL army intelligence doing just that in this instance.

The four background studies address different elements of the deep-seated commitment to violence that has impacted the Sri Lankan polity across the decades after independence. These accounts also address the continued prevalence of the ideologies that legitimized such violence as well as the state complicity in nationalist and counter-insurgency violence. State structures were formulated to respond to the violent movements – the LTTE and the JVP – and these structures remained intact and grew during the conflict with minimal opposition from the populace. The fact that they are used successfully against Muslims and now also against the popular anti-government uprisings in 2022 is therefore unsurprising if chilling. The state’s use of violence, as well as various political projects’ commitment to the potential of violence to bring about transformed politics and the capability for violence, haunts the Sri Lankan polity. There has been no accounting for the extra judicial killings and the human rights abuses that occurred in relation to the northern and southern insurgencies, and no public review of the continued necessity of the security infrastructure has been undertaken in the aftermath of the war. The way Islamist violence intersects with this history has impacted the aftermath of the Easter bombings.

The empirical research carried out in Sri Lanka that attempts to map the impact of the Easter bombings and their aftermath on women’s lives has had to contend with the history of past violence as well. That the most virulent of anti-Muslim ideologies and reactions in the aftermath occurred in a district somewhat distant from the bombings, but one that had the largest number of recruits into the military during the war (Kurunegala); that the East, and a town in the East that was impacted in multiple ways during the conflict saw the emergence of the most well-known Muslim suicide bomber (Kattankudi); that a town that saw Tamil communities resignify their own identity as Sinhala and not

Tamil<sup>18</sup> after the anti-Tamil violence of 1983, saw all Muslims as the enemy in the aftermath of the 2019 bombings, should not escape our analysis and must inform any policy landscape.

The anti-Muslim sentiment in the aftermath of the bombings emerged in the context of its cultivation over a decade. The bombings also occurred in a context where memories of violence perpetrated in the name of other enmities continue to haunt communities. The research notes that when talking about dangerous Muslims, *koti*, the language used to reference the Tamil LTTE, was often almost inadvertently utilized. The regime responded in the way it has been known to in these earlier times of violence, and further, the political elite utilized the fear and mistrust – similar to wartime – in tried and tested ways. The field research reflected women’s embeddedness in the history of these past periods of conflict in the respective research areas.

## The Field Work: women’s experiences in the aftermath of the Easter bombings

The field-based case studies were carried out in the Sri Lankan context as a way of mapping how women’s lives were affected in the upheaval that occurred across the country in the aftermath of the Easter bombings. The research revealed that already existing caste, class, ethno-religious, and gender fault lines were reactivated, and while women both participated in and resisted the exclusionary and violent acts carried out against Muslims by Sinhala and Tamil communities during this time, many women’s lives were disrupted and sometimes upended in ways that are not articulated in either popular, scholarly, or policy discussions regarding the bombings’ aftermath.

The three locations chosen for the research were three regional towns/cities. Negombo, located in the Gampaha District, 35 kms away from Colombo on the west coast, just 7 kms away from the airport; Kurunegala, a nodal point in the North Western Province; and Batticaloa, a central town in the Eastern Province. Two of the locations were where bombings took place: the Katuwapitiya Church was located in Negombo and the Zion Church was located in Batticaloa. Kurunegala saw violence in the aftermath of the bombings with Muslim homes and properties attacked in May 2019, and it was also the location of anti-Muslim mobilizing of an extraordinary nature where a well-known local Muslim gynaecologist was accused of sterilizing hundreds of Sinhala women. These places had also experienced previous rounds of violence related to the ethnic conflict, the JVP insurrection of the 1980s, and countless other moments of violence, including at election time. In all three places at the time of research the anti-Muslim hatred was rife.

The research was conducted through interviews of women from different age cohorts representing the ethno-religious diversity in the areas and also included women activists with a history of connections to the communities that predated the bombings. The politics that animated the research in the Sri Lankan context was preoccupied with unearthing how existing oppressive relations were exacerbated by the heightening of ethno-religious tensions and security-related preoccupations

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18. The Marriage of State Structure with Divisive Identarian Politics: Layers of Resistance and Sites of Struggle, Women’s Agency and the Gendered Impact of Violence in India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka: Sri Lanka Country Report (2022).

after the bombings. The research was conducted while tensions were ongoing and communities remained divided. The prevalence of tensions impacted the ability to do research and raised many ethical issues for the researchers. The documentation produced in the aftermath reflects these ongoing tensions. The frenzy unleashed by the bombings affected and transformed women's lives in very specific ways and the research documents this transformation through reference to several individual stories. The research establishes that a study of the impact of incidents such as the Easter bombings cannot be placed outside of the historical experience of the contexts in which they take place. Situating such events in a decontextualised timeline that sees connections only with a global Islamist agenda is not helpful in understanding their impact on women's lives.

The Sri Lankan study emphasized the importance of each context as the areas had experienced previous outbreaks of violence in particular ways. To provide some background to life in those areas the research also recorded respondents' stories regarding ethnic relations in the areas, transformations in religious practice, and gender roles as well as anecdotal accounts of coexistence with other communities, feminist activism of the past, and women's lives prior to the emergence of nationalist and reformist enmities. The tensions that emerged with the bombings were located in such a context.

The study recounts a variety of experiences from the different sites to present the manner in which women are impacted by ongoing ethno-religious tensions while living lives shaped by previous identity projects. For instance, the research captures one of the respondents in Batticaloa, Hameetha Umma, whose life was transformed in the 1960s when her father who was termed an "Indian Muslim" was forcibly repatriated to India on the basis of the Sirima-Shastri pact that was formulated to resolve the problem of the stateless Indian-origin community. Hameetha Umma was also affected during the war when her mother and 10-year-old son were shot by the LTTE in 1990. She was displaced to the town of Kattankudi, endured great hardship, and was unable to send her children to school for three years. Today, she is affected by the strictures imposed by the Islamic reform movements and contests their attempts to cast Muslim women as pious only when dressed in community-sanctioned ways.

Different nationalist and reformist projects mobilized on the basis of women's social roles and their everyday lives. The research recounts stories of how motherhood was mobilized for recruitment of young women to both the Sri Lankan military and the LTTE, and how women's lives were curtailed by community projects that intended to build a uniform community identity. The LTTE criticised and punished women who ventured to work; community groups consisting of Muslim men policed Muslim women's work online and offline; Muslim female teachers restricted young Muslim girls' participation in sports activities if not dressed in identifiably Muslim attire. The research also records one woman describing the practices that were banned by the Islamic reformist movements: the *kaththam* – commemorating the dead at different intervals in the first months after a bereavement, the visit to *Ziyaram* or shrines of saints, and sharing *barath* roti. She saw this as a loss of ritual spaces occupied by women. Women lost opportunities to engage with one another and to build, establish, and maintain connections.

The documentation also recounts the suffering of a former female LTTE cadre who experienced violence at the hands of her family prior to joining the movement, during her time in the LTTE, and even after she re-entered civilian life. The Sri Lankan research makes the effort to document how women already constrained by class, ethnicity, and patriarchy were further affected by the tensions in the aftermath of the Easter bombings.

In documenting the aftermath of the Easter bombings, the research was able to reveal how the impact of heightened anger and distress in the Negombo area impacted Muslims' everyday lives. The boycott of Muslim businesses, harassment of Muslims through asking families to leave rental premises, and most egregiously, the harassment of Ahamadiyya Muslims displaced from Pakistan, were described. In the case of Negombo, the research also depicts one Sinhala woman from the fishing community whose house had been washed away as a result of the impact of construction further down the coast. For her, the Muslims were readily available to be blamed for all aspects of her terrible ongoing economic hardship.

In Batticaloa, the research revealed the story of a young Hindu woman who wanted to convert to Islam but was prevented from doing so by her family, by community pressure, and by the intervention of an interfaith committee formed to maintain reconciliation and coexistence among the different communities. This young woman, one among several that had attempted to convert from that village, was prevented from even getting a hearing. The Easter bombings happened when there was community agitation around her case. Another young woman from Batticaloa who had also converted was identified as being the wife of one of the suicide bombers. After the bombings, when the communities in the area were struggling to come to terms with the shock, and tensions ran high, it became impossible to speak about or on behalf of the young woman. She ultimately committed suicide.

In Kurunegala, the research documented the virulent racism that was prevalent among economically marginalised Sinhala women. There was anger and hatred against Muslims due to the bombings, and also a normalization of much of the sexualized anti-Muslim rhetoric. Dr. Shafi Shihabdeen, an Obstetrician and Gynaecologist in Kurunegala, was accused of sterilizing 400 Sinhala women. His accusers were fellow doctors and government functionaries and their accusations had wide support among the population frequenting the Kurunegala Teaching Hospital. Hundreds of women in Kurunegala were persuaded to give evidence against Dr. Shafi and the state brought a case against him. Women had been mobilized in the area to complain against Dr. Shafi and the research documented the narratives of some of them. Although Dr. Shafi's name has been cleared and he has been reinstated in the job from which he was suspended, some women continue to believe the rhetoric of the time. Some of them who were persuaded to complain against him and continue to, believe that they were victimized, feel abandoned by those who mobilized them, and feel cheated of a reprieve from their very real problems. The research thereby attempted to cast light on the way the cultivation of animosities impacts on vulnerable communities and individuals in insidious ways that are left out of mainstream discussions of the events. Most importantly, the research draws our attention to the fact that the impact of these incidents exacerbates and renders fraught already existing community fault lines and reanimates oppressive community structures.

## Women's activism in response to violence

The research documented stories of women's activism in the research areas. Among the stories that were captured were histories of women's activism, of women who came together at earlier moments of violence in solidarity with one another. In 1991, the Suriya Women's Development Centre (SWDC) was set up in Colombo to work with displaced persons from the East of Sri Lanka and Muslims evicted from the Northern Province. The SWDC moved to Batticaloa in 1993 when displaced communities returned. Set up in a collaborative effort by feminist organisations in Colombo, SWDC included Yumna Ibrahim who was displaced by the expulsion of Muslims by the LTTE in 1990 and who organised Tamil and Muslim women to talk about their experiences of displacement during that time. There were also Tamil women who stopped wearing their pottu in protest of the LTTE's expulsion of Muslims in 1990.

In terms of more recent activism, the research mentions the work of two Muslim women from Batticaloa who are engaged in critiquing community strictures, who fear being attacked by community members but also of being co-opted by state-affiliated entities' anti-Muslim positions. In the aftermath of the bombings, women in Kattankudi got together and released a statement criticising state measures to address the issue using punitive frameworks that have only resulted in violence and further marginalising of already marginal and distressed communities. Instead, this group consisting of both Tamil and Muslim women, advocated for greater community engagement and support of one another and for maintaining support networks that existed during and after the war. The Tamil Muslim Sinhala Sisters group (TMS) in Batticaloa was formed in 2014 in the immediate aftermath of the anti-Muslim violence in Aluthgama in the South. During that time, the anti-Muslim rhetoric that was pervasive in the south was emerging among communities in the East as well. This group became a place of refuge for women from all communities during that time. Emerging from networks already formed in the areas as described above and maintained in response to domestic violence, the TMS provided an important space in the aftermath of the Easter bombings. They had quiet memorials in the homes of those that died in the blast, provided a space for women to gather together, to openly express and challenge prejudices and reinforce trust. They also engaged in providing support to Muslim families where members were arrested in connection with the bombings. (There were 98 men who were arrested in Kattankudi). The TMS provided assistance for families to access the Human Rights Commission, provided school books, and medicines, and assisted with prison visits. The research recalls a particular event from 2019 – where TMS conducted a memorial for a young woman who died in the attack on the Zion church. Both Muslim and Tamil women participated in the event, together with the young woman's mother and sister. The report records how rare such spaces were at the time in Batticaloa and how rare they continue to be.

In Negombo, the aftermath of the bombings created tensions across the town and the greater district. The research recorded activist responses as well as the difficulties communities faced in coming together after the shock and destruction. One of the women interviewed was an activist working on housing and land rights in 15 Grama Niladhari Divisions in Wellaveethiya, Kudapaluwa and Munnakkaraya. She provided an account of local interventions in the aftermath. The mood

was such that Muslims were excluded and marginalised in myriad ways. There was the threat of violence, people were asked to leave homes that they had rented, and their businesses were boycotted. Muslim women who were part of activist groups were reluctant to continue engagement. Women's groups tried to intervene by talking to renters, and encouraged Muslim women to stay and participate in group activities. These attempts however were not always successful. Other local activists used their platforms to talk about the need to maintain community linkages and provide solidarity and support. One Sister Renu, together with other Catholic nuns, started visiting the Ahamadiya Muslim refugees who were targeted and harassed by local communities. Those affected by the blast were receiving support and assistance but their seemed to be inadequate support for these refugees and Sister Renu and others organised to help them. However, they were often asked, "Are you not ashamed to help those who attacked us?" And even the police had asked the nuns – do you trust them?

The research also noted that in the aftermath of the bombings when the tensions were high the established civil society networks in Negombo had been under severe stress. Although people had come together to work against atrocities committed during the war, it was more difficult when the attacks were against their own community. Nevertheless, the links established within a multi-ethnic and multi-religious polity had enabled organising to minimise outbreaks of retaliatory violence against Muslims. Civil society groups had mobilized with the police to identify places where violence could occur and to ensure protection and responses. There were also requests to the government ministers for increased protection from the army and the air force. The ability of members of the Catholic church to communicate with members of the mosque committees enabled them to organise to prevent violence from occurring on the day of the mass burials in Negombo. The mosques put up condolence messages and carried out prayer services that were attended by Catholic clergy (who were later reprimanded by their own communities for doing so). In May 2019, there was a large gathering organized in Negombo with the participation of more than 300 people that called for peace and humanity with the slogan *yesterday and today and tomorrow we stand for humanity*. This was done when monk politician, Athureliye Rathana was agitating for Muslim MPs to resign and one week after anti-Muslim violence had taken place just north of the area.

In the case of Kurunegala, women activists were compelled to negotiate rising levels of anti-Muslim hatred among family members in the aftermath of the attacks and revealed that they continued their work under such difficult conditions. As the research indicated, the anti-Muslim sentiment was overwhelming and tensions were high. There was evidence among activists, however, that previous work towards reconciliation was having an impact at this time. A military war widow had mentioned attending programmes where experiences were shared with affected women in the North and East and Puttalam (North-West). These experiences of shared pain helped expand their humanity, she said, and helped them deal with the post-Easter Sunday problems as well. There was also an account of small groups formed into civil protection committees that organised at the local level to challenge anti-Muslim mobilizing. They had been functioning since the events of anti-Muslim violence in Digana in the Kandy district in 2018. There is an account of one woman speaking of doing reconciliation activities where on one day, Muslim women went to a temple in their shawls and provided cooked meals for the event. Then young Muslim men decorated pandals for Vesak

and participated in volleyball tournaments with Sinhala youth. During the violence that occurred in May 2019, a few weeks after the bombings, Muslims were severely affected with their houses burnt and shops destroyed. The research noted the story of one woman, Neela Akka, who housed three Muslim families for several days during this time and whose family helped with dousing the fires in Muslim houses.

## Social Media in Sri Lanka

In the Sri Lankan case, the emphasis of the research has been on describing how social media can be considered as being crucial to the propagation and spread of anti-Muslim sentiment in the country after the end of the war. The connection between social media incitement of hate against Muslims and the impact of such mobilizing on violence that occurred in events in 2013, 2014, and 2018 has been documented. In the aftermath of the Easter bombings, during the heightening of despair and tension among the population, the online hate against Muslims was at unprecedented levels. The paper attempts to understand women's participation in the online forums and offline anti-Muslim organising that resulted from such fora. The paper argues that while men participated both in propagating online hate and in the actual physical violence, the women were less likely to engage in violent acts. Women did, however, support other forms of anti-Muslim actions such as complaining against Dr. Shafi Shihabdeen in Kurunegala and in the harassment of women in identifiable Muslim dress.

The Sri Lankan component of the research attempted to locate the current moment, especially the Easter bombings and their aftermath, in the context of the larger history of violent mobilization in the country. The build-up of state security infrastructure during this time, as well as the impact of these moments of violence on women who were also compelled to live in the midst of strained ethnic relations in the aftermath of the bombings, was captured in the research.



# INDONESIA

## Background

The Indonesian component of the research was conducted with the recognition that “violent extremism,” as was defined and understood within the global discourse, was an over studied area that targeted particular groups and individuals within Indonesia. The Indonesian component of this research hoped to go beyond the narrow premises of the CVE project in Indonesia and produce context-specific, historically informed knowledge with a transformative feminist intent. While the COVID-19 outbreak and the resulting difficulties scuttled some of the ambition – specially to pursue particular context-specific research questions – the research project was able to achieve many of its goals of training young researchers in the task of working to strengthen women’s ability to resist the “extremism” against which pro-democracy pluralist progressive movements within Indonesia were mobilizing.

At the outset, the Indonesian team committed to the following research emphases: The study of multi-faceted Islamist social-political movements that

1. advocate for supremacist religion-based ideology;
2. promote violence in its many forms; and,
3. permeate all aspects of life – public and private.

These movements were understood as taking on different forms and strategies in different social and cultural contexts, political moments, and geographic regions of the country. The advancement of these movements has also resulted in the increased strength and dynamism of counter movements in Indonesia’s diverse communities.<sup>19</sup>

The Indonesian team emphasized at the outset that the impact of the use of violence by Islamists in Indonesia cannot usefully be understood unless it was located within the growing importance of Islamist movements throughout Indonesia and their collective goal of state capture and transformation for the long term. Violence was only one mode used by Islamist groups in Indonesia; their commitment to ideological transformation and ultimate takeover of the state is what requires resistance and not just the violent elements of the movement.

Islamist organizing in Indonesia can be traced to the anticipation of independence. Islamist movements have existed throughout Indonesia’s modern history, in diverse forms and with differing agendas, some espousing violence and others committed to non-violence, their prominence and strength impacted by shifting local and global politics. In 1948, three years after Indonesia declared its national independence, the Indonesian Islamic State was established in defiance of the new sovereign secular state. The centre of this movement was in West Java. The response of the

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19. Indonesia Research Plan 20/06/2020



Indonesian state to these Islamist movements have been shaped by specific interests at specific political moments. During the New Order regime, repressive measures were applied to both Islamist and pro-democracy movements. In 1985, all political parties and social organizations were required, by law, to adopt the state ideology of Pancasila as their sole ideological foundation. The government had also issued decrees prohibiting the wearing of headscarves by girls in school in 1978 and of headscarves as school uniforms in 1982. These executive interventions were responding to the growing political organizing at the grassroots by various Islamist groups. During the height of the New Order regime, Indonesian Islamists left the country and trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Fifty years after independence, a year after the country emerged from 32 years of authoritarian rule, mass communal conflicts along religious and ethnic lines began to erupt in various parts of the archipelago. Muslim men around the country became mobilized to participate in these conflicts as jihadi fighters. The internet, which had just become publicly accessible at that time,<sup>20</sup> expanded the reach of narratives regarding Muslims being victimized in Indonesia and across the world with images of mutilated bodies from conflict zones. The most prominent images came from two conflict sites in Indonesia, in Maluku and Central Sulawesi.

The political opening after the end of Indonesia's authoritarian New Order regime became fertile ground for the growth of Islamist movements as much as for the country's progressive rights-based movements.<sup>21</sup> Homegrown Islamist movements, such as the Indonesian Islamic State (IIS) from 1948, and newer ones with transnational affiliations, such as with Jamaah Islamiyah, Al Qaeda, Hizbut Tahrir, all expanded their followings in the country. As soon as the restrictions on establishing political parties was lifted after Soeharto's resignation, the Prosperous Justice Party was established in the image of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Turkey's Justice and Development Party. When ISIS was launched in 2014, local Islamist groups announced their allegiance to it, and ISIS affiliated groups engaged in the direct recruitment of Indonesians.

After the Bali bombing claimed by Jamaah Islamiyah in 2002 and other bombings and violent attacks during the period of political reform, Indonesia constructed a blanket legal and policy framework under the guise of combating terrorism. The measures taken included a law on combating terrorism (2002, revised in 2003 and 2018); an elite force within the national police focusing on terrorism, called Densus 88 (2004); and, a national coordinating body to combat terrorism, BNPT (2010). This anti-terrorism framework was produced under the post-New Order reform period, often referred to as *Reformasi*, and set the stage for Indonesia's gradual return to authoritarian practices. In a repressive move directly targeting certain Islamist groups that did not fit the definition of terrorism, the Indonesian government produced executive decrees to dissolve the organizations, namely Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (2017) and Islam Defense Front (2020), for having ideologies in contradiction with the Indonesian state. Following this, in a first to use terminology other than terrorism, a presidential plan of action to prevent and combat violent extremism, called

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20. See *The Intersecting Currents of Islamist Immersions: Indonesian Women Claiming Space in Social Media, Women's Agency and the Gendered Impact of Violence in India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka: Social Media Study, Indonesia (2022)*.

21. See *Indonesia's Islamist Radicalization, Women's Agency and the Gendered Impact of Violence in India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka: Radicalization Study, Indonesia (2022)*.

the National Action Plan on Preventing and Combating Violence-based Extremism Leading to Terrorism, was signed in 2021. After the election of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) as president in 2004, the Islamist integration into the mainstream and into state structures received a significant boost. When the Indonesian Council of Ulema (Majelis Ulema Indonesia or MUI) released a fatwa stating that religious pluralism, liberalism, and secularism were *haram*, there was no push back and in fact the president welcomed their intervention in “matters regarding the Islamic faith, so that it becomes clear what the difference is between areas that are the preserve of the state and areas where the government or the state should heed the fatwa from the MUI and ulema.”<sup>22</sup> The regime also supported the MUI’s fatwa declaring the Ahamadiya a deviant sect. In 2008, the chair of the MUI’s fatwa commission was appointed to the Presidential Advisory Council. The SBY government provided substantial financial support from the state budget for the MUI.

Under the SBY presidency, the tightening of the grip of the Islamists continued with the reanimation of Indonesia’s then dormant 1965 blasphemy laws and the introduction of laws on pornography and “porno-action”(2005). Pornoaction was defined in early drafts of the bill as “public displays of any sensual part of the body, nudity in public, public kissing on the lips, erotic dancing or movement.” The bill was passed amidst opposition from rights advocates and great celebration by Islamists who declared it a gift for Indonesian Muslims. Additionally, under SBY, decentralizing government was prioritized enabling the making of discriminatory laws at local level under the guise of implementing Sharia. Between 1999–2009, 154 discriminatory local policies and regulations were recorded under the decentralization the Indonesian Women’s Commission (Komnas Perempuan). Other research recorded as many as 422 such “Sharia regulations” from 2005 to 2014.

Another important factor crucial to understanding the spread of Islamist ideology in Indonesia is the government’s rapid institutionalization of a Sharia economy for the country. Under SBY, the government developed the legal foundation for the Sharia economy through formulating laws for the maintenance of waqf or Islamic charitable endowments (2004); state Sharia financial securities (2005), Sharia banking (2008), zakat management (2011) and on guaranteed halal products in (2014). Indonesia’s law on religious courts was amended in 2006 to provide the court with the authority to deal with issues that emerge within the Sharia economy. The growth of the global Sharia economy has impacted Indonesia significantly, and to date, Indonesia is recorded as the world’s largest consumer of Sharia products. However, according to research, the Indonesian economy is only ranked 10th in terms of the production of Sharia certified goods. Therefore, in a push to raise Indonesia’s status as a centre of Sharia economic production, the state has instituted a plan for 2019–2025 to grow the Shariat market place and the digital Sharia economy. The government’s identification of the Shariat economy as a growth area for Indonesia further endorses the Islamist ideological project and institutionalizes the fatwa production by the Ulema Council, and their halal accreditation processes as part of the economic mainstream. The field work in Indonesia was conducted with the above as the background.

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22. See The Intersecting Currents of Islamist Immersions: Indonesian Women Claiming Space in Social Media, Women’s Agency and the Gendered Impact of Violence in India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka: Social Media Study, Indonesia (2022).

# The field work: Women's Experiences in Indonesia

The various Islamist movements had distinct features and dynamics at the local level around the archipelago. The three locations where field research was conducted illustrate the varying ways in which Islamist movements take hold given the unique histories, demographics, and ecology of a locality.

The three sites in which the research was conducted are: East Bandung in the province of West Java; Poso in the province of Central Sulawesi; and, Pontianak in the province of Central Kalimantan. West Java is the largest province in the country in terms of population, at almost 50 million people, with a strong Muslim majority, and East Bandung is a peri-urban centre of its capital city. The province was selected for this research due to its role historically as the birthplace of a political movement to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia, called *Darul Islam* or *Negara Islam Indonesia* (Indonesian Islamic State). This movement came into being during the early years of the independent post-colonial Indonesian state when the nature of the newly sovereign entity was being negotiated. Islamist movements since then often trace their origins to *Darul Islam*. As a university city, Bandung was also an important centre for student organising and recruitment for various Islamist movements. Ikhwanul Muslimeen started recruiting there in the 1980s. Hizbul Tahrir as well as Saudi-oriented Salafis recruited massively on the campuses. Other Islamist organizations also prospered in West Java, including the *Jamaah Anshorul Daulah* (JAD), which became the largest and most virulent pro-ISIS groups in Indonesia between 2014 to 2017. West Java is also home to an active progressive movement that works to counter the narratives of the Islamist movements, build tolerance, and create and foster interfaith exchanges.

The second research location is the district of Poso (population of almost 250,000 people), in the province of Central Sulawesi (population approximately three million people), which was the site of inter-religious conflict in the early years of Indonesia's post-authoritarian reform at the beginning of the 21st century (2001). There are almost equal numbers of Muslims and Christians in Poso with the former living in the lowlands and the latter in the highlands. There was a long-standing agreement among the people of Poso that the leadership of the area would be held in turn by a Muslim and a Christian. Violent conflict broke out when this agreement was rescinded due to corruption. The three-year conflict mobilized armed groups from the Muslim and Christian communities, destroyed almost 8,000 houses and 150 public facilities, caused the displacement of almost 90,000 people, and resulted in the death of almost 600 people. The conflict ended after a peace-making effort led by a prominent Indonesian senior politician with the signing of the Malino Declaration at the end of 2001. In 2000, the Indonesian military police was deployed to Poso as peacekeepers, marking the beginning of a series of special operations by the country's national security forces (from the police and army) that continue till today. In 2010, the Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (Eastern Indonesia Mujahiddin) or MIT set out a training ground in Poso, recruited locally, and, when ISIS was declared in 2014, announced its allegiance to ISIS. In 2012, two police officers were found dead in the hamlet of Tamanjeka, Poso, after being kidnapped by the MIT. This was followed by gun attacks directed at a police patrol crew which killed four among them. These incidents triggered more deployment of security forces, up to more than a thousand personnel from the national police and more than a hundred from the

military under a newly-established special operation for Poso. To date, it is estimated that there have been 11 distinct security operations established by the national government for Poso. Meanwhile, the number of MIT fugitives hiding in the forest had been reported to be a handful. The MIT leader was killed by security forces in 2016 and his successor in 2021.

Today, the presence of the state armed forces in the forest restricts local people from accessing livelihoods. There is widespread corruption, security forces involvement in illegal logging, sexual violence, and harassment of the local people.

Civil society organisations existed in Poso since before the conflict and worked on natural resource management and women's rights. Today civil society organisations' analysis of the conflict is informed by a political economy perspective that is shared with their communities.

The third location for the empirical research is the city of Pontianak (population approaching 650,000 people) in the province of West Kalimantan (population approximately five million people), which has a long history of political mobilization along ethnic lines in a multicultural society. The area is home to as many as 26 ethnic groups but the politics of the area are decided by the following four: Indigenous Dayak, members of the landed Malay sultanate, Chinese who have been a part of the economy since the 18th Century and who were persecuted during the anti-communist pogrom of 1965, and Madurese migrants. There have been intermittent conflicts between the various groups on the basis of land disputes, disagreements among youth, and local elections. Most recently, the local conflicts were being recast in national terms and the local elites were engaging with national Islamist organisations for their own political advantages. It was included in this research because of an incident of mass violence instigated by a nationwide Islamist political campaign in Jakarta, 800 kilometres across the sea, in which local ethnic identities were redefined in religious terms. It is expected that this incident would show how the intertwining of political mobilization along ethnic and religious lines is shaped by the Islamist political agenda at the national level. All three sites of the research are intended to demonstrate the wide diversity in the local articulation of extremist political movements in Indonesia.

The empirical research process was conducted in three stages: preparation, the interview process, and post-interview. In the preparation stage, the local research teams participated in a three-day "reframing workshop" that was intended to provide information on the research aims and methods as well as to build a shared understanding of key socio-political phenomena in the Indonesian context by bringing together experts on a range of relevant topics, such as the history of Islamist extremism in Indonesia, gender and identity politics, young Muslim women's agency in social media, and Indonesian government policy framework on terrorism. Preliminary discussions were also conducted on methodological issues such as virtual ethnography and writing life stories. The local researchers were also required to share background on their respective local contexts to start building the comparative perspective. For most of the local researchers, this workshop was also the first time they ever met as they are separated by significant distances across different islands in the archipelago. Ultimately, this initial workshop was also a means to open a collective space for the researchers.<sup>23</sup>

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23. Women and Islamism in Indonesia: Navigating the Ideological Battlegrounds, Women's Agency and the Gendered Impact of Violence in India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka: Indonesia Country Report (2022).

# Women and Islamist organizing

The study drew from two sets of interview information. The first was the case study material collected from the site-based interviews. The rest were from nine journaling exercises carried out by nine women who had been members of different Islamist organisations, but who had left them for different reasons. According to the study, women are involved with such groups and movements in a variety of ways. They were combatants, mothers, and wives of combatants, online activists, funders, and potential suicide bombers.

Three of the women had joined organizations whose aim is to establish an Islamic state. Alana (born in 1978) and Amanda (born in 1976) had been active members of *Negara Islam Indonesia* (Indonesian Islamic State) and Latifah (born in 1996) had made the journey with her family to join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Syria. Mala (born in 1971) was a jihadi combatant in the context of an inter-religious conflict. The youngest of the women, Henny (born 2001), is a staunch believer in the goal of a transnational Islamic civilization. Two women joined non-violent Islamist political movements. Nur (born in 1995) joined the Indonesian chapter of a transnational Islamist movement, while Yuni (born in 1981) joined a homegrown Indonesian one that is linked to an Islamist political party. Two other women, Rima (born in 1987) and Dewi (born in 1984), became part of these movements by being the wives of their Islamist husbands. All but one of these women, Henny, have ended up disengaging with these Islamist political movements, for one reason or another, which made it possible for them to be part of this research.

Several points emerged in the research regarding the sophisticated organisational capacity of Islamist groups. The Islamist movements accessed young girls in high schools in small and large cities. Some reached rural communities through government programmes on Qur'an education for children. They deployed women recruiters who befriend girls and build strong emotional ties. The Indonesia report states that the recruits were generally "bright, thirsty for new knowledge and experience, and trusting of those who show interest in their lives and aspirations, and "felt excited and proud to be engaging in political agendas linked to global struggles."

The research also presents the stories of Mala and Latiffa who become involved for very different reasons. Mala, from Central Sulawesi, joined when there was a call for the community to take up arms after an attack on their village. Mala was the only woman to volunteer and ended up heading a squad of male combatants and was finally trained to be Indonesia's first female suicide bomber. Latiffa, 19 years old, made the decision to leave for ISIS-controlled Syria with her family of 25 members in search of better healthcare in the utopian community of ISIS propaganda. Both were ultimately disillusioned. Mala refused her assignment to detonate herself in a church and Latiffa returned with her family after experiencing the less than perfect set up of the ISIS in Syria. Both left the respective organisations that they were attached to and supported.

Many of them stated that they were in the groups as a result of being recruited by those that they respected and admired and who were kind to them, but also because they provided information and thought that was broader than what the young women were accustomed to. They were

given the possibility to excel and lead and find some goal to their lives. There were also targets and stages that recruits had to reach and proceed through, thereby ensuring that they were kept constantly busy, were roped into a culture of achievement and performance, and were made to participate in hierarchized giving. This journey is full of very high aspirations – as the country report notes, “Young women have been moved to join Islamist movements whose goals are to transform the world and do so with conviction.”

The research also notes two cases where women married to Islamic scholars or preachers in their respective contexts had no idea that their family members were affiliated to Islamist organizations espousing violence. Women became part of violent Islamist movements by association and kinship without any commitment on their individual part.

Those who left the organisation seem to have done so when the organisations could no longer convince the young women of the purity of their mission and also when the young women had the emotional wherewithal to walk away from the groups. The report points out that the young women find the strength and support to move away from these groups drawing from their own experiences of Indonesia’s plurality that the groups reject, ideas of feminism and also when confronted with the contradictions in the groups own positions. One of the women spoke of the compulsion to contribute to the organisation, engage in businesses to support the organisation regardless of the difficulties women face with children at home, as some of the issues that made the women question the groups.

## Social Media

The research teams recognized the importance of social media for the spread of ideologies and the motivation and organization for violence early on. Each country had a position on social media usage, however, that was very specific to the context studied.

In the Indonesian case, the research looked at online communities when the internet first reached the country at the end of the new order regime in the 1990s and the beginning of “reformasi.” The research – based on secondary sources – showed that the defeat of the new order regime was enabled through exchanges of information, and mobilization through the internet. According to the research, pro-democracy organising escalated in the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, and this was enabled by the emergence of the internet. Internet-based electronic mailing lists became the primary mode of conveyance of vital uncensored communication during the last days of the New Order regime. Soeharto resigned in May 1998 after 30 years in power. For its role during this moment of historic political change, the internet earned the title of “cyber civic space” in which individuals and groups generate collective activism online and translated it into real-world movements in an offline setting. (The research also notes how the attacks against the Chinese during the mass riots of 1998 (that pushed Soeharto out) and especially the sexual violence against Chinese Indonesian women, led to the organising of the Indonesian women’s movement calling for accountability and victims’ rights. Another mailing list – [perempuan@yahoo.com](mailto:perempuan@yahoo.com) came to play a central role in women organising across the archipelago.



At the same time, the internet also enabled the growth and spread of Islamist ideas and helped with the development of a country-wide Islamist project. In January 1999, inter-religious conflict erupted in Ambon, the largest urban centre in the islands of Maluku. Support for the warring sides was mobilized across the country and globally over the internet through mailing lists and websites. Muslims directed their appeals to the national Muslim community and the global Muslim Ummat, while the Christians sent their calls of support to International Christian organisations, the international community, and the United Nations. The Muslim organising in response to the Ambon clashes originated from a group formed of the followers of Ja'far Umar Thalib, an Indonesian who had fought in Afghanistan in 1988-1989 and studied Islam in Pakistan. The organisation was named Forum Komunikasi Ahlus Sunna wal Jamaah (FKAWJ). They organised the gathering of "Jihad fighters" through their online communication forum and gathered close to 3000 people from across the archipelago to fight in Ambon in the "holy war." The media infrastructure of the FKAWJ also features a Laskar Jihad or Jihad Fighters website that was linked to similar sites in Saudi Arabia, Chechnya, and Afghanistan. The inter-religious war in Poso, Sulawesi broke out soon after in 2002, and the media of FKAWJ mobilized persons to participate in the holy war in Poso as well. Jemah Islamiya, another organisation set up by Indonesian Islamists returning from Afghanistan, set up a website called Al Bunyan that shared information about the conflicts in Ambon and Poso but also covered the bombings of 11 churches on Christmas even in 2000 and of a popular nightclub in Bali in 2002. These websites used this information to mobilize for "holy war."

In 2014, several years after the end of the new order regime, Indonesia was transformed by economic changes that led to the rapid growth of a large middle class and also the spread and growth of Islamist projects of different hues. Organized support for ISIS and the functioning of networks that managed travel to ISIS territories in Iraq and Syria were done through social media. Social media enabled Indonesian women migrant workers to connect with and support radical and militant Islamist organisations including ISIS and its affiliates. At the same time, Islamist groups mobilizing based on middle-class consumption patterns continue to peddle ways of life – especially for young people—that are considered to be properly Islamic. Wearing the hijab and refraining from dating were examples of lifestyles made prominent by social media influencers. Many online Islamist mobilization project enabled women to recast their journey towards piety as "Hijrah," referencing the Prophet Mohammed's journey from Mecca to Madina. Groups resisting the gendered obligations considered compulsory for Muslim women also utilized the concept of Hijrah for their own ends of propagating an alternative notion of Hijrah that challenged the status quo.

With the usage of the internet for the popularization of radical Islamist views and the recruitment of Indonesians into ISIS in 2014, the Minister of Communication and Information Technology published a ministerial regulation that would allow the government to block extremist online sites. Using this regulation which referred to "negative content" defined broadly as "pornography and other illegal activities" the Indonesian government banned 22 radical Islamist websites in 2015. Since then, the government has requested social media providers for assistance to restrict "extremist" content and also increased its own capacity to monitor and block Islamist activity online. While this has compelled Islamist organisations to use new ways to organize and stay engaged, these processes have also strengthened the state's repressive capacities.

# Protest in Indonesia

The discussion of protest in Indonesia, gleaned from the research, is manifold. The research, grounded among women's groups that are actively engaged in feminist and community-friendly, pro-democracy interventions in their respective locations, embodies the protest against the Islamization push in Indonesia. Raheema, one of the organizations engaged in the research study, was actively engaged in appropriating and recasting terminology utilised by Islamist organizations. As the research has documented, the terminology of Hijrah or the prophet's journey is used by Islamists to help women map their transition towards greater piety, more sustained involvement with the groups, and their anti-minority othering activities. There has been a response to such movements. One of the most significant developments that signal Islamist ascendancy was the mobilization of Islamist groups around the election of the governor of Jakarta in 2016. The Islamist mobilization brought hundreds of thousands of people out on the 2nd of December in opposition to the minority candidate and in support of a Muslim, regardless of the fact that he was accused of extensive HR violations. After the election of the Muslim candidate, a young woman wrote to one of the main Islamists responsible for the large mobilizing of crowds and challenged the position from a perspective that espoused a more pluralist Islamic position. The movement that was set in motion by this young woman's intervention has grown. This young woman Kalis Mardiasih, is now a prominent social media influencer with a large following and pushes an agenda of plural Islam drawing from her own background as an Alima trained within the traditional Indonesian Islamic schools, discussing experiences of Indonesian Muslim women. The above young alima's experience and intervention were influenced by KUPI, the Congress of Indonesian Women Ulema that gathered together in 2017 to think about and advocate for greater women-friendly Islamic approaches to a variety of social issues in Indonesia. A gathering done in conversation with both Islamic and secular feminists the objective was to establish the authority of women Ulema and to launch a progressive rights-based movement of young women ulema towards bringing about gender justice. This gathering was a new initiative and indicated the emergence of opposition to the Islamists' narrow vision of Islam from other Indonesian Muslim communities and religious institutions. Much of these interventions were also informed by the thinking of Faquihuddin Abul Kodir, a young Islamic scholar who has built the theological concept of *mubadala* or reciprocity, as a foundation for advocating equal relations between men and women from within Islamic thought. During the meeting in 2017, a website was launched – Mubadala.id, which is a platform for writers formulating positions on current issues on the basis of Islamic thought and principles. The website also has the section: Hijrah archives which provides information on the concept of Hijrah from a variety of different perspectives, complicating the notion propagated by Islamists. One of the learning for the research study in Indonesia was that young women often engaged with Islamist organisations when seeking out some meaning and direction for their own lives. While the study lamented the absence of women's organising for plural and democratic ideals, there are initiatives already available that provide models as to how such provision of sites of protest and greater inclusive meaning can be carried out.



# INDIA

As stated earlier, the Indian team was unable to carry out field research. Therefore, from India, for comparison and learning we used only the desk research-based document that was prepared regarding the historical emergence and contemporary manifestations of the ideology of Hindutva. Our one piece of writing from the Indian team reflected the political project of the country team, as well as the severe limitations of the conditions under which the work could be done. The piece itself was a complex laying out of the emergence and evolution of the phenomenon that the Indian team understood to be violent extremism: the ideological commitment to and the institutional validation of the majoritarian masculinist casteist Hindutva project by the state.

In this report the issue highlighted was the increase in state repression and the mobilization of Hindutva Ideology across the subcontinent in new and violent ways. In an attempt to trace the emergence of the Hindutva ideology in its current form, the report began with a discussion of the early 1990s where Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh decides to operationalise the recommendations of the Mandal commission on the issue of scheduled castes. The opening of the Indian economy also happened at the same time – India’s first embrace of neoliberal economic policies wreaked havoc since then. The deterioration of civil liberties seems to go hand in hand in the Indian context with the expansion of the Hindutva project and the growth of the neoliberal economic model. The report uses the three vectors of caste, religion, and economy to articulate the predicament that India finds itself in at the moment.

Anti-Muslim ideology and violence in the context has been elaborated in the report in a variety of ways. At the community level, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) has been extremely successful in spinning local issues in terms of Hindu-Muslim fault lines that were then exploited for violence against Muslims. This was the case in Bhagalpur in 1998 and also in a much larger scale in Gujarat in 2002. The anti-Muslim project continues in India with the ongoing deterioration of civic space. The harassment of Muslims through the instrumentalization of tropes of Muslim sexuality – long practised in India – continues. Prominent Muslim female public figures were recently attacked in a novel manner by “selling” them as domestic workers on an app. The project of love jihad – accusing Muslim men of seducing and converting upper caste Hindu women – also continues and the critique against Muslim women wearing the headscarf, an issue long debated within intellectual circles in India, has been reanimated.

Part of the BJP’s “long game” has involved working to confront its own image as an upper caste party alone and has brought scheduled caste and other backward class (OBC) representation into its fold. Narendra Modi for instance is a representative of an OBC. However, the assertion of caste upward mobility has been violently resisted. The numbers of Dalit student suicides in educational institutions, the hangings of Dalits by Hindu mobs as a result of “violations” such as cow slaughter, the sexual violence against Dalit women, are an indication of the extent to which anti-Dalit sensibility remains present within the BJP ideology as well as at the level of popular practice regardless of the party’s shift to Dalit inclusion in its ideological project.

The capture of all significant institutions by the BJP led Hindutva project – education and research, the media and the judiciary was emphasized in the research. Fees have been raised in the most important educational institutions, thereby limiting those who can enter; BJP-supporting bureaucrats now occupy positions in the most important institutions that in an earlier time worked to preserve academic autonomy and integrity in India. Institutions such as the University Grants Commission, the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR), the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), and the Indian Philosophical Council (IPC) have been systematically housed with regime and BJP-friendly bureaucrats and they are no longer the bastions of critical thinking and free speech that they were imagined to inculcate at independence. The corporatization of the media as well as the utilizing of airwaves through programmes such as Narendra Modi's own monthly radio programme, are some of the ways in which the capture has been instituted and thereby a manufacturing of consent as well. The research also highlighted the connected practice of hate speech through the media but also in large gatherings where violence was mooted as the mode for incorporating all communities of the Indian nation state into the Hindutva programme.

Undermining NGOs has been a long-established mechanism within South Asian states and resonates in the Sri Lankan case as well. In 2020, the Indian government took very specific steps to monitor and control NGO activity through the control of finances entering such organisations. This had significant impact on the country's COVID-19 response and continues to date.

The capture of the judiciary has been a similar, but much more problematic, development. The Indian judiciary, with all its problems, was considered a fairly dependable institution with a history of standing up to authoritarianism (by a few individuals) even during repressive times – when Indira Gandhi was PM for instance. However, in recent years, the actions of the judiciary have contributed to the institutionalization of Hindutva and the dismantling of protests. This has happened through the systematic appointment of BJP-friendly judges to significant benches, and strategic blocking of the appointment of those who may dissent. In recent years the judiciary has failed to block unconstitutional legislation such as the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act and instead has reaffirmed it. Judges are routinely seen praising the government and Narendra Modi, and have abdicated responsibility to speak up against the government's misuse of power while engaging in inordinate delays of justice.

The assault on many aspects of social life and of institutions within the Indian polity by the BJP and the Hindutva project has not been without resistance. The Indian state's institution of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) where Indian citizens, particularly Muslims, were compelled to prove their citizenship; the farmer laws where the government introduced three laws that loosened rules around sale, pricing, and storage of farm produce – rules that have protected farmers from the free market for decades;<sup>24</sup> and the abrogation of Article 370, which gave Jammu & Kashmir special status, have all met with resistance. During the agitation against the CAA there have been interesting new methods of resistance utilized. Furthermore, it is clear that there is a younger group of female activists who are becoming a vanguard in the protest movements. Regardless of the regime's attempt at a crackdown, the work of these young women continues.

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24. See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-61912110>

The project of the India team was to argue for an understanding of the state as a perpetrator of violence, of “Violent Extremism.” The attention given to the discourse is a recognition of violence as a global development with terrible consequences for vulnerable local populations. However, the insistence on targeting already otherised communities – in India and in the case of Sri Lanka – masks the complicity of states in the perpetuation of violence against individuals and communities. It is also a continuation of past processes of discrimination in a new form. Such otherizing/discrimination and violence is also done through undermining of hard-won procedural checks and balances against such acts. As the research in the Indian context notes, there is an insidious coming together of the neoliberal economic project and Hindutva. The upper caste has reinvented itself as the economic elite as well – and is accelerating the doing away with inconvenient rules and regulations – ostensibly for the forward march of the economy. The Hindutva nationalist project marginalising all religious and caste “others” is also facilitated through the removing of hard-won checks and balances and through a sustained assault on the institutionalization of such checks and balances.

The state endorsement for the ideology of Hindutva in India and the capture of state institutions with the complicity of political actors including the Prime Minister is stark today. The report argues that such capture is inadequately understood as important in the exclusionary exploitative and violent project of Hindutva. The analysis of the Indian case established the need for a global recognition of state projects that cultivate violence against selected minorities and contributes to the destructive violence that communities continue to live with. The currently limited purview of the violent extremism framework leaves the actions of the state that may lead to such violence unaccounted for. The Indian case was again indicative of the need to broaden the ambit of the categories of violent extremism that are currently in global operation.

The Indian report also argues for a recognition of the global provenance of such practices that stem from the targeting of non-state actors in the guise of “security” needs. There are many global examples where the discourse of violent extremism renders absent the deep complicity of states that have perpetrated violence against communities and takes advantage of this security discourse to further strengthen its abilities to suppress dissent, cultivate a neoliberal economy that further oppresses the already marginalized, and ensure regime survival.

## Protest in India

The India document, together with the dire picture that it depicts, also records that there is sustained and powerful resistance to the state-mandated acts of repression. Tracing protest movements by Dalits, the #notinmyname movement in opposition to the killing of a young Muslim man “Junaid” on the accusation of eating beef, also garnered massive crowds countrywide. In 2019, there were Adivasi protests against the inadequate implementation of the Forest Rights Act. The massive crowds that protested the abrogation of Article 30 of the Indian Constitution were brutally suppressed. The Shaheen Bagh protests emerged in 2019 against the Citizenship Amendment Act targeting Muslims, that became law in December that year. In Shaheen Bagh, a group of Muslim women took over a road in their area and refused to move for four months. They were compelled to leave only after the emergence of COVID and related restrictions. By that time however, their act had

spawned many similar acts of resistance and there were Shaheen Bagh's emerging in many other places. The research notes that it became a beacon of hope and a model for protests across the country. Yet another mass-scale protest that shook the country and produced actual results were the farmer's protests against the neoliberal farm laws that led to the repeal in November 2020. What is exciting and hopeful about the protest movements is the involvement of young people, especially young women, and the mobilization of the symbols of the state such as the flag and the constitution against violence and towards more inclusive and democratic ends. According to the research, while there is evidence that there are leaders emerging, it is also clear that there are masses of young people who are politicized and have a critical understanding of the developments in India, and that is perhaps unprecedented.

The state project also seems cognizant of this development and has begun its own process of undermining protest. There was orchestrated anti-Muslim violence in Delhi in 2020. The state has arrested activists on the accusation that they are responsible for these riots. Prominent Indian intellectuals, activists, and students have been jailed and substantial activist time and energy has been spent in getting them out. The research ends on a hopeful note however, that the effort to build community and keep the spirit of resistance alive continues with creative research and cutting-edge journalism in the lead.

While social media has been utilized in rather egregious ways to organize in support of Hindutva, it has also been a weapon used against Muslims – as was clear in the case of the auction of Muslim women public figures. In the case of the Delhi riots mobilization, inciting hate against Muslims occurred online. The mobilization targeted those who protested against the CAA. Social media was used for mobilization as well as organization and in the aftermath, many videos and images of the acts of violence were gleefully shared. Undercover reporting by journalists has also revealed how the BJP leadership fosters the spread of hate. In this endeavour the Telegram app has been used – with a questionnaire – to solicit and weed out possible participants. This research has also revealed that the seemingly dispersed and random interventions at many levels are actually derived from lists of activities that have been formulated and also involve toolkits with instructions as to how interventions in the chosen areas should be carried out. This evidence of organization reflects the learning from the Indonesian research where the organized maintenance of Islamist networks was noted.

# INSIGHTS FROM THE RESEARCH AND FINDINGS

## Some broad conclusions and suggestions for further research across the three countries

As stated throughout, the work that was begun in 2020 was conducted as the COVID-19 pandemic was raging across all three countries, costing lives and severely constraining working conditions. Travel was virtually impossible and work for the research was conducted under severely limited conditions. Therefore, some of the more ambitious aims of the research study were difficult to attain.

With the raging of the pandemic, the politics in our respective field locations also became very tense. As the Indian report outlines, the Hindutva project's crackdown on dissent was ongoing even as COVID-19 spread across the subcontinent; in Sri Lanka, the issue of Muslim cremations caused tensions within communities already torn apart by the bombings. However, regardless of the limitations posed by the pandemic, a substantial amount of work was carried out.

One of the most important interventions of this initiative was building networks of young researchers and activists across the research sites in Sri Lanka and Indonesia. The research methods emphasized enabling them to improve their knowledge and develop their skills in conducting research on sensitive subjects in tense contexts. The young researchers' workshop that was conducted midway through the research brought researchers from across the Indonesian and Sri Lankan locations for a discussion of the challenges that they faced. The issues that were discussed were summarized in pictorial representations as notebooks, postcards, and coasters. Some of the issues that were raised at the workshop include challenges to trust-building in the research context when the researcher was from the oppressor group; how to talk to people whose ideological position the researcher did not share – and manage to build trust; how friendship, food, and sharing were ways of overcoming such challenges; how to develop listening skills to see beyond one's own perspective and beliefs; how to build and cultivate empathy for the participants' points of view; how to move beyond one's own biases. The researchers also grappled with the fact that sometimes violence was committed in the name of one's own religion and that religion can be a polarizing force in society. The researchers identified that lack of communication and limited interaction among divided communities were a hindrance to research; that one's own history may reflect ongoing conflicts; that men's and women's experiences of conflict differed significantly; and that political actors tapped into people's personal pain. Researchers also brought up questions about writing – maintaining confidentiality, maintaining the flow of narrative, and modulating the writer's own perspective when presenting the findings.

At the outset, it was clear that the political conditions in each of the three countries and the countries' histories as nation states were unique and would influence the conducting of the research and impact the findings. Additionally, given that the research was entered into with a particular local

politics in mind, it also became clear that the research would inform and be informed by this politics. The “background” section in the country summaries in this report lay out the broader political context in each of the three countries. In the Indian case, the research was limited to the production of this background document and any conclusions to be drawn must be done from this material alone. As such, the Indian case study emphasizes the importance of understanding the recent developments in India as a state perpetrating violent extremism.

In the case of Indonesia, the research was framed as an attempt to better understand the spread of Islamist groups and movements throughout Indonesia’s recent history, and their differential engagement in the different contexts as manifested in the three locations chosen for the study. The Islamist groups insistence on a narrow understanding of belonging, and their attempts to limit women’s roles, and their rejection of all minorities –ethnic, religious, and sexual – are cited in the research as reason for understanding their ascendancy as problematic. The Indonesian research was also explicit in its rejection of any attempt to study “Violent Extremists” in the manner that ongoing CVE interventions have been doing in Indonesia thus far. The intention of the research was also to train younger women researchers in the research process and create knowledge with transformative potential. This clearly articulated research programme generated knowledge and other results from the fieldwork that can be characterized as follows:

1. The study noted the elaborate planning and process that was involved in the building and maintenance of the Islamist movements. The movements set goals and targets that the recruits had to achieve. There were rewards and opportunities provided to those who excelled at the assigned tasks. These tasks often involved actions that grew the movement.
2. The research documents the manner in which the movements fulfilled young women’s need for friendship support, direction, and ideas and provided opportunities for growth. It demonstrates the energy that the young women bring to these movements and how they thrive and grow. The research was clear in the demonstration of engagement on the part of the young women and that they were usually captivated by such movements because they themselves were seeking out some direction for their lives.
3. The research also demonstrated that young women left such movements when exposed to ideas that contradicted the claims of the movement and when their own past experiences made them question the truths that these movements were espousing.
4. The research also then drew attention to the fact that there wasn’t an adequate presence of the thinking of feminist, pluralist, and pro-democracy movements in the places where these young women lived and that the presence of such movements and their thinking being reachable for all young women is a goal that the Indonesian women’s movement and progressive movements in general should strive towards.
5. The research also indicated an important learning that religion and religious difference was not always the primary motivation in conflicts that were planned on religious grounds.

6. The Indonesian research clearly demonstrated the long-term thinking that went into the planning process. The fact that the research was all carried out by a single team with one lead researcher was probably reflected in the findings.
7. All in all, the research presented some hope and some goals and directions for feminist interventions.
8. The research also pointed out that although the Indonesian state may not yet fully identify with the Islamist project, those in power have instrumentalized Islamists for their own ends. For instance, the regime in power has enabled the growth of the Islamist project (under SBY) and consolidated its own repressive power (first under Megawati and more recently under the current regime).

In Indonesia, the ongoing Islamisation of the Indonesian population can be understood as similar to the example of Hindutva success in India. While arguably, the state capture by Islamists remains incomplete, the decentralisation of power to the regions has enabled the transformation of regional centres by Islamist influences. Furthermore, the institutionalization of the Halal Economy has strengthened the authority of the religious establishment. While the growth of the movements resisting the incursion of Islamists is encouraging, the research participants would do well to see what lessons for Indonesia can be learnt from the Indian example. Islamist capture at the level of the central government still seems distant but perhaps not for long? The economy in general was largely under-theorized in the research as a whole. More attention to the working of the economics of Islamist incursion, through halal but not only, would be an interesting additional vector that might be revealing of future developments.

The Sri Lankan case was organized differently and the findings reflected this difference. The three components of the study, the Social Media Study, the Radicalization Papers, and the field work were done by different activist scholars and reflected their long engagement with the issues of gender and conflict in the country. The Sri Lanka research therefore brought together established scholars for a collaborative engagement on a research project exploring a phenomenon that was fairly new: that of Islamic militancy in the aftermath of the Easter bombings. Although the Sri Lankan Muslim population is one with a history that spans at least a thousand years, the scholarship regarding Muslims remains sparse, with little or no historiography that traces Muslim communities in the country. There is limited scholarly engagement throughout the years compared to the scholarship on Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil communities. Even in scholarship on issues related to the conflict, politics, and class in Sri Lanka, the default communities are rarely Muslim due to language and location and also the manner in which the protracted ethnic conflict preoccupied research in the country. Therefore, the categories and frameworks through which Sri Lankan Muslims can be written about are not readily available. The process of formulating such a language is ongoing. And even when such language exists, there is no accepted base line and the positions are scattered. The fieldwork done in Sri Lanka reflects this difficulty of framing and categorization.

The Easter bombings destabilized the Sri Lankan polity in significant ways. As the research showed, it brought back the trauma and memories of the war that ended almost exactly a decade earlier



and further entrenched the anti-Muslim sentiments cultivated during the post-war years. The cultivated fear of Muslims was seen to have been realized by the bombings and the new threat of Muslim militancy impacted the lives of ordinary people of all ethnicities across the country – and the decisions that they made. It also transformed the country's political landscape by further entrenching the security discourse, justifying the growth of the country's military establishment and the long-established militaristic manner of addressing problems. The security architecture that was in place during the war emerged once again, almost fully intact, with cordon-and-search operations and checkpoints and the harassment of civilians. As Satkunanathan has recorded in relation to other instances, the moment saw the state using the same techniques used on Tamils against Muslims. As the field research noted, Muslims arrested in the aftermath of the bombings languished for months in jail. In some instances, local Sinhala women's reference to terrorists often conflated the terminology used to reference Tamils and Muslims. The ghosts of past violence were a constant presence that communities were contending with everywhere.

The Sri Lankan fieldwork locates the women that it interviewed in the interstices of the above developments and framing preoccupations. Some of the learnings from the Sri Lankan field work are as follows.

- 1 Nationalist movements and religious reformist movements often target women in ways that limit women's movement, self-expression, and choice and have little respect for their dignity.
- 2 In the Sri Lankan case, women from all communities are affected by the nationalist and reformist movements that have been working in Sri Lanka since independence.
3. Such movements are inevitably faced with resistance from women and women are invariably punished for their recalcitrance.
4. Women also participate in and enable such movements and are victimized by the masculine discourses that support othering and violence.
5. Even progressive and well-intentioned community mechanisms (the interfaith committees for instance) are often unable to intervene on behalf of women who fall victim to such processes.
6. Women who are instrumentalized by nationalist forces participate in rhetorical othering of different ethno-religious groups in pursuit of justice for their own circumstances but are often abandoned by such movements.
7. Even under the most difficult circumstances there are women who value and work towards community and solidarity.
8. The state has done little to address the differences between communities and state functionaries and the police have participated in and benefited from the cultivation of animosities.
9. The country remains highly militarized and the oppositional polarization, and the confrontational ethos of the conflict period, continues to impact communities. The maintenance of conflict era practices by the military and the police continues to impact families.

In the Sri Lankan case too, the discussion of the economy was muted. While references were made to economic problems motivating people's actions, a fuller account of the economic changes that the country underwent would have proven more illuminating of the cultivated ethnic fault lines hiding failures of the economy. In the context of Sri Lanka's current crisis, the absence of a substantial reference to the economy is noteworthy. While we discussed how an integration of economic changes were important for a fuller understanding of past violence and its current manifestations, it proved to be too complex to be fully integrated into a discussion of violent mobilization that we have long discussed as being based mainly on ethnic and religious differences.

## CONCLUSION

The choice of countries for this research project was made on the basis of the solidarities already forged through decades of feminist activism and histories of research and project work among the leads in the three countries as well as their long-standing affiliation with the Women and Media Collective, the organization that hosted the research. As the research has shown, each of the three countries was experiencing ongoing ethno-religious violence and was also the location of horrific past violence. The emerging global language dealing with what was perceived as a new and very contemporary threat of violent Islamist groups was not adequately informed of the local politics and the histories of conflict of the three contexts where the research sites were located. Moreover, it was not sufficiently sensitive to the manner in which young women and girls were participating in and impacted by such violent groups and movements. The particular ways in which violence and intolerance were manifesting in the contexts studied were also not adequately described by the language of violent extremism or the policy framework that was emerging internationally. It is with a view to intervening at the global and national policy levels through providing a perspective on VE as experienced by young women in these various contexts that the research findings expect to make an impact.

This research initiative was a learning exercise for the research team as well. The differences in the different country contexts were crucial and were informative of the widely varying ways in which the concepts and language being used could be utilized. For instance, Sri Lanka, just coming out of the shock of the attacks of April 2019 was awash with the language of preventing violent extremism (PVE) and countering violent extremism (CVE). The government, with two investigative reports in hand, was using the terminology fairly uncritically. The government policy response seems to regard all aspects of Muslim life as worthy of critique and investigation and ultimately of reform. Muslimness itself was under interrogation. Sri Lankan civil society, utilizing a language developed during the war, engaged critically with the repressive arms of the state and pushed for due process. However, the ways in which Islamic religiosity itself should be thought of, addressed, or managed was unclear to many. The necessity of observing and critiquing conservative norms while at the same time being critical of the state apparatus utilizing the same critique for its own political ends was a negotiation that was required of progressive movements and actors in the Sri Lankan context. This negotiation is ongoing.

The Indian context at the beginning of the research was tense with protests around the CAA and other developments. The transformation of Kashmir's special status had occurred, protests were ongoing, and the social media blockade was just announced. The activist preoccupation with regards to India was to make clear that the main perpetrator of violent extremism was the state itself. What started off as a difficult moment in Indian history at the beginning of the research continued throughout the time of COVID-19 and as the essay on India lays out, things are looking very bad for all those not supportive of the Hindutva project in the country. Dissent has been cracked down on and civil society activism is at a virtual standstill, preoccupied mostly with protecting activists from harassment and rescuing others who have been arrested and held within the clutches of the state.

In the Indonesian case, contemporary Islamic militancy is just the most recent manifestation of a long struggle within the Indonesian polity against an Islamist takeover of the state at the expense of the enormous regional ethnic religious and cultural diversity of its massive population and land mass. As a Muslim majority country, the assertion of an Indonesian Islamic state has been a reality since the dawn of independence in 1945. While Indonesian leaders at the time were able to prevent the inclusion of Islamic terminology in the language of state-making at independence, staving off the Islamist influx has not been easy. The research into the Indonesian context was most engaged with understanding the widespread and organized influx of Islamist groups taking advantage of the life circumstances of women who were looking to advance themselves in terms of their social and economic wherewithal but also in terms of intellectual development and the importance of being part of a higher purpose or goal.

In all three cases the state's complicity in the violence unleashed on societies was evident. In the Sri Lankan case, regimes cultivated enmity and encouraged violence for the sake of their own longevity. In India, the Hindutva project has been so successful in its capture of the state and social institutions that the Indian team named the state "violent extremist." In the case of Indonesia, state responses at various historical points have encouraged Islamist projects, resisted their expansion, and also taken advantage of their violent acts to build up the state's repressive capacity and enact laws by which to suppress dissent.

The emphasis on young women as the focus of the research exercise, generated rich results in multiple ways. The pulling together of researchers from across different parts of Indonesia and the inclusion of local researchers and activists in the empirical data gathering processes in Sri Lanka reanimated existing networks and created new linkages that generations of activists and researchers can benefit from. The young researchers' workshop that was held midway through the research project enabled young women to address some of the constraints and challenges that they faced carrying out this highly sensitive research in political charged contexts while being from groups that can often be identified as oppressors.

An opportunity that was perhaps missed was the comparison of the transformation of economies in the respective countries and how the requirements of the state in its attempt to foster a neoliberal economic system marginalized the poor and other minoritized communities across the board. All three locations include some material regarding the manner in which state repression escalated

in relation to the demands of economic change; a more sustained engagement with economic issues may have enabled a better illustration of this particular dynamic.

At the end of three years, the research project has managed to deepen the participants' understanding of their own context from the perspective gained through comparison with the other research contexts. This study has enabled the argument made from India that the terminology of violent extremism should be directed at state action, and has complicated the discourse of violent extremism and terrorism as untenable if not understood in terms of the complex social and political histories in which the communities under scrutiny are embedded. It has challenged the use of the language of CVE and called for a more complex historically and contextually informed analysis of the phenomenon being studied that foregrounds the experiences of the marginalized in general and marginalized women in particular. The findings and analyses from the study have been utilized by each country to design their own country-specific policy interventions. This knowledge will also be worked into policy documents for intervention at the global level.

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# Women and Islamism in Indonesia: Navigating the Ideological Battlegrounds

by **KAMALA CHANDRAKIRANA**



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# INTRODUCTION

THIS REPORT BRINGS TOGETHER the findings of empirical research in three localities in Indonesia as part of a three-country study on violent extremism and women's agency. The research is designed to achieve the following outcomes: (1) understanding of violent extremism transformed, particularly of young women from the nine sites of research in the three countries under study; (2) developing pathways out of violent extremism to inform a shift in policy intervention, based on and reflecting young/women's experiences as victims, participants, and resisters of violent extremism; and, (3) increasing the effectiveness of young/women-led community-based strategies to combat violent extremism beyond a state/security-centred approach, applying feminist analysis to social and cultural engagement processes. The overarching question guiding the research is as follows: How have young women experienced and navigated the forces of violent extremism in their lives, personally and in relation to marriage, family, community, and nation? It is also designed to answer these four specific questions:

1. *What are the pathways in which violent extremism developed and spread? What are its means and milestones at the national and local levels? How are they linked to previous or existing conflicts?*
2. *What are young women's perceptions of violent extremism, and what do they consider its drivers? What is the impact of violent extremism on their lives, including how they have borne its effects? What are their sources of vulnerability and strength, including the social movements they have accessed?*
3. *How have young women participated, resisted, or mobilised against violent extremism? Are there inter-generational and inter-sectional connections and/or disconnects that influence their sense of options?*
4. *In what ways has the state empowered and/or disempowered these women who are dealing with violent extremism in their daily lives?*

This country report is organized into four parts. It starts with a description of the approach taken by the country team and the methodology applied in the empirical study. This is followed by a section that provides an explanation of the larger socio-political context, at the national and local levels, on which the empirical work was conducted. This section is written primarily based on the study's papers on radicalization and social media as well as on the descriptions of local context by the local researchers. The third part presents highlights from interviews with nine women whose life stories were documented for this research. The final section examines the role of the state in addressing Indonesia's Islamist political movements and their impact on women.

The three sites in which the research is conducted have distinct histories, demography and ecology. They are: East Bandung in the province of West Java; Poso in the province of Central Sulawesi; and, Pontianak in the province of Central Kalimantan. West Java is the largest province in the country in

terms of population, at almost 50 million people with a strong Muslim majority, and East Bandung is a peri-urban centre of its capital city. The province was selected for this research due to its role historically as the birthplace of a political movement to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia, called *Darul Islam* or *Negara Islam Indonesia* (Indonesian Islamic State). This movement came into being during the early years of Indonesia's post-colonial independence when the nature of the newly sovereign state was being negotiated. Consequent Islamist movements since then often trace their genealogy to *Darul Islam*. The second research location is the district of Poso (population of almost 250,000 people), in the province of Central Sulawesi (population of approximately three million people), which was the site of inter-religious conflict in the early years of Indonesia's post-authoritarian reform at the beginning of the 21st century. Poso's post-conflict landscape was selected for this research as it was once used as a training site for Al-Qaeda in Southeast Asia and, when the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was declared, an Islamist group there announced their allegiance to it. The third location for the empirical research is the city of Pontianak (population approaching 650,000 people) in the province of West Kalimantan (population approximately five million people), which has a long history of political mobilization along ethnic lines in a multicultural society. It was included in this research because of an incident of mass violence instigated by a nationwide Islamist political campaign in Jakarta, 800 kilometers away across the sea, in which local ethnic identities were redefined in religious terms. It is expected that this incident would show how the intertwining of political mobilization along ethnic and religious lines is shaped by the Islamist political agenda at the national level. All three sites of the research are intended to demonstrate the wide diversity in the local articulation of extremist political movements in Indonesia.

The women whose life stories inform this report come from the three locations above as well as from women who joined Islamist movements during their university years in Yogyakarta and Jakarta.

## Methodology

Engagement is a core element of this research project. The focus is on violent extremism as the research topic is itself intended as a means of engaging in the global discourse on the subject matter. In Indonesia, the research project is grounded in a mission of engagement with researchers and activists navigating the rise of Islamist ideologies in their respective contexts, particularly at the local level. It is also a knowledge-building project that is positioned within a feminist agenda for social justice and pluralism. Such positioning has, in turn, confronted the research team with questions regarding the framing and naming of the phenomenon globally discussed as "violent extremism." As part of a three-country study on this issue, it became clear from the outset that each country has its own distinct relationship with the term, shaped by its specific social and political histories. In international discourse, the term also emerged in a particular context for specific interests. For the Indonesian context, the term is mostly used among experts, academics, and civil society organizations engaging with the issue but does not much enter into policy-making or public discourse at the community level. The term itself is used either in its original English language or in various forms of a literal translation into Indonesian that sounds awkward.

# Research as engagement

The Indonesian empirical research team consists of eight local activist researchers who are deeply engaged in their respective communities on issues of women's rights, social justice and peace. They are central to ensuring that all the intended aims of this research would be achieved, including the effectiveness of young/women-led community-based strategies to combat violent extremism beyond a state/security-centred approach. All the local researchers work in the community in which the fieldwork was conducted. Rahima, an association that works on women's rights within Islam, coordinated the fieldwork in West Java; Mosintuwu Institute, a civil society organization based in Poso, Central Sulawesi, works on women's rights, peacebuilding and ecological justice; and, Suar Asa Khatulistiwa (SAKA), a local foundation based in Pontianak, West Kalimantan, supports youth and women in advocating for pluralism and tolerance. Each partner organization has deep networks in these communities and has brought young researchers into the team. Their active networks and engagements enabled them to find the women for the interviews and to gain their trust in the process, and their respective mission on women's rights and social justice ensures the active use of the research results.

Each local partner organization set up its own research team. In West Java, the team consisted of four women, while in Central Sulawesi and West Kalimantan the teams consisted of two persons each. All local teams had to interview five women from different age groups, backgrounds, and positions vis-à-vis the Islamist movements. Beyond the basic criteria in selecting the women to interview, they were given leeway to include additional considerations according to their organization's specific needs and interests. This step was taken to ensure that the research was meaningful to each organization's mission in their respective contexts and not simply an initiative that exclusively meets aims at the national or global level. In light of this, Rahima in West Java interviewed women who joined Islamist movements as well as those from minority communities who were victimized by them. Meanwhile, the Mosintuwu Institute in Central Sulawesi found it necessary to include women combatants from among the Muslim and Christian communities to show the interconnection between Islamist extremism and past conflict. Each research team were also asked to produce a paper that describes the broader socio-political context of their respective localities. To gain access to women in the Islamist movements, each team conducted focus group discussions and meetings with key people in their networks who would be able to provide assistance in identifying and connecting them with the right women. In one case, our researcher was surprised to learn that the woman she was to interview was, in fact, a close friend who had never disclosed having been part of a movement to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia.

The pandemic posed real challenges during the fieldwork as the timing coincided with Indonesia being one of the worst-hit countries in the world by the Delta variant of Covid-19. Delays occurred multiple times as the country went into lockdown several times.

Aside from the interviews in the three localities, the Indonesian team also initiated another form of documentation of women's life stories. Through a member of its Advisory Group, the team invited seven women to write about their experience joining and then leaving Islamist organizations.

These women had all been students in universities in Yogyakarta and Jakarta. All welcomed the opportunity to share their stories. Their life stories provided valuable insight into the inner workings of Islamist recruitment systems into schools and communities as well as into the inner thought process that the young women went through as they navigated through their Islamist involvements. After writing these “unlearning diaries,” a few of the women shared that the process had a healing impact on them.

The fact that the research is carried out by activist researchers provided both advantages and limits. While the advantages have been mentioned above in terms of opening access and gaining trust, its limits have to do with the fact that all the women interviewed had some degree of association with progressive movements in Indonesia’s civil society. Only one woman had no association with the local research partner and was still inside the Islamist movement during the time of the interview. Contact was initiated through her social media platform. Unsurprisingly, the interview with her was brief, but it provided sufficient insight nevertheless.

This report profiles women whose life stories were documented for this research. While a total of 22 women shared their stories in this study, only several have been selected for this report to maintain a holistic focus on their life journeys and also to reflect the diversity of women’s life experiences and the variance of the Islamist political movements they joined. From the three districts where the empirical research was conducted, there are four women whose lives are profiled and another two whose views are recorded in this report. This report includes the life journeys of another five women which were taken from their own autobiographical writings submitted to the research team. The latter was called ‘unlearning diaries’ as they tell the story of how they entered and then exited these movements.

## Research as collective learning

The empirical research process was conducted in three stages: preparation, the interview process, and post-interview. In the preparation stage, the local research teams participated in a three-day “reframing workshop” that was intended to provide information on the research aims and methods as well as to build a shared understanding of key social-political phenomena in the Indonesian context by bringing together experts on a range of relevant topics, such as the history of Islamist extremism in Indonesia, gender and identity politics, young Muslim women’s agency in social media, and the Indonesian government’s policy framework on terrorism. Preliminary discussions were also conducted on methodological issues, such as virtual ethnography and on writing life stories. The local researchers were also required to share background on their respective local contexts to start building the comparative perspective. For most of the local researchers, this workshop was also the first time they ever met as they are separated by significant distances across different islands in the archipelago. Ultimately, this initial workshop was also a means to open a collective space for the researchers.

The collective space for the empirical research commenced in May 2021 with the reframing workshop and continued to occur regularly – every two weeks or, as needed, weekly – up till January 2022 when the local researchers were finalizing their writings. The Covid-19 pandemic meant that this collective space existed virtually throughout the research. This space was used by the local researchers to consult on the research as well as to learn from each other as they navigate challenges in the field. All conversations in this collective space were facilitated by the country lead researcher. As we learned about the specific dynamics in the three local research sites through our regular virtual meetings, we agreed that each locality would highlight its unique contexts. For West Java, it was the centrality of social institutions, such as the family and education, as the spaces in which Islamist political agendas and recruitment occurred; for Central Sulawesi, it was its past of inter-religious conflict and the current post-conflict situation; while for West Kalimantan, it was the intersections of Islamist agendas with historically deep-seated inter-ethnic identity politics. Each team’s selection of women to interview was guided by this outlook.

During the interview process, the collective space was used to share the challenges in finding women who met the research criteria and were willing to speak with the researchers. The challenge came from the reality of a highly polarized and fragile society throughout the country. In West Kalimantan, a few women declined to be interviewed by our local research partner organization known for its work on tolerance and pluralism. In Central Sulawesi, a careful step-by-step effort to reach out to the wife of a leader in the armed jihadi community failed due to an attack by the Indonesian security forces that ended in the death of her husband. As the interviews commenced in each of the research sites, the researchers started sharing the stories they heard in our virtual space.

To assist the writing process, the country lead researcher was accompanied by an expert on cultural studies with experience conducting writing workshops on life stories. The post-interview stage of the research began with a writing workshop in November 2021. This workshop was followed by bi-weekly virtual meetings, including for each local team separately, which were conducted over the months of December 2021 to January 2022 in which comments were made to the first drafts. Revised write-ups from the local researchers were submitted in batches between February and March 2022.

## Framing extremism as political ideology

In conducting the empirical research in Indonesia, the term “violent extremism” required reconsideration. This was raised as an issue among the local researchers when they started seeking out women to interview who had experience engaging in Islamist movements. They found the term politically charged, particularly for those who are not aligned with government policy, and risked *a priori* judgmental labelling that would discourage open conversation with their resource persons. In contrast, women who were participating in internationally-sponsored programmes on countering violent extremism were familiar with the term and had no problem engaging with it. Earlier that year, in January 2021, the Indonesian government took up the term as part of its international engagement, particularly with regard to the push for national action plans on violent extremism. The presidential regulation outlining Indonesia’s National Action Plan

for Preventing and Overcoming Violent Extremism that Leads to Terrorism 2022-2024<sup>1</sup> defines this phenomenon as “a belief and/or action that uses violent means or threats of extreme violence with the aim of supporting or committing acts of terrorism.” This research team ultimately agreed not to use the term “violent extremism” when introducing the study at the community level and in the individual interviews unless its acceptability is ensured. As a result, the research question on women’s perceptions on violent extremism was obtained from some of the resource persons but from not all.

While the term “violent extremism” opens doors to engage in the international discourse on the matter, it is too generic to be empirically meaningful for conversations at the local and community levels in Indonesia. In the largest nation of Muslims that is not, as a matter of political settlement upon post-colonial national independence, an Islamic state, the form that extremism takes is mainly one shaped by Islamism. In this context, Indonesia’s version of extremism is understood in terms of the goal to radically transform state and society through movements that aim to establish a religious autocracy, dismantle political, social, and economic institutions, and deny the cultural pluralism of the nation. Such transformative political agendas are waged through violent and non-violent means in Indonesia. Establishing Indonesia as an Islamic state and part of a larger trans-national Islamic caliphate are political goals advanced also by organizations that denounce violence and take on persuasive tactics through social organizing, online and offline. Breaking away from the violent vs non-violent binary in addressing extremism is especially relevant for this study that seeks to understand how women navigate in, through, or against these movements. For both violent and non-violent Islamist extremists, the idea of transforming state and society stands on the principle of male authority and control over women.

In framing extremism beyond the violent/non-violent binary, the research team turns to a definition of Islamism proposed by Mehdi Mozaffari. He understands Islamism as a totalitarian ideology comprising four elements: religious ideology: holistic interpretation of Islam; conquest of the world; and use of all means in achieving the final objective (Mozaffari, 2017). Such recognition of the multidimensionality of Islamism is useful for this study as it means recognizing that violent extremism is only one aspect of a totalitarian ideology and that it is not a prerequisite for achieving its goals. Women’s experiences within Islamist movements are defined not only by their violent projects but also by a belief system on the Islamist way of life. Mozaffari emphasizes that, as a religious ideology, Islamism believes in the indivisibility of religion, way of life, and government and provides guidance for “a total way of life with guidance for political, economic, and social behaviour,” which undoubtedly includes gender relations. Mozaffari’s conception of Islamism is also particularly relevant for the Indonesian context, in which a multitude of Islamist movements co-exist, in that he views Islamism as a “divided movement” with no single source of global leadership and with global as well as national formations.

In terms of political mobilization, Mozaffari recognizes that Islamism applies a whole spectrum of means to achieve its goals: propagation, peaceful indoctrination, and political struggle to violent methods. This view aligns with the findings of Charlie Winter after his review of propaganda media

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1. See <https://setkab.go.id/en/govt-issues-regulation-on-action-plan-to-tackle-violent-extremism/>



products by the Islamic State after its declaration in 2014, in which violence was only part of a 6-pronged “taxonomy of Islamic State propaganda,” comprising brutality, mercy, victimhood, war, belonging, and utopianism (Winter, 2015). Recognition of Islamism as a complex entity beyond its violent projects is crucial for understanding the breadth of Indonesian women’s interest and engagement in the political movements that aim at the transformation of both state and society following the Islamist ideology.

The women whose lives are profiled in this report had had different degrees and forms of engagement with several different Islamist movements: the Indonesian Islamic State, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, Jemaah Islamiyah, Jamaat Tabligh, Laskar Jihad of Poso, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and a range of student organizations following Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and affiliated with the Indonesian political party, Prosperous Justice Party. Of all these organizations, the ones that justify the use of violence to achieve their goals are the Indonesian Islamic State, Jemaah Islamiyah, Laskar Jihad of Poso and ISIS. Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia specifically denounces the use of violence but takes on a non-cooperative position vis-à-vis the Indonesian state. Meanwhile, organizations emulating the Muslim Brotherhood place themselves within the formal system of political organizing, both on campus as well as in the electoral system. Despite their varying political strategies, all these Islamist organizations have the goal of transforming the state and society and actively pursuing women for their movements.

## PATHWAYS OF ISLAMIST EXTREMISM

Islamist movements have existed throughout Indonesia’s modern history, in diverse forms and agendas, espousing violence and non-violence, expanding and contracting in reaction to political changes nationally, locally, and globally.

In 1948, only three years after Indonesia declared its national independence, the Indonesian Islamic State was established in defiance of the young sovereign secular state. The centre of this movement was in West Java. This movement was crushed by the newly independent nation and stayed underground for fifty years, particularly during the 32-year authoritarian New Order regime. As this regime ended, communal conflicts erupted in various parts of the archipelago and mass violence spread along religious and ethnic lines. This re-energized the long-dormant Islamist ambitions and triggered the mobilization of Muslim men around the country to go to the conflict areas as jihadi fighters. The internet, which had just become publicly accessible at that time, expanded the reach of narratives on Islam’s victimization in Indonesia and the world with images of mutilated bodies in conflict zones. The most prominent images came from two conflict sites, in Maluku and Central Sulawesi. The latter is one of the empirical research sites in this study.

There are three main milestones in the rise of Islamist extremism in Indonesia’s national political landscape: the inter-religious communal conflicts at the start of the Reformasi era in the early 2000s; the declaration of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in 2014; and the political mobilization

around local elections in Jakarta in 2017.

The political opening after the end of Indonesia's authoritarian New Order regime, in 1998, became fertile ground for the growth of Islamist movements as much as for the country's progressive rights-based movements. Homegrown Islamist movements, such as the Indonesian Islamic State (IIS) from 1948, and newer ones with transnational affiliations, such as Jamaah Islamiyah, Al Qaeda, and Hizbut Tahrir, all expanded their followings during this period. The inter-religious communal conflicts in Maluku and Central Sulawesi proved to be fertile ground for mass recruitment. The internet, which had just entered Indonesia, became the crucial means in the expansion of Islamist movements at this time. Most Islamist groups had set up their own communications team that relied heavily on the emerging virtual world.<sup>2</sup> In 2000, as many as 28 churches were bombed in Jakarta and other cities in Sumatra and Java, killing 19 people and injuring more than 120. Two years later, the bombings of two popular bars in Bali killed more than 200 people and injured another 200. The Jamaah Islamiyah, a homegrown Islamist movement operating in alliance with Al-Qaeda to establish an Islamic caliphate in Southeast Asia, claimed responsibility for these attacks and continued to carry out bombings targeting international hotels, embassies and restaurants in 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2009.<sup>3</sup> The leaders of these attacks were Indonesian Islamists who had been in self-exile under the authoritarian Soeharto regime and trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan for combat. Upon the end of this regime, they returned to Indonesia as part of a transnational Islamist movement.

Meanwhile, the political opening marked the beginning of an era of electoral democracy, often called "Reformasi," when the decades-long restrictions on forming political parties were abandoned. One of the most high-profile new political parties was the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party, established in the image of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Turkey's Justice and Development Party. In contrast, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia chose not to take part in formal political processes and established itself as a non-violent social organization despite its political goal of building a global caliphate. Other Islamist organizations flourished during this time, including those that actively recruited in university campuses as well as in high schools.

The next big milestone for extremism in Indonesia was the declaration of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014. ISIS specifically targeted Indonesians for recruitment and Indonesian Islamists responded enthusiastically. Among the recruiters were Indonesian women who shared online their experience of moving to Syria. One estimate puts between 1,000 and 2,000 Indonesians having pledged allegiance to ISIS by early 2016 (Countering Extremism Project, 2018). The targets of extremist attacks shifted after the presence of ISIS in Indonesia, from symbols of Western power (e.g., international hotels, clubs, restaurants) to that of the Indonesian state (e.g., police stations, presidential palace, detention centre). It is also during this time that women migrant workers abroad began to be active supporters of jihadis seeking ways to join ISIS in Syria and even financing bombing plans. This period demonstrated how closely connected Indonesian Islamists are to global Islamist movements.

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2. See this study's paper on social media.

3. See report by Counter Extremism Project, 2018, at <https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/indonesia-extremism-and-terrorism>

But aside from the global connections, the pathway of Islamists in Indonesia is also determined by local politics. In 2017, during a period of local elections, the Jakarta gubernatorial elections became a centre point for political mobilization among diverse Islamist groups to defeat the incumbent governor who was a Christian of Chinese descent. On the eve of the election year, on December 2, 2016, Islamist groups that do not espouse violence made a show of force through what has been called the largest political demonstration in Indonesia's history. Among the leadership of this demonstration was a Salafi-inspired movement whose long-term objectives include: a greater public role for ulama, shari'a-inspired public policies, Muslim majority rule and Muslim control of the economy. Their politics have been described as follows:

They are careful to stay within accepted political bounds, and avoid calling for the formal application of Islamic law or an Islamic state. Strongly influenced by the so-called Sahwa movement from the early 1990s in Saudi Arabia, a fusion of Muslim Brotherhood activism and Salafi-wahabi religious tenets, they aim to transform state and society from the bottom up along more puritan lines. Their instruments of choice are not political parties but educational institutions, religious outreach (*dakwah*) groups, the media and civil society through which they hope to shape public opinion. (IPAC 44, 2018)

This event was a milestone also because a few months after the completion of this gubernatorial election, the government took an unprecedented step of banning an Islamist organization. A ministerial decree repealed the legal status of Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia on the grounds of its goals being in contradiction with the Constitution and its activities undermining the integrity of the nation. Three years later, in 2020, another Islamist organization that was involved in the 212 Movement, Islamic Defence Front, was unilaterally dissolved by the government. These steps marked a shift in the Indonesian government's stance with regard to Islamist social organizations, from accommodation to outright repression.

Meanwhile, Islamist extremism has distinct features and dynamics at the local level. The three districts in this empirical research illustrate the varying ways in which Islamist movements take hold given the unique histories, demographics, and ecology of a locality. Interests and actions of the national government, including the national policy framework to address terrorism and violent extremism, generate varying outcomes in different local contexts.

## West Java: education as site for politicization

West Java is Indonesia's largest province, at almost 50 million people, with a strong Muslim majority at 97% of the population. People from West Java identify themselves culturally as Sundanese, and most consider Sundanese as synonymous with being Muslim. The capital city of West Java is Bandung, with a population of almost 2.4 million people, where the interviews for this study were conducted. Majoritarian politics predominate in this province and religious minorities there face discrimination, persecution, and violence. Data on violations of freedom of religion/belief

collected annually by the Setara Institute<sup>4</sup> since 2016 show West Java as having the highest number of incidences, at 755 cases, more than double that of the province with the second most cases. Vigilante groups bearing the name of Islam were responsible for many of these incidents, including those associated with the Islamic Defence Front. West Java was also among the top provinces in the country producing local regulations which were discriminatory against women and minorities, according to data collected by Komnas Perempuan in 2016. Many of these regulations were framed in terms of district governments enforcing Sharia law.

Bandung is also a university city, with several top national universities located there. One of them, the top university on technology and urban development, was the first site of the Islamist *dakwah* (religious preaching) movements among Indonesia's youth. In the 1980s, student organizations with affiliation to Egypt's *Ikhwanul Muslimin* (Muslim Brotherhood) began recruiting in the campuses using a mentoring system organized into small cells and set up Islamic centres on campus. Other Islamist movements, such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia and the Saudi-oriented salafis, also recruited massively on campuses, in Bandung and other main cities like Yogyakarta and Jakarta. They mobilized to take over key positions in student bodies to influence decision-making not just in Islamic universities but also in secular ones. Students in these Islamist organizations then set up recruitment systems directed at high schools, utilizing alumni networks and engaging with high school student religious groups, called the *rohisi*.<sup>5</sup> During the height of mobilization by Islamist groups in 2016, in relation to the Jakarta gubernatorial elections, Bandung became the headquarters of the notorious "Muslim Cyber Army," a collection of trained young hackers whose role was to spread provocation and hoaxes on social media. For them, having their Instagram site closed down by the government was considered martyrdom.<sup>6</sup>

Most genealogies of Islamist movements in Indonesia point to West Java where the Indonesian Islamic State (IIS) was declared in 1948 by the *Darul Islam* movement. The movement was soon crushed by the Indonesian state but then re-emerged under new leadership by the 1970s. In the 1990s, the IIS set up its own Islamic education institute which covered kindergarten to high school. Students from Bandung's top universities taught here. This was led by a branch of the IIS, called *Negara Islam Indonesia Zakaria* (NII Zakaria), which specifically focused on social and economic programs. It further set up health clinics, orphanages and businesses, including for the sale of *kurban*, sacrificial goats or cows during one of the Muslim holy days. This was the means to manifest the Islamic state. One of the women interviewed for this research, Alana, was a member of NII Zakaria. Other Islamist organizations also prospered in West Java, including the *Jamaah Anshorul Daulah* (JAD) which became the largest and most virulent pro-ISIS groups in Indonesia between 2014 to 2017.<sup>7</sup>

West Java also has an active progressive movement which take on the role of countering Islamist extremist narratives. A local interfaith organization, Jakatarub, was set up in 2000 to facilitate communication and exchanges between Muslim youths and those from minority religions and

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4. See database at <https://bebasberagama.id/data/distribution-province-act>

5. See paper on context in West Java by the local research team.

6. Ibid.

7. IPAC, *Extremists in Bandung: Darul Islam to ISIS—and Back Again?*, Report No. 42, 12 February 2018.

beliefs. Other groups adopt a cultural approach at the community level, introducing films that give a message on tolerance. There are advocacy networks that focus on addressing the discriminatory local regulations in West Java and those that work on “violent extremism” as part of a national network of women’s organizations. The outreach of such groups has impacted on some to leave their Islamist movements.

The five women interviewed for this study reflect the dynamics of West Java. Two of them come from minority communities which have been the targets of Islamist vigilante groups, namely West Java’s indigenous religion and the Shiite Ahmadiyah community. Two other women are those who have taken up the path of resistance against Islamist encroachment of the education institution and against the growing culture of intolerance. Last but not least, one woman was interviewed for her experience as a cadre of the Indonesian Islamic State movement for more than 15 years from the age of 17.

## Central Sulawesi: politics of security

Central Sulawesi is a much smaller province than West Java with a population of approximately three million people. It was the site of inter-religious conflict between 1998 and 2001 when several parts of the country broke out in communal conflicts just at the start of Indonesia’s post-authoritarian “Reformasi” era. The conflict was concentrated in the district of Poso, which has a population of nearly 250,000 people, and where this empirical research was conducted. There are equal numbers of Muslims and Christians in Poso, the former living mostly in the lowlands and the latter in the highlands, with pockets of Balinese Hindu communities who settled in Poso as part of the government’s transmigration program in the 1970s. Central Sulawesi is also a resource-rich province with significant forest cover, much of which are under large forest concessions. There is a long-standing political settlement in Poso in which the Muslim and Christian communities would take turns, within the framework of the electoral process, filling the positions of district head and deputy. The inter-religious conflict erupted when this political settlement was seen to be violated amidst accusations of corruption.

Over the three-year open conflict, armed groups from the Muslim and Christian communities destroyed approximately 8,000 houses and 150 public facilities, caused displacement of around 90,000 people, and resulted in the death of almost 600 people. The open conflict ended after a peacemaking effort led by a prominent Indonesian senior politician with the signing of the Malino Declaration at the end of 2001. Meanwhile, in 2000, the national government deployed military police as peacekeepers, marking the beginning of a series of special operations by the country’s national security forces (from the police and army) that continue till today.

After the open conflict ended, incidents of violence continued to occur, including the beheading of three schoolgirls and bombing of a market in 2005 (Komnas Perempuan, 2009). In 2010, Poso became a training ground for the armed Islamist Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (Eastern Indonesia Mujahiddin) or MIT. In 2012, two police officers were found dead in the hamlet of Tamanjeka, Poso, after being kidnapped by the MIT. This was followed by gun attacks directed at a police patrol crew which killed four among them. When ISIS was declared in 2014, MIT announced its allegiance to them.

MIT's violent attacks triggered more deployment of security forces by the national government, up to more than a thousand personnel from the police force and more than a hundred from the military under the framework of special operations specifically designed for Poso. An estimated 11 distinct security operations have been established for Poso by the Indonesian government to date.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, the number of MIT fugitives hiding in the forest had been reported as in less than twenty. The security forces killed the MIT leader in 2016 and his successor in 2021.

The large and extended presence of security forces deployed by the national government has brought about concerns among many in Poso. The security operations have encroached into Poso's forest in the mountains where the MIT were said to be in hiding. This has made it difficult for local communities to access their fields and harvest their tree products. Local communities have reported illegal logging involving security forces as well as sexual exploitation targeting young local women, violence against civilian populations, and corruption.<sup>9</sup>

Civil society organizations in the district of Poso and more broadly in the province of Central Sulawesi have existed prior to the conflict, mostly working on natural resource management and women's rights. During the conflict, many of these organizations took up roles in human rights monitoring and peacebuilding. At the height of the conflict, international humanitarian organizations entered the area, financing and shaping much of the activities of local organizations. In the post-conflict context, and living with the continued presence of security forces, local civil society organizations have constructed new understandings of their situation, recognizing the powerful political and economic interests shaping the future of their communities.

The five people interviewed for this study illustrate women's experiences in Poso's evolving conflict and post-conflict situations. Two of the women were combatants during the inter-religious conflict, each fighting for their respective religious communities. One woman shares her experience living in a community of jihadis, another provides a picture of life in an Islamic boarding school linked to the inter-religious conflict. Lastly, a 26-year old woman tells her story of joining an Islamist youth group and deciding to leave it for a feminist local organization.

## West Kalimantan: local capture

West Kalimantan, a province that shares a border with Malaysia on the resource-rich island of Borneo or Kalimantan, has a population of approximately five million people in a multicultural society. Kalimantan's dense tropical forest is known as second only to the Amazon but equally faces severe deforestation due to logging and extractive industries. As many as 26 ethnic groups<sup>10</sup> reportedly reside in the province, including the indigenous Dayak people and several ethnicities who had been migrants into the region several generations ago. Four main ethnic groups predominantly shape the contours of local politics in West Kalimantan: the indigenous Dayak,

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8. See Poso context paper by local researcher.

9. Ibid.

10. See the West Kalimantan context paper by local researcher.



Malays, Chinese and Madurese. The capital city of this province is Pontianak, with a population approaching 650,000, which is the site for this empirical research.

West Kalimantan has a long history of inter-ethnic conflicts. According to one analyst, there have been 12 violent inter-ethnic conflicts in the four decades between 1966 and 2008, involving Dayak vs Madurese, Malays vs Madurese, and Dayak vs the Chinese.<sup>11</sup> The triggering factors for these conflicts have been varied – land disputes, youth brawls, local elections, etc. – but underlying this all is the hierarchy of power and access to resources which overlaps with ethnic divisions in West Kalimantan. The indigenous Dayak, having been forcibly moved by the New Order government from the depths of the forest to settlements closer to the administrative centres are displaced from their traditional sources of livelihood. Meanwhile, the Madurese, who had left their poor villages in the island of Madura and migrated to the region in search of employment, mostly occupy the bottom stratum of West Kalimantan society and often targeted as scapegoats of social discord. The Madurese share their Muslim faith with the landed elites of the area who are descendants of the Malay sultanate. While the Chinese have been an integral part of the West Kalimantan society since the 18th century, they continue to be vulnerable to discrimination and violence. During Indonesia's anti-communist pogrom in 1965, the Chinese in West Kalimantan were persecuted for being communist with ties to mainland China.

Given the long-standing identity politics in West Kalimantan, there is fluidity in the way people declare their social identities. According to the census data of 2000, 34% of the population were Malay, 30% Dayak, 9.5% Chinese and 5.5% Madurese. The remaining 20% of the population were a mix of Javanese, Buginese (South Sulawesi) and Sundanese. A decade later, the 2010 census identified two dominant ethnic groups: 48% Dayak and 18.5% Malay. Some observers explain this shift in terms of changes in the way the people of West Kalimantan self-identify. According to the Dayak Muslim Family Association, by the time the 2010 census was conducted, West Kalimantan's Muslim Dayak had become more willing to be identified by their ethnicity rather than by their religion.<sup>12</sup> In the meantime, the dominant ethnic Malays are vested in their religious identity as Muslims, particularly due to historical fact that their sultanate was founded by Hadrami traders from Yemen. This connection to an Arabian identity would eventually play a key role in the way Islamist movements from Jakarta found an interested political constituency in West Kalimantan for their political agenda.

Identity politics in West Kalimantan heighten around local elections. The 2018 local elections had two candidates running against each other: a Dayak Catholic vs a Muslim of Javanese-Chinese-Tamil descent. The former is a woman from a local elite political family and the latter a seasoned politician. Meanwhile, in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial elections, the two candidates also had an almost parallel mix of identities: a Chinese Christian incumbent vs. a Muslim candidate of Arab descent. Leading up to the Jakarta elections, massive mobilization was carried out through a convergence of multiple Islamist organizations based on the idea that a Muslim majority society cannot be led by a non-Muslim. This mobilization was carried out under the banner of the "212

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11. Ibid.

12. IPAC, *The West Kalimantan Election and the Impact of the Anti-Ahok Campaign*, Report No. 43, 21 February 2018.



Movement,” denoting the date of its massive show of force at the centre of the nation’s capital on December 2, 2016. One of the leaders of this movement was the *Front Pembela Islam* (Islam Defence Front) or FPI whose leader, Habib Rizieq, was an Indonesian of Hadrami descent. He had made a visit to West Kalimantan in early 2000 and found strong support from the Malay-Hadrami sultanate and its descendants. Some Dayak observers noted that the Malay political elites built alliances with national Islamist organizations and garnered support locally from non-Dayak migrant Muslim populations.<sup>13</sup>

The Islamist political mobilization for the 2017 Jakarta elections and that for the 2018 West Kalimantan elections were intertwined. A local politician facilitated a delegation from West Kalimantan to Jakarta in support of the “212 Movement” during its rally, while one member of the Malay sultanate attended on his own accord. In January 2017, a group of conservative Muslim clerics from Jakarta flew to Pontianak in a period of heightened tensions as the local election campaigns were gaining momentum. Their arrival triggered massive mobilization by the indigenous Dayak community who entered the airport tarmac area in traditional warrior dress, calling for the banning of the FPI. At this point, through the process of local Malay’s alliance-building with national-level Islamist, ethnic-based political mobilization took the form of religious-based oppositional politics. By June 2018, as the local elections came closer, public narratives among Muslim voters came to resemble more and more the Islamist narratives of the “212 Movement” during the Jakarta elections, namely that Islam forbids Muslim societies to be led by non-Muslims.<sup>14</sup>

The final outcome of West Kalimantan’s local elections was victory for the Muslim candidate. Tensions were high and many anticipated inter-religious violence to erupt. In the end, this did not happen due to the efforts of civil society, including by setting up a Hoax Crisis Centre, and by increased security measures by the government.

The five women interviewed for this study are all located differently in the ethnic landscape of West Kalimantan: a young Malay Islamist; a young Chinese Muslim; a Madurese journalist; a mixed Dayak-Melayu-Javanese who represents Muslims in the provincial inter-faith body; and a journalist immigrant from West Java.

## WOMEN NAVIGATING ISLAMIST EXTREMISM

How do women perceive extremism? Interestingly, the women in this study have different ways of understanding the phenomenon. Their views are shaped by the specific realities of their local contexts and by their unique personal experiences. The perceptions documented here are from women who had never been part of any Islamist movements or those who have distanced themselves from them.

In West Java, where Islamists had set up massive recruitment systems among students and faculty, a campaign was waged by alumni against the pending appointment of a leader of Hizbut Tahrir

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13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

Indonesia as deputy dean in one of the university departments. Dahlia was one of the leaders who initiated this campaign. In her view, Islamist extremists are engaged in a transnational ideology that carries out indoctrination overturning conventional views on society and the state. She sees them weakening the values of the nation, undermining the love of the motherland, and encouraging social discord. In her view, the campus environment needs reclaiming through counter-narratives against radicalism and religious extremism. Dahlia's campaign was successful after mobilizing other like-minded alumni and receiving significant media attention. This view reflects the intense battle by civil society in West Java to recapture education institutions from the grip of Islamists.

In Central Sulawesi, where violent extremist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and ISIS were part of the post-conflict landscape, women's perceptions of extremism were inseparable from their experience in the inter-religious conflict that had erupted in the early years of the 2000s. Mala, who was a combatant from the Muslim community during the inter-religious conflict, believes that a recent incident of bombing and shooting by violent Islamists was not a sign of continuing animosity between the Muslim and Christian communities in Poso. In her view, these were the acts of Islamists from outside the region who wanted to keep Poso's inter-religious tensions alive and those who wanted to guarantee the continued flow of funding for programmes on anti-terrorism. Rima, who lived in a hamlet identified in public as a home ground for the East Indonesian Mujahaddin (MIT), believed that this was an act of labelling that benefited the national security forces posted in post-conflict Poso. In her mind, every time they capture a jihadi hiding in the mountains, someone in the security forces gets promoted. She believes that by now the number of remaining jihadis is so small that it should not be insurmountable to defeat them. Both Mala and Rima have grown cynical over the outsized role of the national security forces in post-conflict Poso and saw the issue of Islamist extremism in this light.

In West Kalimantan, where inter-ethnic tensions have historically fed into violent conflicts, perceptions on Islamist extremism did not veer far from women's understanding of their local context. Murni, who is a young journalist of Madurese ethnic background, saw the Islamists as part of the identity politics that have been the common practice by local elites all along. She believes that behind the mass mobilization using Islamist narratives is the old-age competition for resources among West Kalimantan's ethnic groups.

Some of the perceptions on Islamist extremism are derived from the personal experiences of women in this study. One woman who had experienced discrimination at school due to her indigenous religion in the majoritarian Muslim community of West Java believes that intolerance is more dangerous than terrorism. She believes that the state has criminalized terrorism and therefore clearly addressed it. In contrast, intolerance is societal behaviour that is often encouraged by influential Islamists with little sanction from the government. An Ahmadiyah woman who has been many times victimized by Islamist vigilante groups sees the state as being complicit in their prosecution due to restrictive government decrees against their religious community. In a different context, a Christian ex-combatant in Central Sulawesi notes that the existence of Islamist extremists in her area has perpetuated hatred in her son who believed that violence was the only way to respond to them. In her view, Islamist extremists are nurturing a culture of violence that is being

passed to Poso's young generation. Two women who were directly involved in Islamist movements – one in West Java and another in Central Sulawesi – demonstrated an evolution of their personal views. Upon departure from these communities, as a choice (West Java) or as a reality forced upon her (Central Sulawesi), they adopted the position of the state and viewed these movements as “prohibited” or “against the law.”

What are the sources of strength for these women? Most point to their families and many mentioned the important role of their religion and religious leaders. While many of the women in this study recognized the political nature of extremist movements, they also consider this a matter of (problematic) religious understanding. They see this as simultaneously a matter of political ideology and religious ideology. For the women who joined collective actions against extremism, the central role of civil society groups and supportive lecturers on campus have been identified. Many saw their vulnerability linked to their ethnic or religious identities as well as to their personhood as women.

## YOUNG WOMEN'S EVOLVING ENGAGEMENTS IN ISLAMISM

This section follows the life journeys of nine young women who joined and then left Islamist political movements in their local community. Three of the women had joined organizations whose aim is to establish an Islamic state. Alana (born in 1978) and Amanda (born in 1976) had been active members of *Negara Islam Indonesia* (Indonesian Islamic State). The former in West Java and the latter in Jakarta. Latifah (born in 1996) had made the journey with her family from Jakarta to Syria to join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Mala (born in 1971) was a combatant fighting for the Muslims during the time of inter-religious conflict in Poso, Central Sulawesi. Henny (born 2001), a young entrepreneur based in Pontianak, West Kalimantan, is a staunch believer in the goal of a transnational Islamic civilization. Two women writing their own stories share their experiences joining non-violent Islamist political movements in Central Java. Nur (born in 1995) joined the Indonesian chapter of a transnational Islamist movement, while Yuni (born in 1981) joined a homegrown Indonesian one that is linked to an Islamist political party. Two other women, Rima (born in 1987) in Poso, Central Sulawesi, and Dewi (born in 1984) in West Sumatera, became part of these movements by being the wives of their Islamist husbands. All but one of these women, Henny, have ended up disengaging with these Islamist political movements, for one reason or another, which made it possible for them to be part in this research.

The life journeys of these nine women provide insights into the dynamics of how young women enter into these Islamist political movements, their experience in engaging from within them, and the circumstances that move them to exit. The Islamist political movements with which they were associated are varied but all have the similar goal of transforming society following Islamist ideology and replacing the secular state with an Islamic state or caliphate.

# Entry

That night, I was picked up in a car [and driven] with my eyes covered in cloth. I was brought to a place with an auditorium where many people had already convened for a ceremony to celebrate the independence day of the Indonesian Islamic State (IIS). I joined the ceremony and sang the independence anthem of the IIS. Seventh of August 1949, that is the day when the Indonesian Islamic State was born.<sup>15</sup>

This is how Alana described the day her membership in the Indonesian Islamic State, an underground movement, was officially recognized. Her recruitment had occurred three years earlier, when she was 17 years old, when she declared her allegiance and loyalty to the IIS. She was recruited by someone who had lived with her and her aunt and who she considered an older sister and mentor. Alana was an avid reader of books who excelled in her studies and aspired to travel abroad, accessing higher education in Egypt to eventually becoming a diplomat. But, during her high school years, Alana found herself more attracted to the ideas shared by her mentor who spoke about the hardship of Muslims in Iraq and Bosnia. In her second year in high school, Alana started dressing the same way as her mentor, namely a long veil, layered gown, and socks, which made her stand out in school and become the target of bullying. Nevertheless, she stayed steadfast in her choices and faithful to her mentor and her teachings. In retrospect, Alana believed that her mentor's effectiveness had to do with the fact that her ideas were shared alongside love and care (*kasih sayang*) and she felt safe with her.

As Alana approached her 17th birthday, the minimum age for recruitment according to IIS regulations, her mentor started talking to her about the inadequacies of the country's *Pancasila*<sup>16</sup> ideology which did not comply with the Holy Qur'an. Two days after her 17th birthday, Alana proclaimed her allegiance to the IIS to an official of the Islamic state – whom she said acted like “a motivator” – who made clear to her that she was joining an Islamic revolution. While he was attentive to her needs and interests, including her love of books, she also emphasized that she must be “strong in her conviction, shrewd in her strategies, and abundant in her knowledge” and that this meant she must know how to “hide in plain sight” as the revolution was underground. Her task as a member of the IIS was to recruit people in her closest circle. According to Alana, her first recruit to the IIS was the person who had bullied her in school.

Amanda's recruitment into the IIS occurred also during her teenage years, after being approached by a young man who eventually became recruited her into the IIS. She noted that, interestingly, he did not dress in the conventional Islamist style (read: bearded, white robe or loose pants, sandals) but in the more Western-style jeans and short-sleeved shirt. Having won a national essay competition for high school students, Amanda was recognized as a high-performer and gained access to a politically-connected Islamic think tank in Jakarta where she was exposed to intellectuals, activists, and business people connected to this think tank. Like Alana, Amanda excelled in school and had

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15. Interview with Alana.

16. Pancasila is the official state ideology that recognizes the notion of God without specific reference to Islam as the state religion.

an ample thirst for knowledge. She began her religious activism in high school having selected an extracurricular activity in this field based on her observation that the students in this group seemed more serious, studious, polite, and respectful than those in other fields who often targeted her and her female schoolmates with catcalls. Amanda had had previous experiences witnessing sexual harassment of women in public spaces and felt deep anger about it. In her religious group, Amanda quickly rose through the ranks, becoming the leader of its *dakwah* (preaching) program, feeling safe in the sexually-segregated spaces that were put in place. Amanda noted that, at times, her activism brought about critique from her male peers whom she saw as feeling threatened by her strong leadership as a woman. She started wearing a hijab to school, which gradually became longer and bigger in size as her activism heightened and soon came to confront a government decree prohibiting hijab in schools. In response, she organized 200 Muslim students from various schools in Jakarta to campaign against this prohibition, including by protesting to the national parliament and approaching national political elites to gain their support. She believes that her campaign benefitted from the outcry among Muslims against atrocities that were happening in Bosnia Herzegovina at that time.

Amanda remembers that she became particularly intrigued by her IIS recruiter because he spoke about state-building (*bagaimana kita bernegara*) and made a compelling critique of the corrupt New Order regime. She then agreed to convene a "*hijrah* forum"<sup>17</sup> in her home in which the IIS's version of the history of Islam and that of Islam in Indonesia were conveyed, including the ill-fated *Darul Islam*/IIS movement which was banned by the newly-independent secular government. When she declared allegiance to the IIS, Amanda changed her name to a more Islamic one and, by that time, had already recruited her two older brothers. As she got more and more involved in the IIS, she started changing her dress to a smaller-sized headcover with jeans and finally simply disappeared from school activities.

Latifah decided to move to the territory of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) when she was 19 years old. The decision was seen as her only choice as her whole family, plus her maternal aunts and uncles, had decided to go and she would be left behind on her own if she did not join them. The instigator of the move was her sister who was two years younger than Latifah. When ISIS was declared in 2014, she was moved by its promises, especially regarding free healthcare for her family that was struggling to pay bills and repay debts due to an aunt with cancer, a cousin with schizophrenia and another requiring physical therapy for weak leg muscles. After selling one of their houses to pay for the trip, Latifah's family departed for Syria as a company of 25 people.

Mala joined Laskar Jihad, a national jihadi militant group, having fought in an inter-religious conflict in Central Sulawesi. When Mala was 29 years old, in 2000, her home and land were burned down in an attack by enemy combatants whom she recognized to be Christians from outside the region. There was a call for the community to take up arms to fight back. While most of the women fled with their children, Mala decided to join the men in arms. She was the only woman to do so, using the spear as her weapon. She came to lead a squad of male combatants and noted how her role

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17. '*Darul Islam*' refers to Prophet Muhammad's historic move from Mecca to Medina to free Muslims from persecution and build a new society was built based on Islam.

as a female combatant was used to motivate the male fighters. So, when the Laskar Jihad arrived from the island of Java to Central Sulawesi, Mala volunteered to join. She was initially assigned to be the cook but insisted to be made a fighter. She was eventually trained to distribute ammunition, carry out intelligence, disassemble arms, and make bombs. Every night for three months, they were made to watch films on the war in Afghanistan and indoctrinated with jihad doctrine. One day she was brought, blindfolded, to a special training ground where she and others were to be trained to become suicide bombers.

The four women above joined Islamist organizations/movements for which violence, and in the case of the IIS also theft, are considered legitimate strategies to achieve their goals. But, as mentioned before, the Islamist ideology and goal of creating a state and society replicating the institutions and traditions during the life of the Prophet Mohammad are equally upheld by political movements that do not espouse violence. The gendered dimensions and implications in this latter context are also relevant to a transformative understanding of extremism. The experiences of Nur, Yuni and Henny are insightful here.

Nur joined Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), the national chapter of a non-violent transnational movement to create a global caliphate, when she was 16 years old during her second year in high school. In her first year of high school, she had been approached by a schoolmate who invited her to join an after-school religious discussion group every Friday. This friend had intrigued her not just because she dressed differently from everyone else with her wide veil and socks, but also because she was asking an interesting question that made her think about what it meant to wear the veil. With seven other students from her school, Nur finally joined the after-school sessions where she met two older women wearing a wide veil and loose robe who were there to be their mentors. They provided the students with reading materials which Nur remembers to be political in nature, mentioning the idea of the caliphate. The subject matter of these readings was too difficult in Nur's view but she continued to engage because the mentors were kind and made a strong emotional connection with them. Eventually, she became more interested in the weekly Friday discussions and started to share the views and ideas she gained from them with others, inside and outside the classroom. She felt proud of distinguishing herself from others by her capacity to speak on political and socio-economic issues, including regarding the state.

After a few months, Nur also started wearing the wide veil and loose robe (by sewing together the top shirt and bottom skirt of her school uniform to form a gown-like dress) and abiding with the social code required by her mentors: no dating, no interacting with the opposite sex except for education, health and social purposes, no shaking hands with men, no revealing the face or hands (*aurat*) to men who are not connected to you by blood. The weekly Friday discussions then turned into something more purposeful, with more specific reading materials and a syllabus that prepared the ground for recruitment into the HTI. During this time, Nur and her schoolmates were asked to spread the ideas of the caliphate to their peers and distribute the HTI bulletin, *Al-Islam*, in the school. It was only after reaching this stage that Nur realized she was being recruited into a transnational organization. In retrospect, Nur thinks that she joined HTI because she really believed in the ideas of HTI and had no other reference that countered these views. At that time, she had a



high level of curiosity and interest in improving herself. Her emotional connection with her mentors was also a significant factor in her view.

Yuni joined an Indonesian affiliate of Egypt's *Ikhwanul Muslimin* (Muslim Brotherhood) during her first year of university in Yogyakarta. As a Muslim raised by her Catholic grandmother in a Javanese village, Yuni has memories of going to church every Sunday until the village authorities intervened to put a stop to it. But her upbringing remained multicultural in her young years, reading the Mahabharata and Ramayana and learning about life's values from a diversity of sources, including old Javanese rituals practised by her grandmother. One day, the government's program of creating Qur'an education centres for children came to Yuni's village and required all Muslim kids to take part. Four different religious groups were taught in four different days, including those affiliated with conservative *salafi* groups and the HTI, propagating their respective views of Islam to the village children after school or in the evenings. Consistent with the Javanese syncretic mindset, Yuni and her peers agreed that these different ideas of Islam were all good and no single one can claim to be the best or true. But once Yuni reached university, she had to make a choice on which Islamic student organization to join and decided on KAMMI, a follower of the global Muslim Brotherhood movement, as she knew people in them from their home village. Once in, Yuni rose through the ranks of the organization quickly and became a recruiter for the movement.

Henny considers herself to have carried out the *hijrah* from an unenlightened life to one that serves the Almighty. She grew up in a wealthy family in Pontianak, West Kalimantan, supported by her father's business in shipping. When she was 18 years old, life started to turn badly for her family, when her father married a second wife and then got sentenced to prison due to his business dealings. Aside from feeling let down by her father, the family's financial standing also took a hit. Under these circumstances, Henny decided to commence her *hijrah* mission. This was made possible by her existing engagement with an Islamic humanitarian organization, *Pasukan Amal Soleh Indonesia* (Virtuous Troops of Indonesia) that mobilizes funds and support for orphans in the madrasahs who are being trained to be Qur'an reciters. At 20 years old, Henny herself is a shrewd businesswoman who uses social media extensively. She sees herself as a writer and content creator, an influencer and a founder of online business ventures. She dedicates the three online businesses that she manages to support the work of the humanitarian organization. As part of her *hijrah* journey, Henny decided to become a Qur'an reciter herself in association with a local Islamist mosque. In this phase of her life, she is inspired by the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II (1432–1481), whom she read about in the madrasah's library, and was commonly known as "Mehmed the Conqueror" after achieving victory against the crusades, conquering Constantinople and bringing to an end the Byzantine Empire. According to Henny, Mehmed II (she refers to him as al-Fatih) left behind a prophetic mission still unmet, which is to conquer Rome. In this light, as a single 20-year-old, Henny describes her aspiration in this way:

The Prophet said "Muslims conquer" and so this is the struggle that Muslims must take on. My descendants shall, God willing, be groomed to be the next al-Fatih. [They will be] the next Conqueror. Because Rome has not been conquered.

It is clear from the lives of Nur, Yuni, and Henny that young women have been moved to join Islamist movements whose goals are to transform the world and do so with conviction.

The experiences of Alana, Amanda, Latifah as well as Nur and Yuni provide insight into the high sophistication and deep penetration of the recruitment systems put in place by a range of Islamist organizations and movements. These systems have accessed young girls in high schools in small and large cities. Some have even reached rural communities through government programmes on Qur'an education for children. They have deployed women recruiters who not only bring Islamist ideas to these girls but also befriend them to build strong emotional bonding. As the stories above demonstrate, the girls who were recruited were bright, thirsty for new knowledge and experience, and trusting of those who show interest in their lives and aspirations. Most of these young women felt excited and proud to be engaging in political agendas and linked to global struggles.

Two more women, Dewi and Rima, show yet another way in which women become involved with these movements, namely through marriage.

Dewi, who had spent her years after elementary school in *pesantren* (madrasah) communities, sought out student organizations to join upon being admitted to one of the top Islamic universities in the country. After observing almost ten different options, she finally made her choice, *Lembaga Dakwah Kampus* (Campus Da'wah Organization), because it was, in her words, very contemporary, promoting Islamic viewpoints while staying modern and contextual, with a cool and youthful image. She considered those who joined this organization to be young preachers of Islam with high spirituality, integrity and a professional ethos. She continued on to join other Islamist organizations, such as KAMMI (affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood), and later became a cadre of the Islamist political party, *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* or PKS (Prosperous Justice Party). As part of the convention in these Islamist communities, the business of marriage is arranged by the officials of the movement. So, when she was ready to marry, Dewi asked the assistance of her mentor or *murabby* to find a husband. She received the CV of a candidate and met him via cellphone, and after six months and with the approval of his *murabby*, they set out to marry. It was months after their marriage that Dewi found out her husband was a member of *Jamaat Tabligh*, which is a militant Islamist organization originating from South Asia to recreate the society in accordance to the era of the Prophet Mohammad. As his wife, Dewi was required to wear the *niqab* (head and face covering), read the *Jamaat's* publications and socialize with other *Jamaat Tabligh* wives.

Rima grew up in Tamanjeka, a hamlet at the foot of Poso's mountain range which is renowned in the Indonesian national imagination as the home ground of Central Sulawesi's jihadi terrorists. The label stuck after an incident in 2012 in which two policemen were kidnapped and killed in this hamlet by the *Mujahiddin Indonesia Timur* (Eastern Indonesia Mujahiddin) or also known as MIT, an armed Islamist group that declared its allegiance to ISIS in 2014. Rima, who lived with her parents in Tamanjeka, was married off at 15 years of age to a local religious preacher (*ustad*) and community leader. One day, when asked to choose between marriage or education, she chose marriage as she did not see any real prospect in further education given that her schooling thus far had been too disrupted by inter-religious conflict. Once married, Rima was required to wear a



*cadar* (face cover) in addition to her long veil when leaving the house, and not allowed to meet any of her husband's male guests at the house. She was also no longer allowed to wear her usual pants when working in the field as this was considered un-Islamic. In her 20 years of marriage, with six children, Rima served as an obedient wife to her husband. One day in August 2021, on his way to Poso from their village, Rima's husband was arrested by the national police's special forces on terrorism, named *Detasemen 88*. She found out later that he had confessed to being a member of the *Jemaah Islamiyah*, an Islamist group that claimed responsibility to several bombings, including the Bali Bombing of 2002, and is noted to be an affiliate of Al-Qaeda to establish an Islamic caliphate in Southeast Asia. She never knew.

The two women whose husbands were active members of Islamist movements didn't know about their respective husbands' political activities. Dewi found out after several months of marriage, while Rima did not know even after two decades of marriage. Both had to change the way they dressed and interacted in society as a requirement from their husbands and built a family life following the ideological precepts of their husbands.

## Inside

The experiences of these young women who joined Islamist movements provide a glimpse of the internal systems used by these various organizations.

Through the stories shared by Alana and Amanda, the Indonesian Islamic State (IIS) held monthly gatherings with its members. Alana was put in a group of six peers under the leadership of a mentor. These monthly gatherings were organized geographically by zones, generationally by age, and segregated by gender. When Alana married, she was moved from a group of single women to one among married women. There is a hierarchy of command in the IIS that is seven layers deep, according to Amanda, and no one knew their leaders beyond their particular group or cell. Over time, Alana learned that there were two branches of the IIS movement. One branch supports violence as a strategy along the same line as ISIS. The other branch is "softer" and operates in the field of education and social welfare to prepare its members to join the government civil service and rise up the policy-making levels.

As part of the monthly gatherings among IIS members, there would be lectures by different leaders in the movement, followed by discussions, in each monthly gathering. They were given required readings on the history of Islam and of the IIS. According to Amanda's telling, those who came to give these lectures came from a wide variety of backgrounds, including a religious preacher (*ustad*), a businessman, a driver, and a repairman.

Each IIS member was expected to bring in recruits. Alana received guidance from her mentor about how to obtain recruits. She was told that before inviting people into the movement, she must first befriend the person and get to know her parents and family members. Each step in the process was to be reported back to her mentor. In the case of Amanda, she was such a high-

performing recruiter, at one point bringing in 11 new members within a month, that she was named “Fatimah The General.”

Aside from getting new recruits, IIS members were required to pay dues and make other financial contributions to the Islamic State. For Alana, this meant selling calendars and halal meat. Male members were in charge of these income-generating activities while female members were tasked with selling these products. Sales targets had to be met, which created a competitive atmosphere across the different groups. For Alana, meeting the sales target meant going door-to-door and even travelling to another city while leaving her young children behind with a heavy heart. She saw how other young mothers locked their children at home while they went out to meet the sales target set by their mentors. Meanwhile, Amanda was tasked with collecting dues from IIS members who were factory labourers and workers living in poor, flood-prone urban settlements.

There were other actions the Islamic state required of the members, as Alana explained, namely spreading hoaxes, inciting riots and theft. Alana recounted her experience spreading news of an impending attack against sellers in a market. She described how she and her peers had to overcome their doubts and convince each other that these acts, including stealing, were justified for the cause of the IIS.

While the IIS is an underground political movement, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI)<sup>18</sup> operated above ground through *dakwah* (proselytizing) to build support for the global Islamic caliphate. As noted above, Nur joined HTI during her second year of high school. When she graduated and entered university, she received what was effectively a transfer letter from her old HTI chapter to the new one, as the university was located in a different city. She was welcomed by the HTI members in the university city and invited to join them in their all-female rented house. Yuni learned that different from the system in her hometown, HTI here had two distinct *dakwah* groups, one for HTI members and mentees from the community at large, such as housewives, doctors, teachers, and students, and another *dakwah* group for university lecturers and student on campus. Within these groups, there is segregation by gender so that a female member is never in the same group as a male member.

For each gathering session, there are weekly targets to be met: the number of people who have been reached through *dakwah*, the progress in reading the required books, and new verses in the Qur’an memorized. Members were also divided into groups of three to four and assigned distinct tasks. The media team was tasked with distributing HTI bulletins, the faculty team was assigned to carry out *dakwah* targeting lecturers, and the opinion team was tasked with attending seminars and other public forums to raise counter-arguments in line with HTI’s viewpoint. These function-based teams had to report their activities in the weekly sessions as a basis for the group to develop their *dakwah* strategy.

Yuni joined KAMMI, a student group affiliated with Egypt’s Ikhwanul Muslimin, during her university years. She quickly rose to the upper echelons of her campus-based organization to become a

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18. Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia was banned by the government in 2017 for being contradictory to the state ideology of Indonesia. At that time, the organization reportedly had a membership of five million people.

member of its governing board. As part of this board, Yuni took part in mapping the development of dakwah activities on campus, identifying potential cadres and those for its blacklist, determining their dakwah strategy on campus and planning events. As part of this student organization, Yuni joined political demonstrations organized by the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) on a variety of issues, such as protesting the banning of the veil for school children, supporting the anti-pornography bill in opposition to women's groups, mobilizing against Presidents Megawati and Abdurrahman Wahid, and campaigning in solidarity for Palestine. Upon Yuni's graduation, she was assigned as a campaigner for the PKS party during the national parliamentary elections. A consistent picture was drawn by Dewi who joined a different student organization in her university but one that is also affiliated with the PKS political party. She witnessed how the party had a chain of command to all levels of education, not just at the university level but down to high school and even pre-kindergarten levels as well.

Henny embraced her notion of an expansionary Islam through her role as a social media influencer. As a woman whose ambition is to have her descendants conquer Rome, she sees women as the pillar of civilization and, as such, must hold a big vision for humanity while supporting their husbands. Having been a lost soul herself, she believes that prayer is her link to God and that consuming *haram* food would risk rejection of her prayers. It is in this light that Henny has initiated the "Indonesian Muslim Culinary" movement which educates the public on *halal* food through online media as well as offline through a network of mosques.

The Islamist movements in which these young women engage, ones which condone violence and those that do not, make high demands for the militancy of their members. However, it does not necessarily mean there was no room for the women to negotiate their personal interests or to deviate from the required norm.

Alana had a personal aspiration of going to the university in Al-Azhar, Egypt, to study Islamic philosophy. While she was directed to enter the field of mathematics by her IIS mentor, she still held on to her own goal. Alana had been enrolled in an intensive course that helped IIS members to get accepted at the top secular universities in the country. She purposely failed her test here to avoid going to IIS's chosen university for her and secretly applied to an Islamic university to which she was accepted. Alana also managed to avoid entering into an arranged marriage by IIS. She did so by convincing her partner to join IIS with her and arranging things so that the IIS then would marry her to her chosen partner.

Mala, who joined the jihad combatants during the inter-religious conflict in Poso, had her own moment of negotiation. After being trained to be the first female suicide bomber in Indonesia, Mala went through three days of intense discussion with the leader on the doctrine of martyrdom (*mati syahid*). The night before the scheduled date for her suicide bomb, after inspecting the vest she was to wear and knowing that the bomb could kill more than 30 people, she asked what was the target. When she found out that a church was her target, she raised a question for which she felt did not provide a satisfactory answer. She had asked for a verse in the Qur'an that supported her killing people in church. She was remembering her adopted mother who was a Christian

and treated her well. She had memories as a young girl helping with Sunday church activities in the community. Finally, at 4 a.m., after three nights of intensive discussion with her leader, she concluded that she was not convinced and decided to decline from executing her suicide bombing. Alternatively, she joined a battle as a combatant, using large ammunition (20 kilograms in weight), to win back a village from their enemy.

## Exit

All except one, Henny in West Kalimantan, of the women who shared their stories eventually decided to leave the Islamist movement they had joined. There are three circumstances under which these decisions were made: the discovery of internal contradictions, irreconcilable discrepancies with empirical reality, and exposure to alternative paradigms. These circumstances are not mutually exclusive and, in certain cases, present themselves in combination.

## Discovery of internal contradictions

Amanda, who earned the title of “Fatimah The General” in the Indonesian Islamic State (IIS), reached a state of anger upon carrying out her task of collecting member dues among the urban poor. She spent nights sleeping on the floor in homes without furniture and witnessed the hungry and malnourished children of the IIS members who had given up whatever money they had to the Islamic State. She came to believe that something was wrong with the movement. On campus, she found other IIS members who disclosed more problems from within the movement and who shared their doubts and misgivings. After five years in the IIS, Amanda finally decided that she must leave the movement.

For Alana, it took 17 years before she decided to leave the IIS. The higher she got in the hierarchy, the deeper her engagement with its theological groundings. As a student of Islamic philosophy herself, Alana found shortcomings and contradictions in the IIS’ theology. Her understanding of Islam had been developing independently also in relation to her engagement with a progressive civil society organization that exposed her to notions of pluralism and gender equality within Islamic thought. Prior to this, she did receive lectures in her university on gender equality, but she merely considered this information, not conviction. Her difficulty in leaving the movement was fear of losing her social support system and long friendship with her original mentor. Finding community among the progressive movement and convincing her husband to leave the IIS with her made it possible for Alana to take that final step to leave.

Both Amanda and Alana described going through their own versions of self-therapy after leaving IIS. Amanda did so by spending months going hiking in the mountains, joining theatre groups and sleeping in the streets, while Alana adopted a method called the “spiritual emotional freedom technique.”

Nur, who joined Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) after three years of being in-training, made her decision to leave only two months into being a full-fledged member. She had disagreement with

its strategy as well as personal reasons. Being a full-fledged member of HTI, Nur was required to lead weekly dakwah activities of her own as well as to serve as a speaker in public prayer sessions. She felt ill-prepared for this role and was concerned that she was asked to speak on an issue on which she had no expertise (i.e., the economy). She came to see HTI's dakwah activities to have an undue element of force as it imposed targets of new recruits that she had to obtain. She also began to question the HTI credibility seeing how members were required to speak on issues with no real expertise in the field. She felt constricted by the behavioural requirements made on her, such as the prohibition to wear short pants and short-sleeved t-shirts even at home in an all-female house, or to ride on motorcycle taxis with male drivers even in emergency situations. On a personal level, Nur felt she had lost her sense of freedom and was not happy. She found that she did not own her own life as it was claimed so fully by HTI. She was concerned that she had no time to explore her hobbies or even to concentrate on her studies. Meanwhile, her chosen field of study, sociology, was giving her access to different ways of understanding the world which, in turn, raised questions about the HTI's ideology.

## Irreconcilable discrepancies with lived reality

Latifah, who left Indonesia with her extended family to build a life in ISIS territory in Syria, returned to her home country after two years in total disillusionment. Having entered the territory in a smuggler's car without headlights, the men and women in the group were separated upon arrival. The men were to go to the education centre while the women were led to a dormitory. In Raqqa, Latifah adjusted to the dirty dormitory where fights among tenants occurred frequently. Their reason for going to Syria was to experience the promises made by ISIS but the realities of life proved to be starkly different. Latifah was shocked to receive marriage proposals from ISIS fighters who wanted an answer within a day. Despite pressures from the dorm tenants that, for women, marriage was jihad, Latifah and her sister refused all the marriage proposals. Accessing free healthcare, the main pull for Latifah's extended family, involved a harrowing trip overland to Mosul in Iraq and an incident of sexual harassment experienced by her aunt. When they were reunited with the male members of the family, Latifah learned that they were forced to go through military training. When they refused, they were imprisoned and declared ineligible for all the free services ISIS provided. Latifah and her family decided to write a letter to the authorities regarding their situation but were advised to stop making requests. They decided to find a way back to Indonesia and, after two failed efforts with fraudulent smugglers, 17 out of the 20 family members who made the trip were finally able to leave the territory. Along the way, the men were put in prison and the women in a refugee camp for two months before they finally made it home.

For Rima, whose husband had admitted to being a long-time member of the Al-Qaeda affiliated *Jemaah Islamiyah*, his imprisonment was a turning point. Since his arrest, Rima was approached by government security forces questioning her on her husband's activities. She found the behaviour of the security forces coming to their hamlet to be overly aggressive. They would search people's homes without advance notice, force her neighbours to squat from morning to sundown, and treat everyone harshly. Rima remembers the head of her hamlet saying that this kind of treatment

would only result in new seeds of radicalism in the community five to ten years down the line. Rima ultimately decided to leave the hamlet so she could begin a new life as a single mother to her six children in a different village where she would grow mushrooms for an income. Since then, she refused to be called “umi,” the Arab equivalent to the Indonesian “ibu” for mother or ma’am, and preferred to identify herself as “Ibu Rima” in her new life.

Yuni’s decision to leave Indonesia’s version of the Muslim Brotherhood student organization (KAMMI) and then political party (Prosperous Justice Party or PKS) had to do with years of questioning that arose from Yuni’s experience growing up in a multi-religious and multi-cultural family and village life. She played around the church on Sundays, read the Mahabharata and Ramayana for pleasure, and took part in the government’s after-school Islamic education programme for children. The village authorities had arranged four different Islamic sects to teach the children in four different days of the week. This memory of diversity planted a seed of constant questioning that followed Yuni throughout her time with KAMMI and PKS. Aware of the multiple Islamist organizations on campus, she was uneasy with each of these organizations’ requirement of total acceptance and obedience from their members. She questioned the view that only one’s organization’s notion of Islam is right and those of others are all wrong and deviant. When she successfully campaigned in support of a PKS parliamentary candidate, she questioned the genuineness of the promises made to the voters. She was disturbed to witness dishonesty in the raw ambition for power. It was in the midst of PKS’ celebration of reaching the top five political parties winning seats in the parliament that Yuni decided to leave the movement altogether and return to her home village.

## Exposure to communities with alternative paradigms

For Nur, Mala, Dewi and Alana, exposure to alternative paradigms played a key role in making their ultimate decision to leave their respective Islamist movements. In Nur’s case, it was her exposure to the field of sociology at the university that opened her eyes to a different way of knowing. Her readings in class made her rethink the concepts introduced to her by Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI). It made her become aware that the HTI did not give her the freedom to explore ideas and think outside the organization. Ultimately, when she became more and more resolute to leave, her professors and classmates helped her find the way out.

In Mala’s case, the post-conflict context in Central Sulawesi brought in a stream of peacebuilding organizations that helped shift her understanding of the inter-religious conflict in her community. As a former combatant who lost her home during the conflict and had to live in an IDP camp, Mala received various trainings on conflict management. In one of these trainings, a speaker presented a political economy perspective on the conflict in Poso. Mala found the data and viewpoint to be consistent with her own observations, including the growing business interests of the security forces, such as illegal logging land grabbing, widespread corruption across the rank and file, and sexual violence against women. She also began to see the outsized influence of jihadis from outside Central Sulawesi and the country, and questioned that some local jihadis may be nurtured by particular elements in the security forces. This total transformation in her way of thinking led

Mala to set up her own organization working on peace and reconciliation at the grassroots level. Dewi, who before her marriage was active in an Islamist student organization affiliated with the Prosperous Justice Party, had early exposure to a Muslim women's rights NGOs since a feminist Muslim activist was as a speaker at her high school. Her connection with these activists continued throughout her life in the Islamist community. She was invited by a Muslim women's rights NGO to participate in a training on reproductive health, for instance, and also joined a research project on Islamic student movements with one Muslim feminist researcher. The frame of thinking originating from these engagements continued to shape her life choices to some degree and at certain moments. When she was a teacher in a *salafi* Islamic boarding school, Dewi applied her knowledge of women's reproductive health with her students by giving a session on sex education and was reprimanded by the school principal for engaging in pornography. Once married to a husband who turned out to be part of Jamaat Tabligh, she initiated some pushback. She successfully gained the support of her father-in-law in convincing his son to move the family to a different city with the intent to disrupt her husband's active engagement with the Jamaat Tabligh. In their new home, she then requested permission from her husband to no longer wear the *niqab* and to start working again to help with the household finances. He agreed to both these requests, though he then rejoined the Jamaat Tabligh. Dewi's capacity to negotiate and navigate her self-interest vis-a-vis her husband still ended with her ultimate exit from the relationship. One day she was asked to give signed permission for her husband to marry a second wife, along with demands to wear the *niqab* again, to limit her work time outside the house from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. only, and to leave the house only when accompanied by a male guardian. She refused to sign this letter and was raped by her husband that same night. He then sued for divorce in court based on a made-up charge and was granted custody over their two children. Dewi's exit from being part of an Islamist movement ended with the dissolution of her marriage.

In Alana's case, she exited the Indonesian Islamic State (IIS) after 17 years of having been a member since she was 17 years old. Even though she had been exposed to progressive ideas about pluralism and gender equality in her course work on campus and in training sessions with local civil society organizations that work within the framework of Islam, she did not leave the IIS because she had a fear of losing her friendships. When she finally left, over her theological and philosophical disagreement with the IIS ideologues, she had to confront her feeling of deep loneliness and fear of abandonment as well as a sense of "spiritual emptiness," in her words. At times she even reacted physically when reminded of her involvement in the movement, her stomach tightening and then vomiting. As she became more involved with the progressive Muslims in the local civil society organizations, she found herself a new community that was so important to her.

For all the women who decided to leave their Islamist communities, the experience was deeply traumatic but also led to a sense of liberation, both of which manifested physically as well as psychologically.



# Gendered journeys and transformations: Navigating power in the political and personal

The life journeys of these nine women illustrate how they fit into the machinations of varying Islamist political movements in Indonesia. The long arm of their recruitment systems reaches out to rural communities and small towns through schools and after-school religious education programs for children. But their main investment has been on campuses among university students. While each woman's story is unique, almost all were moved to follow these movements as an expression of their personal ambition to learn and/or engage with a political cause. Several of the women mentioned the excitement of being able to advance their knowledge of Islam by accessing readings and speakers – something that was not available to them otherwise. Some described feeling pride in being able to speak about contemporary political and economic issues and having the confidence to criticise the secular state. Many were moved by narratives on the victimization of Muslims at the global level, referring to Palestine and Bosnia Herzegovina, and, on this basis, found reason to be part of global Islamist movements. All this was consistently and systematically couched within the fabric of friendship and sisterhood. No other alternative opportunities for engagement with a similar level of cognitive and emotional bonding seem to have existed for these women. For all these empowering benefits, they were willing to accept the terms of engagement, including by accepting that their bodies are a source of ill and thus must be fully covered from head to toe, by following a segregated public life with men, and by accepting that marriage serves the political cause which means relinquishing individual choice in one's marriage partner.

Local context also shapes women's distinct trajectory in their engagements with Islamist movements. In the context of Central Sulawesi, Mala joined armed jihadis as a conscious choice to be an active combatant during a time of inter-religious conflict, while Rima came to follow Islamist social norms as the consequence of the choice of marriage and obedience to her Islamist husband in a social milieu shared with armed Islamists after the inter-religious conflict had died down. Both had consequences for their social positions in society but in the opposite direction.

The militancy of these women in carrying out their Islamist missions, such as in expanding and managing recruits and in implementing acts of political disruption, was empowering but peppered with questioning and doubt, as their telling of their journeys shows. In some cases, the sense of doubt emerged through growing interaction with Muslim progressive movements at the local level whose aim was to contest and counter the Islamist narrative and agenda. These progressive movements present an alternative paradigm within Islam, particularly on gender equality, pluralism and the argument for a secular state. This was experienced by Alana, among others. For Yuni and Mala, the questioning came about from personal memories of living with pluralism, namely of life in multi-religious families and communities during childhood. These doubts and questions shaped the way these women navigated and negotiated their interests within their respective Islamist organizations as well as in their marital and family lives.



Ultimately, except for one who has remained faithful to the Islamist agenda, all these women went through a transformation that was triggered and shaped by events reflecting the interplay of political developments and power dynamics in public and private spheres. For Amanda, for example, the process of transformation occurred as part of her response to Indonesia's moment of political opening and reform in 1998. At this time, Amanda was seeking new readings and found Nawal El-Sadawi's memoir, an icon among feminist Muslims, which impacted her profoundly. In her words,

I found a book with the title "Memoir of a Female Doctor" by Nawal El-Sadawi. This opened a new door for me. The book spoke about women's body [and it resonated with] my own body that had experienced subordination due to the patriarchal culture and even religion. I began to remember that this was in fact my initial line of questioning when I was young and a teenager [which was triggered by] an incident of sexual harassment first experienced by me and my friends.

Reading El-Sadawi's book led her to seeking out more readings from feminists in the Muslim world which brought her to a realization that her main issue was about patriarchy's power over women's bodies, including through religion. She then joined a feminist organization upon completion of her studies. For Yuni, her transformation was in reaction to her critique of electoral politics during the 2004 national parliamentary elections having been an integral part of it at the local level. In seeking an alternative cause for herself, she turned to a cultural reference that was distinctively Indonesian rather than Islamic, namely Kartini, an historical figure from Java who advocated for women's rights in the late 19th century. Upon this orientation, Yuni decided to return to the pluralist community in rural Java and work for the empowerment of women in her village.

Alongside their reconstruction of thought and perception, the transformation of these women also manifested in the way they relate to their bodies and social identity. Dewi marked her departure from her life with her Islamist husband and the start of her new identity by wearing jeans and a top shirt, sports shoes, choosing a simple pashmina as her headscarf and putting on light make-up. She donated all her sharia-compliant clothes as seeing them in her room traumatized her. Rima marked her transformation by refusing the Arabic prefix of "umi" in calling her name. While she criticized the government security forces for taking economic advantage of their operation in Poso, she also expressed her disagreement with the Islamists' movement:

When the law is applied to them, we cannot refuse. Islam can govern but it can also be governed. It can exist under any circumstances. If it is governed, it must obey [the law]. That's the way it is. If it governs, it means non-Muslims need to be safe. Their possessions need to be protected as the property of Muslims. Their blood needs to be protected just like that of Muslims .... When we live in a state with the rule of law, we should follow the law.

All this demonstrates the dynamic interlinking of structural and intimate relations in women's lives and in the choices they make. To return to the research questions, the life stories of the nine women provide some preliminary insights.

What are these young women's perceptions of violent extremism, and what do they consider are its drivers? Upon entry, as young women from rural communities or small towns or cities, those who proceeded to join Islamist movements had no preconceived notions about extremism. They were driven by the simple ambition to learn and engage and empowered by a newly found capacity to speak and act politically. As they went deeper into the movements, and as they rose in their respective segregated hierarchies, they began questioning the movement's ideological constructs and expansionist strategies. It is only after exiting that they may adopt the framing regarding these political movements as extremist.

What is the impact of violent extremism on their lives, including how they have borne its effects? The first impact experienced by these young women was in the relationship with own bodies, given that the way the dress was a primary signal or symbol of their ideology and political standing. They also speak about how their choice of engaging with Islamist ideology influenced their relationships in the family and in social life in general, as this ideology is all-encompassing and requires total obedience. Several women describe how they made compromises as they relinquished autonomy in determining their personhood and social relationships for the sake of gaining a strong sense of belonging in the community and confidence in taking a leadership role in a political movement. What are their sources of vulnerability and strength, including the social movements they have accessed? How have young women participated, resisted, or mobilised against violent extremism? Among the significant insights from the life stories of these women is that, at their first point of entry into Islamist movements, they disclosed an absence of any alternative social or political movements with differing or opposing views that were available to them in their respective hometowns. This absence betrays a weakness in progressive movements and can be seen structurally as a source of vulnerability for young women in rural communities and small towns. Many of the women interviewed described the centrality of the emotional bonding provided by their Islamist sisters/mentors as part of their ideological recruitment. Their interaction with rights-based civil society organizations, which exposed them to an alternative ideology, mostly emerged when they moved to urban centres to obtain higher education. This defining exposure, which would lead to an ideological turnaround, was possible because civil society organizations conduct outreach and engage in relationship-building among conservative and even Islamist communities.

In terms of inter-generational and inter-sectional connections and/or disconnects that influence young women's sense of options, several of the women's stories indicate the importance of their multidirectional connections, both inter-generational and inter-sectional. Speaking to their mothers or even remembering their relationship with their parents or grandparents contributed to their decision to exit their respective Islamist movements. The support systems they build to help them leave these totalitarian organizations include also their professors, classmates, and activists. Despite the restrictive systems and sanctions put in place to preserve the militancy of their members, the intersecting networks and social fabric in a pluralist society were able to continuously challenge the way these young women understood the diversity of options for a meaningful life.

# THE STATE'S ROLE: DISJOINTED AND HALF-HEARTED

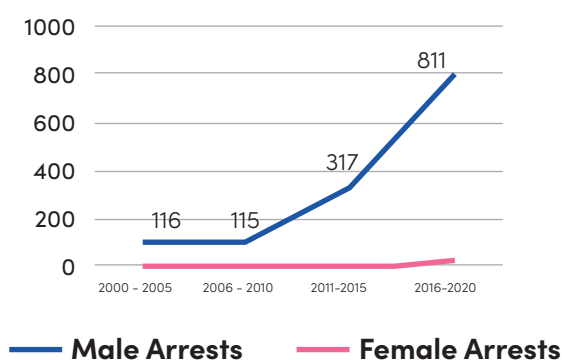
Women experience Islamist extremism as mothers and wives in the family, as members of communities and citizens of the nation. In what ways has the state empowered or disempowered women as they navigate their lives and interests in the face of extremism?

Indonesia's law on anti-terrorism, which covers deradicalization efforts, has no specific recognition of women's specific roles nor the gender dimensions in radicalization and deradicalization. The national body established to address terrorism also has no particular mandate to adopt a gender perspective in its work. The more recent National Action Plan on violent extremism, published in 2021, also does not give recognition to women's role nor to the gendered aspects of countering violent extremism in its main text. The plan's attachment, which lists institutions responsible for particular actions, however, includes the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection as well as the National Commission on Violence Against Women (hereafter, Komnas Perempuan). No elaboration is provided on why and how these two women-focused state institutions are in the plan of action.

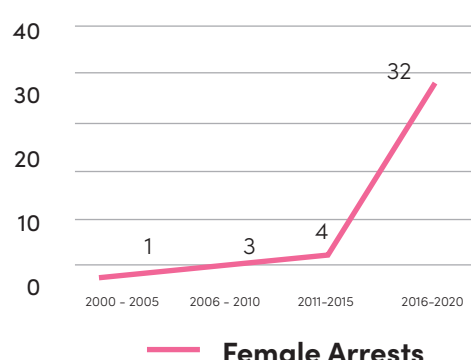
In Central Sulawesi, where there has been a continuous deployment of national security forces to maintain peace and combat terrorism, complaints have been made about sexual exploitation and assault against local women by members of these forces. This is a pattern already reported by Komnas Perempuan, a national institution for women's human rights, in 2008. However, no steps have been taken to hold these officers accountable nor to provide meaningful support for the victims are in place. Despite many reports by Komnas Perempuan on the matter, the gendered impacts from incidents of attacks against minority communities around the country by Islamist groups have also not been addressed in any comprehensive manner by state agencies.

Meanwhile, for women who were arrested under the anti-terrorism law, the government has no specific guidelines for handling them as women in detention. An estimate from 2020 by a policy institute on violent extremism<sup>19</sup> notes that there was a total of 39 women who have been convicted or awaiting trial since 2004 (see graphic below).

**Figure 1: Indonesia's Terrorist Arrests 2000-2020**



**Figure 2: Female Terrorist Arrests 2000-2020**



19. See IPAC, *Extremist Women Behind Bars in Indonesia*, Report No. 68, 21 September 2020.

The basic procedure applied for both male and female inmates includes an orientation session, evaluation at various stages of detention, disciplinary measures, access to visitors, cell phone communications, medical care, and searches.<sup>20</sup> As the number of women arrested jumped around the time of intensive ISIS recruitment, the government was not prepared and simply applied its standard system to them. This included gender-stereotypical approaches to skills development, such as in sewing and cooking, during their rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

Islamists whose aim is to penetrate the system of mainstream social and political institutions have benefitted from government policies framed within the Islamic narrative. The government's promotion of the Sharia economy, for example, benefits those who manifest their hijrah into Islamism in economic terms by moving out from mainstream secular jobs to Islamic entrepreneurship. The national government's unwillingness to repeal local regulations which impose night curfews and Muslim dress for women,<sup>21</sup> despite having the authority and obligation to do so, creates a permissive political environment for Islamist narratives that discriminate against women.

Despite the lack of substantive recognition and comprehensive special measures that address the gender dynamics and impacts of Islamist extremism, there are legal breakthroughs that benefit women in navigating their interests in the face of Islamism. The laws criminalizing domestic violence (2004) and sexual violence (2022), while limited in the conviction record of these cases, raised public awareness of these issues and provided a standard for women within Islamist communities and families in making their respective life decisions. Such is the case with Yuni (see above) whose resolute decision to leave her husband and the Islamist community was finally made after experiencing marital rape. The public debate on the sexual violence bill was very heated, with those for and against conducting their respective political mobilization. As most of the opposition to the bill was framed in religious terms, this gave way to the emergence of a public voice from among feminist Muslims who held some degree of religious authority regarding Islam. As the unique stance of feminist Muslims became a political force, Muslim women in conservative and Islamist contexts were presented with an alternative viewpoint within the Islamic paradigm.

The law on village governance (2014) is another legal product that has been used, mainly by women's rights groups, to secure women's participation in decision-making at the village level, including in villages where the Islamist influence is significant. This is possible due to specific clauses in the law that guarantee women's equal participation in governance processes at the village level. All these laws were products of advocacy efforts by women's rights organizations. While they were not specifically directed at the issue of extremism, they have created new possibilities for women navigating their interests within Islamist families and communities.

The state's enabling impact on women's capacity to navigate their interests in the face of Islamist extremism comes from a patchwork of different and separate policy frameworks, not necessarily focused on the specific issue of violent extremism. On the contrary, straddling the political interests of the security approach and security forces, on one hand, and the economic interests of growth, including through the Sharia economy, the state's response to Islamist extremism has further entrenched women in stereotypical roles, in both Islamist and secular contexts.

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20. Ibid.

21. See Komnas Perempuan, <https://komnasperempuan.go.id/siaran-pers-detail/siaran-pers-komnas-perempuan-kasus-pemaksaan-busana-dengan-identitas-agama-27-januari-2021>

# CLOSING

In addressing Islamist extremism, Indonesian women populated the ideological battlegrounds in which at stake was the identity and purpose of the Indonesian nation: pluralist or Islamist. As demonstrated by the life journeys of the women in this study, these battlegrounds are multiple, exist in parallel, and perpetually evolving. The battlegrounds exist within state bodies as well as in society. Also, they exist not only in the public domain but also in the private sphere: at homes and in the lives of families and decisions about marriage. Even as women comply with public positions of their respective Islamist communities, they do not stop exploring and negotiating their interests even when it diverges or are in opposition to the accepted Islamist conventions. For many whose piety is central to their personhood, the ideological battle is simultaneously political as well as religious. As demonstrated by Alana's journey, the latter involves transforming the way Islam is understood and lived. The state, with its own political and economic interests, is generally not an enabler of women's agency in the context of its project of countering violent extremism and terrorism. The exception derives from legal frameworks established through the demands of the women's movement.

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**The Marriage of State  
Structure with Divisive  
Identitarian Politics:  
Layers of Resistance and  
Sites of Struggle in Sri Lanka**

*by* **SARALA EMMANUEL**

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# INTRODUCTION

AS THIS RESEARCH REPORT WAS BEING WRITTEN, two chilling events took place in the East. The first was a protest in a girl's school in February 2022, Sri Shanmuga Hindu Ladies College in the Trincomalee District, where young girls in their school uniforms and their parents protested against the reappointment of a Muslim teacher in the school. This was an ongoing conflict which had started in 2018, when the teachers and parents of students objected to some teachers coming to school in abaya.<sup>1</sup> Veteran Trincomalee parliamentarian and leader of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) R. Sampanthan had also urged education authorities to resolve the matter in a way that "respects the traditional dress code followed in the [said] school" and ensure "no community introduces new ways of dressing."<sup>2</sup>

In June 2022, when two adult women, one Indian and one Sri Lankan, were arrested based on a complaint by the father of the Sri Lankan woman, for desiring to get married to one another. The Sri Lankan woman, aged 19, was from a Muslim village. The news went "viral" on Tamil language social media. Even though the Akkaraipattu Magistrate, M.H.M Hamsa, released the Indian woman, the Sri Lankan adult woman was sent to a safe house with her one-and-a-half-year-old child, under the custody of Probation Services.<sup>3</sup> According to a news report, this was for the "safety" of the woman.<sup>4</sup>

This research report captures women's experiences in negotiating patriarchal, heteronormative, racist practices in their everyday lives. The Muslim teacher who was violently denied from taking on her work in a government school, because she wore an abaya, to the two women who were violently separated through the use of legal processes, are among the case studies in this report that highlight diverse experiences of women in Sri Lanka. Often, family structures, state institutions, political actors, and even the law are intertwined and execute oppressive, restrictive, and often violent actions upon women's lives.

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1. Rameez, along with three other teachers, initially filed a complaint with the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) on May 21, 2018, stating that they had been prohibited from wearing the abaya by the school's management committee which is headed by the principal. On February 2, 2019, the HRCSL, following an investigation into the complaint, recommended that the complainants be allowed to wear the dress of their choice (in this case, the abaya) to resume their duties and to continue their work without hindrance or harassment. However, allegations are levelled at the school for not implementing this HRCSL recommendation. Although three of the initial complainants have now accepted transfers elsewhere, Rameez decided to file a writ application at the Court of Appeal in 2021, requesting the school to implement the HRCSL recommendation. The case was called up for support in November 2021. Rameez was asked to report to duty on February 2, through a letter sent to her by the Education Ministry, which is when this incident occurred. <https://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/75943>; <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/fear-of-the-abaya/article61827761.ece>; <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2018/7/14/hindu-group-protests-against-muslim-teachers-wearing-abaya>

2. Ibid.

3. Probation and Child Care Services only have jurisdiction to handle cases related to children. However, this woman was handed over to the probation services by the courts stating this was for the wellbeing of her child.

4. <https://www.themorning.lk/indo-sl-lesbian-couple-seeking-matrimony-released/>; <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/220626/news/indo-lanka-lesbian-love-couple-held-487294.html>; [https://ibctamil.com/article/indian-women-release-court-sri-lanka-1656375047?itm\\_source=parsely-api](https://ibctamil.com/article/indian-women-release-court-sri-lanka-1656375047?itm_source=parsely-api)

The research aims to develop new grounded knowledge on violent extremism from a gender perspective with a purpose to shift the narrative away from one of “counter-terrorism” to that of the lived experiences of women and their communities, to contribute to developing local pathways for change. Towards this end, the objective of the research was to highlight violent extremism and its gendered dimensions, particularly from the perspective of young women. From the insights derived from this, we hope to develop policy directives for national and international intervention and to strengthen women’s leadership locally with particular reference to young women.

In the inception workshop for this research project, we decided not to use terms such as “violent extremism” for many reasons. First, this term emerged from global discourses of counter-terrorism and had not emerged out of the local realities of the research sites. The term did not even exist in local languages. Even though we did not directly use such terms, women interviewed for this research, reflected on different aspects of “violent extremism” as it was broadly understood. These reflections were based on the one hand, on their own experiences of bodily integrity, sexuality, sexual control, motherhood, sexual/domestic violence, autonomy and choice; as well as what they had come across through media and public discourses. All those interviewed identified moments in their lives when they had faced violence, oppression, and patriarchal control; and for some women these moments epitomized “violent extremism” and for others they made sense of these moments as everyday patriarchy.

The tentative framing we used was exploring women’s everyday negotiations within contemporary political violence, capturing gendered experiences and focusing on specific actors including the state, media institutions, legal authorities, education institutions, armed militant groups, religious reformist groups, and decision-makers within the home. This research report, therefore, captures women’s experiences following the Easter attacks in April 2019 and the violence unleashed on Muslim communities thereafter, in different parts of Sri Lanka.

Multiple studies have documented the increase in anti-minority sentiment, fuelled by rising Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and extremism in the aftermath of the war that ended in 2009.<sup>5</sup> There has been a number of attacks on minority places of worship including Hindu, Christian, and Islamic sites. Intimidation, surveillance, legal restrictions, and hate speech against minority religions and large-scale religious riots against the Muslim community have been commonplace for more than a decade.<sup>6</sup> In most documented cases there has been state involvement, overtly or covertly, in instances of violence. This has taken the form of inaction when Muslims have called the police for protection during anti-Muslim riots and of Sinhala senior government officials posting anti-Muslim messages on their Facebook accounts.<sup>7</sup>

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5. Jayantha de Almeida Guneratne, Kishali Pinto-Jayawardena, Radika Guneratne (2013), *Not This Good Earth: The Right to Land, Displaced Persons and the Law in Sri Lanka*, Law and Society Trust; Verite Research and NCEASL (2020), *Prejudice and Patronage: An Analysis of Incidents of Violence Against Christians, Muslims and Hindus in Sri Lanka*, Minormatters; Verite Research (2021), *Inaction and Impunity: Incidents of Religious Violence Targeting Christians, Muslims and Hindus*, NCEASL; Gehan Gunetilleke, (2018), *The Constitutional Practice of Ethno-religious Violence in Sri Lanka*, *Asian Journal of Comparative Law* 13; Gehan Gunetilleke (2018), *The Chronic and Entrenched: Ethno-religious Violence in Sri Lanka*, *Equitas and ICES*, p.70.

6. Guneratne et al., 2013 quoted in Samuel (2021).

7. Ria Samuel (2021); Ambika Satkunanathan (2021).

The powerful emergence of “Sinhala-Buddhist militant groups” such as Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Ravana Balaya, and Mahason Balakaya has fuelled hate speech, intimidation, and violence particularly against the Muslim community.<sup>8</sup> Gunetilleke (2021) identifies the cross fertilization of ideas among militant Buddhist groups in Sri Lanka and Myanmar as shaping the majoritarian ideology in Sri Lanka. For example, in October 2014, BBS and 969, a militant group from Myanmar, signed a memorandum of understanding, following the visit from the 969 leader U Wirathu to Colombo. Gunetilleke (2021), also highlights the influence of Chinese counter-terrorism strategies, particularly in relation to “re-education camps” for the Uighur community, which showed similarities in the Prevention of Terrorism (de-radicalisation from holding violent extremist religious ideology) Regulation No. 1 of 2021, introduced by the Sri Lankan government<sup>9</sup> in the aftermath of the Easter attacks in 2019.

Key mainstream Buddhist institutions in Sri Lanka encouraged violence against Muslim communities using extremist arguments that are in effect about attacking women’s bodily integrity as a way of “protecting the race.” One such sermon was given by chief prelate of the Asgiriya Chapter of Buddhism Warakagoda Sri Gnanarathana on June 15, 2019 and reported in the media a few days later. As per media reports, the chief prelate called for a boycott of all Muslim-owned businesses, claiming that they were working to “sterilise” the Sinhala population. He said:

Don’t buy from those shops. The young people who ate from those shops, I think, will not be able to have/lose their children. You should know this. Don’t eat or drink from Muslim shops. Traitors who have destroyed this country shouldn’t be allowed to live in peace. I won’t tell you to stone them to death, but that’s what should be done.<sup>10</sup>

Women’s everyday experiences in Sri Lanka, must be placed in the broader context of systemic prejudice in the laws and policies of the state. This prejudice which primarily targets minorities in Sri Lanka has a history which spans several decades. These laws have had a wide range of impacts, including discrimination based on religion and ethnic identities, targeting of terror laws, land dispossession, control of women’s dress and bodies, and discriminatory health regulations in the COVID-19 response of the state.

In 1956, the SWRD Bandaranaike coalition came into power with the rhetoric of victimization of Buddhists and the need for a stronger Buddhist nation. Bandaranaike commissioned a report by the Buddhist Commission which was called “Betrayal of Buddhism.” By 1972, Article Six of the Constitution gave Buddhism the “foremost place” in the Constitution. Buddhist nationalism became strong in the political sphere. In 2004 and 2008 there were attempts to introduce anti-conversion laws in response to allegations of unethical conversions. In 2008, the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs issued a circular demanding that all new constructions of places of worship should obtain approval from the said Ministry. This led to state authorities cracking down on Christian churches and Mosques (Samuel, 2021).

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8. Gunetilleke (2021).

9. Prevention of Terrorism (De-radicalisation from holding violent extremist religious ideology) Regulation No. 1, of 2021 – Gazette Extraordinary No. 2218/68 of March 12, 2021.

10. <https://thewire.in/south-asia/sri-lanka-finance-minister-protests-anti-muslim-remarks-of-top-buddhist-monk>

Draconian laws such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act has been used disproportionately against the Tamil minority and after the Easter attacks, against the Muslim minority. The PTA has also been used as a weapon to intimidate, threaten, and stifle dissent, media freedom, and civil society activities, especially in the Tamil majority North as well as the East of the country, including in the guise of countering terrorism financing (Fonseka, 2021; Satkunanathan, 2021).<sup>11</sup>

Gunetilleke (2021) has noted that even the ICCPR Act of 2007 has only been used against religious and ethnic minorities and against those who have had dissenting views. Furthermore, not a single individual who has incited violence against minority communities has been convicted under the Act.

In terms of the Judiciary, quoting a study by Verite Research,<sup>12</sup> Samuel (2021) further notes that there is a bias against minority religious freedoms, including failure to expand and promote religious freedoms as well as seeing any attempt to propagate religion in Sri Lanka as a threat to the socio-cultural dominance of Buddhism, for example by denying three Christian organisations to be registered.

According to the People's Land Commission Report (2021), in terms of land dispossession, often forest and wildlife conservation regulations as well as archaeological conservation laws have been used, particularly targeting minority communities.

"The sudden and arbitrary demarcation of privately-owned lands as forest land for wildlife conservation or archaeological sites in different parts of the country becomes ethnically charged when the lands are acquired only from minority communities. Privileging a discourse of environmental protection or archaeological conservation based on ethnicity often results in the dispossession of minority communities. Such cases were brought to the notice of the Commission in areas like Mullaitivu where the minority Muslims were deprived of their land. Similar complaints were brought by communities in Wilpattu and in Trincomalee. In Kokuthoduwai (Mullaitivu) a Tamil community that was displaced during the war found that upon their return in 2012, their agricultural lands had been designated as a hazardous area due to mines. These lands were subsequently acquired by the Forest Department. When the Forest Department relinquished ownership of 25 acres of this land they were then transferred to a Sinhalese person. This particular Tamil community's ability to contest this situation has been limited due to the loss of documents of ownership (even at the AGA office) due to the war and the tsunami."

Using the Town and Country Planning Ordinance and the Urban Development Authority Law, areas of land are declared as sacred even though neither of the laws define what is "sacred." In some cases, areas of land are declared as archaeological reserves or protected monuments under the Antiquities Act. However, these acts are rarely used to protect histories of minorities. In the post-war context, the military worked along with the Urban Development Authority (UDA) to alienate minority communities from their land (Secretariat for Muslims, 2015). One of the recent examples of this is

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11. <https://colombogazette.com/2021/10/27/us-congress-human-rights-commission-discusses-sri-lankas-pta/>

12. [https://books.google.lk/books/about/Judicial\\_Responses\\_to\\_Religious\\_Freedom.html?id=elkmtAEACAAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.lk/books/about/Judicial_Responses_to_Religious_Freedom.html?id=elkmtAEACAAJ&redir_esc=y)

in 2021, in Kurundumalai, Mulaitheevu where Vidura Wickremanayaka, Sri Lanka's state minister for "national heritage," accompanied by army soldiers and archaeology department officers, led an event at Kurunthoormalai in which a new Buddha statue was placed and consecrated at the site of the Athi Aiyandar temple. This was done in spite of a court order halting any activities on the ancient site.<sup>13</sup>

In the COVID-19 context, on April 11, 2020, The Minister of Health and Indigenous Medical Services issued the Regulation 61A under the Quarantine and Prevention of Diseases Ordinance of 1897 that the corpse of a person who has died or is suspected to have died of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) shall be cremated (Gunetilleke, 2020).

Apart from the above, there have been legal regulations that have directly targeted women. A week after the Easter attacks, new emergency regulations were passed. Regulation 32A provided: "No person shall wear in any public place any garment, clothing or such other material concealing the full face which will in any manner cause any hindrance to the identification of a person." Consequently women wearing the Niqab were harassed and prohibited from entry to public buildings and public transport.

At the inception workshop for this research project, the research teams shared their own contexts and experiences in Indonesia, India, and Sri Lanka. Some of the key reflections noted that within the women's movement and in feminist discourse there are different understandings of how to deal with "violent extremism" and "counter-terrorism" and its underlying politics. Women are often prevented from taking action when counter-terrorism strategies are employed against them and their communities. The space for women's autonomous work is restricted. In the context of Asia, where patriarchy severely constrains women's behaviour, there is a special need to have a more nuanced understanding of these dynamics and compulsions. For this, there is a need to understand violent extremism from the perspective of women's lived experiences in local contexts.

There are strong feminist articulations that women's bodies, honour, and sexuality are the ground on which socio-economic and political battles are acted out.<sup>14</sup> The war years in Sri Lanka were no exception in this regard.<sup>15</sup> This research is based on this body of literature, which highlights that women's experiences, everyday negotiations and interactions – in homes, on the street, at

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13. <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sri-lankan-minister-leads-buddhist-landgrab-tamil-temple>

14. Lata Mani, Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India, *Cultural Critique*, No. 7, 1987, pp. 119–56. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354153>, Accessed October 7, 2022; Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin (1998), *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, Kali for Women, New Delhi; Urvashi Butalia (1998); *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. Penguin Books India

15. Malathi de Alwis (2002), The Changing Role of Women in Sri Lankan Society, *Social Research*, Vol. 69, No. 3, 2002, pp. 675–91. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40971569>, Accessed October 7, 2022; S. Maunaguru, (1995), Gendering Tamil Nationalism: The Construction of 'Woman' in Projects of Protest and Control, in Pradeep Jeganathan and Qadri Ismail (eds) *Unmaking the Nation: The Politics of Identity and History in Modern Sri Lanka*, Social Scientists Association, Colombo; N. De Mel (2001), *Women and the Nation's Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka*, Kali for Women New Delhi; Sarala Emmanuel (2006), *Dealing with women's militancy: an analysis of feminist discourses from Sri Lanka*, Social Policy Analysis and Research Centre (SPARC), Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo in collaboration with Berghof Foundation for Peace Studies, Colombo; Ambika Satkunanathan, (2012), *Whose Nation? Power, Agency, Gender and Tamil Nationalism*, in Asanka Welikala (ed) *Sri Lankan Republic at 40: Reflections on Constitutional History, Theory and Practice*, Centre for Policy Alternatives, Colombo, <http://constitutionalreforms.org/the-sri-lankan-republic-at-40/>

workplaces, in political spaces, during wars and violence – are all related to the control of sexuality and reproduction including economic reproduction.

### **Following from this, below are the overarching questions of this project**

*How have young women experienced and navigated the forces of violent extremism in their lives, personally and in relation to marriage, family, community, and nation?*

### **The specific questions further guiding the research**

*What are the pathways in which violent extremism developed and spread? What are its means and milestones at the national and local levels? How are they linked to previous or existing conflicts?*

*What are young women's perceptions of violent extremism, and what do they consider are its drivers? What is the impact of violent extremism on their lives, including how they have borne its effects? What are their sources of vulnerability and strength, including the social movements they have accessed?*

*How have young women participated in, resisted, or mobilized against violent extremism? Are there inter-generational and cross-sectional connections and/or disconnects that influence their sense of options?*

*In what ways has the state empowered and/or disempowered these women who are dealing with violent extremism in their daily lives?*

In this research, the case studies are anchored in the Easter attacks and its aftermath to ensure interviews are rooted in a particular timeframe. However, we explore life stories before and after this time period.

On April 21, 2019, Easter Sunday, there were explosions in three churches and three hotels which killed 290 persons and injured more than 500. The churches attacked were St. Anthony's at Kochchikade in Colombo, St Sebastian's at Katuwapitiya in Negombo and the Zion Church in Batticaloa. These attacks were organized and carried out by two small groups called National Thawheedh Jamaath and Jaamiyathul Millathu Ibrahim (Gunasigham, 2019). Eight men and one woman detonated bombs killing themselves and others. Global discourse and national media discourse focused on how these were close family networks.<sup>16</sup> The locations we chose for the field work of this research – Negombo, Batticaloa and Kurunegala – were reeling from the impact of the violence and the attacks against Muslims that followed.

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16. Anbarasan Ethirajan, Sri Lanka attacks: The family networks behind the bombings, BBC, May 11, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48218907>; Gunasingham, A. (2019). Sri Lanka Attacks: An Analysis of the Aftermath. Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses, 11(6), 8–13. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26662255T>



# Methodology

The local-level empirical research consisted of the selection of three geographical sites and a collection of life stories of women from each site. The three research sites – Negombo in the Western Province, Batticaloa in the Eastern Province and Kurunegala in the North-Western Province – were chosen to capture a diversity of women’s experiences. All interviews have as their background one or more of the following: the impact of Sinhala Buddhist extremist mobilizations, war histories of both women from army families and women who were former militants, history of JVP<sup>17</sup> violence, history of Tamil-Muslim conflicts, and the direct impact of the Easter attacks and its aftermath. Another important consideration in choosing field sites was the presence of trusted local women’s groups with in-depth knowledge of the local context who can organize and be part of the research process. This is crucial as the broader political context was extremely volatile and there was overbearing suspicion and tensions in the local context.

Even though work on the Sri Lanka case studies continued during the COVID-19 crisis, fieldwork was often disrupted. It was with great risk and care that the team carried out the fieldwork. Due to many months of lockdowns the field work was delayed several times in 2021.

One of the key objectives of the research was to work with community-level women leaders, as research assistants. We hoped to build critical insights and networks across locations as part of this research, in order to create sustained connections across historically divided communities. We worked with two young researchers in Batticaloa and Negombo who were also activists. They were later part of the “young researchers’ workshop” (described below).

Women from different communities in each location were interviewed by the research team. Some had lost friends in the Easter attacks. Others had faced direct violence in the aftermath, while some had been part of racist propaganda and violence. The objective was to capture different class and caste experiences. Women who were interviewed were involved in different kinds of work such as sex work, fishing, business, teaching, politics, social activism and religious work. The women who were interviewed were selected based on criteria developed in the inception workshop involving the full research teams from Indonesia, India, and Sri Lanka. With the experienced suggestions of community-based women activists, 1. Women who had directly witnessed or experienced violence, and who responded and intervened to support victims, in the post-Easter attacks, 2. Women who were part of groups and discourses which were anti-Muslim and perpetuating hate speech, 3. Women who can provide specific experiences of marginalization based on class, work, ethnic identity and gender, 4. Women who were from different generations were selected.

In total 50 people were interviewed, either individually or as focus groups in the three locations. The interviews followed a loose structure, a story-telling intimate format, and included questions that explored women’s life stories. This methodology was important to build trust with the women interviewed and to broach sensitive conversations as explained in the ethical considerations section

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17. Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People’s Liberation Front), a Marxist-Leninist Communist Party and a former armed resistance group.

below. Fifteen interviews were carried out in Negombo, twenty-one in Kurunegala, and fourteen in Batticaloa. Some of the interviews were with key stakeholders who knew the historical socio-economic context of the area, were civil society actors and knew the history of movements of resistance and/or response during the violence. We also conducted interviews to gain a sense of the broader socio-political and economic backgrounds of the districts. The interviews were then juxtaposed with secondary literature including publications, media reports, and social media content.

The interviews with women in Negombo were completed over zoom with the local researcher Kumari, sometimes meeting the interviewees in person. The interviews were conducted in a manner that captures the inter-generational changes in terms of identities/women's experiences as well as diverse cultural and social norms based on ethnic identities. We specifically explored how women's experiences changed after the Easter attacks as one of the churches that were attacked was in Negombo.

In Kurunegala, in the North-Western (Wayamba) Province, the interviews were conducted in person through a field visit and several in-depth case studies with women from Muslim and Sinhala Buddhist communities were carried out. There was widespread communal violence against the Muslim communities in the Wayamba Province where Kurunegala is situated.

The research team also held focus group discussions with activists – men and women separately – to explore the historical narratives around how diverse communities had co-existed, focusing on social, cultural as well as economic power struggles and changes.

The interviews in the Batticaloa district, in the Eastern Province, where also a church had been attacked, were conducted in person with a young research assistant. Along with this, some of the interviews were conducted over zoom. Batticaloa, situated in the East of Sri Lanka, also held long histories of war and communal violence and the interviews captured these as experienced by women as well.

## Ethical considerations

From the very outset, it was clear that the research process was going to be extremely sensitive. There was a clear need to build trust to have honest conversations. Therefore, as mentioned above, we identified local activists to be research assistants and worked through networks established by long-standing women's organisations.

As the research progressed, we documented many other ethical issues faced by the field researchers. As a result, we decided to have a workshop with the young researchers from both Indonesia and Sri Lanka, to be able to share their experiences of doing research in divided communities. The workshop was conducted online over two sessions across multiple languages of Bahasa, Tamil, Sinhala and English. In small groups, researchers discussed strategies for access, lessons on building trust, and support needed when ethical challenges come up.

Researchers shared their challenges in “othering” those who they interviewed, in other words, going into interviews not considering their own positionality. Others shared the challenges of being seen as part of the oppressor community. Sometimes, the stories were heard for the first time and researchers were left with guilt as the violence and oppression happened in the name of one’s own religion/ethnicity. They spoke of the importance of recognizing one’s own positionality in the field.<sup>18</sup> When there was very little everyday interaction across divided communities, it became hard to do this kind of research. Sometimes when movements were banned from functioning it was difficult to connect with women. Also, using words such as extremism or terrorism was unhelpful and made women defensive, thus making it harder for researchers to build trust. Researchers spoke of their experiences of sharing food and slowly building friendships as important when carrying out sensitive research. Food, often a fraught terrain where hatred and distrust are expressed, became a way to establish trust for our researchers. Some researchers had to listen to friends who spoke of their involvement in movements which held opposing views to that of the researcher herself. They had to practice how to listen empathetically and with a critical mind.

Sometimes, researchers met women who were part of movements with racist ideologies, and couldn’t reveal the whole truth about the objective of the research. In two of the highly sensitive cases in Sri Lanka, one in Kurunegala and another in Batticaloa, we could not publicly reveal that we were conducting this research. It was only possible to access the women involved, through community-based women activists who already had a relationship with them. In Batticaloa, when meeting some of the Tamil women, Sameera, our researcher who is of the Islamic faith and visibly looks so, could not come. This would have added tension to the interviews and severely impacted them. Just her presence in the village would have been observed and questioned. As this became an insurmountable ethical challenge for the research, the information gathered from these two visits has not been directly used in the research report.

The learnings with regard to ethical challenges while doing research for this report, in itself yielded profound lessons on the subject matter of this work. The existing mistrust and the hindrances to open and free conversations across communities experienced by the researchers is a microcosm of the realities in these places. These realities in turn are a stark indicator of the impact of contemporary political violence or what may be called “violent extremism” on these places and people.

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18. A. Appadurai (1988), Introduction: Place and voice in anthropological theory. *Cultural Anthropology*, 3(1), 16-20; Richa Nagar (2014), Reflexivity, Positionality, and Languages of Collaboration in Feminist Fieldwork, in *Muddying the Waters: Coauthoring Feminisms across Scholarship and Activism*, University of Illinois Press.

## CASE STUDY

# BATTICALOA

This section is drawn from interviews with five Muslim women born in the 1970/80s, one Muslim woman born in the 1950s, and one Tamil woman who was a former militant and a child soldier in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). We also interviewed different actors who were involved in the incident of a young Tamil woman who decided to convert to Islam. All names used in this section have been changed apart from instances where the person has been already named in public media, or it has been taken from published material.

Through this incident we hoped to understand how a young woman tried to navigate family, community, and institutions of the law/religion to assert her will. We also learnt that this process failed her. As the quote below illustrates, identity formations continued to be dynamic processes, and had specific impacts on women's lives.

*“Islamic consciousness is now closely linked to our identity. Arabic has become our language that we must learn.”*

- Kamina, 2020

The consolidation of identity categories such as Sinhala, Tamil, and Moor took place primarily during the British colonial rule, with processes such as the census as well as the political representative structures in the colonial and post-colonial state.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the post-colonial nation state of Sri Lanka emerged with tensions between the majority Sinhala Buddhist political powers and the minority political aspirations of the Tamils and the Muslims. Tamil nationalist aspirations and later armed struggle were rooted in the Hindu revivalist constructions of Arumuga Navalar in the 1950s and 1960s. These aspirations are very much connected to the love of the Tamil language and cultural consciousness.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, in 1949, as the new nation was being imagined, close to half-a-million Indian-origin Tamils who had been working in the tea plantations for more than a century in Sri Lanka were disenfranchised and denied citizenship rights.<sup>21</sup> This decision was taken by elites across all ethnicities, motivated by a desire to hold on to power in the emergent nation and oppose any prospect of working-class mobilisation in Sri Lanka.<sup>22</sup> In the subsequent struggle for predominance in the power balance, the initial alliances between the elites of different ethnicities disintegrated when found to be no longer feasible. There were several attempts at negotiating political autonomy and devolution of power to the Northern and Eastern regions of the island which were predominantly populated by Tamil and Muslim communities.<sup>23</sup> However, these political negotiations failed. One of the major development programmes that affected the minority communities involved the massive state land colonization schemes in the 1950s through which landless persons, who were predominantly Sinhala, were given plots of land and thus settled in the North and East.<sup>24</sup> This, along with the passing of the Sinhala Only Act (Official Language Act) in 1956, which made Sinhala the official language of the state,<sup>25</sup> has come to be identified as among the root causes for the growth of several Tamil armed political movements in Sri Lanka. They were diverse but broadly demanded self-determination, including in the form of the separate state of Tamil Eelam.<sup>26</sup>

In terms of land rights and administrative control, both the Tamil and Muslim communities of the East were marginalized. For example, the massive state colonization schemes mentioned above, prioritized giving land and settling Sinhala landless persons over Muslims and Tamils who were landless, who were already living in the region. The Batticaloa district, which had a predominantly Tamil and Muslim population, was carved into two, and a new district, Ampara, was formed in 1961. This, along with the Gal Oya colonization scheme, which was in the Ampara District, changed the population demographics of the East and created a new Sinhala-dominated district. This consolidated state power within Sinhala governance structures.<sup>27</sup>

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19. Nira Wickramasinghe (2006).

20. Ambika Satkunanathan (2012).

21. Rajan Hoole, et al. (1990).

22. Ibid.

23. <http://archive.pov.org/nomoretears/timeline/>; <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/tamils/>; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Origins\\_of\\_the\\_Sri\\_Lankan\\_civil\\_war](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Origins_of_the_Sri_Lankan_civil_war)

24. Rajan Hoole, UTHR(J), Sri Lanka's Colonization Experience: Development or Disaster, <https://uthr.org/Rajan/colonisation.htm>

25. <https://www.himalmag.com/a-tale-of-two-languages/>; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12004081>; <https://www.columbia-telegraph.com/index.php/sinhala-only-its-effects-on-ceylons-legal-tradition/>

26. Emmanuel & Gowthaman (Forthcoming 2022).

27. Macgilvray & Raheem (2007).

Muslims in Sri Lanka, being 9% of the population, were frequently caught between the power struggles of the Majority Sinhala Buddhist and the larger minority of the Tamils. MacGilvray and Raheem (2007) document the political history of post-independence Sri Lanka, where Muslim politicians chose to go with coalition politics with the mainstream Sinhala nationalist political parties, rather than ally with the Federal Party, which was Tamil nationalist. For example, the Muslim politicians, who were mostly from the South, opposed proposals for power sharing by the Tamil political parties, with the District Councils in the 1960s and the District Development Councils in the 1980s and several of the Muslim politicians voted in favour of the Sinhala Only National Language Bill in 1956.

With the loss of faith in Tamil political parties to be able to deliver to the aspirations of Tamils, Tamil youth formed several armed groups by the late 1970s. As Satkunanathan (2012) notes

Following the 1983 pogrom against Tamils and the Sixth Amendment to the 1978 Constitution, which outlawed the advocacy of secession, the ascendancy of the militancy could not be stemmed. The forfeiture of parliamentary seats by Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) MPs who refused to take the new oath of allegiance to the Sri Lankan state under the Sixth Amendment resulted in the militant brand of Tamil nationalism taking control of the struggle for the rights of the community. The rise in violence and the stepping up of terror tactics by the state also led to increased use of violence by the armed groups, and the movements became subordinated to the compulsions of Tamil Resistance in the face of increasing state repression. (p. 622)

One such group was the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Over the war years, the LTTE became one of the most powerful militant groups as they violently eliminated most of the other Tamil militant groups.<sup>28</sup> Since the 1980s, there were some nine attempts at negotiating a political settlement.<sup>29</sup> One of the most significant processes was the Indo-Lanka Peace Agreement signed in 1987 with the mediation of Rajiv Gandhi, the then Indian Prime Minister. However, despite bringing in place some form of provincial administration with limited powers, this not only failed to prevent violence, but also resulted in the further exacerbation of the war with the intervention of the Indian Peace Keeping Force.<sup>30</sup> None of the agreements negotiated was successful in ending the war.

During the war, particularly in the mid-1980s and 1990s, Muslim communities particularly in the North and East were affected by violence and atrocities including massacres and mass eviction from the North. The East has seen Tamil-Muslims riots starting from 1985. Muslim areas were bombed by the Indian Peace Keeping Forces<sup>31</sup> from 1987-90. The LTTE attacked mosques in Kattankudi and Eravur in 1990 and people from 33 Muslim villages were displaced during this period. Muslims have also been implicated in communal violence, massacres and killings as home guards<sup>32</sup> trained by the state military outfits.<sup>33</sup>

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28. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/demons-in-paradise-a-spine-chilling-testimony-to-rebel-violence-in-sri-lanka/articleshow/59825098.cms>; <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/witness/2018/1/31/demons-in-paradise-memories-of-sri-lankas-civil-war>

29. Mathivathana Paramanathan (2007), Peace Negotiations of Sri Lankan Conflict in 2000-2006: The Ceasefire Agreement Facilitated by Norway is at Stake. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:4488/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

30. Rajan Hoole et al. (1990), <https://uthr.org/BP/volume1/Chapter8.htm>

31. The Indian Peace Keeping Forces were deployed in Sri Lanka following the signing of the Indo - Lanka Accord by Rajiv Gandhi, Prime Minister of India and J R Jayewardene, President of Sri Lanka in 1987.

32. Village men trained by the security forces to gather intelligence and act as guards to protect villages from militant attacks.

33. (Haniiffa (2016); Macgilvray & Raheem (2007)).

While Tamil political leaders were articulating self-determination, Muslim political leaders chose to work from within the Sinhala-dominated power structures. Muslims were seen as the good minority by the state as they did not challenge the Sinhala majority state through armed struggle. The Southern Muslim leaders did not relate to the experiences of the Muslims in the North and East. This led to the emergence of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress in the 1980s, based in the East and formed under the leadership of M.H.M. Ashraff. The party was formed on the basis of a collective religious identity to counter the threat of Tamil chauvinism in the North and East.<sup>34</sup>

The political power struggle between the Tamils and Muslims also played out in education institutions. The 1970s saw the establishment of a separate government Muslim schooling system, training of Muslim teachers, and the appointment of Muslim staff as education officers on a proportional quota by the then Education Minister Dr Badiuddin Mahmud. Subjects of Islam and Arabic language were introduced in mainstream education, and the hijab as the uniform for Muslim girls was introduced in 1982.<sup>35</sup>

However, the political tensions only got worse as the war continued. Through the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord and the establishment of the North-East Provincial Council, the Tamil-dominated council eliminated Muslims from the Police force, halted the appointment of volunteer teachers on the ethnic ratio quota, and failed to hold the referendum on the merger of the North and East Provincial Councils.<sup>36</sup>

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34. Haniffa (2015); Mihlar (2019); Macgilvray & Raheem (2007).

35. MacGilvray & Raheem (2007).

36. Ibid.



## Gendered discourses on identity

Gendered roles of women as mothers, for instance, were an integral part of the nationalist discourses of the Tamil mobilisations and the Sinhala-dominated Sri Lankan state. The 1980s, saw the call to mothers to give their sons for heroic nationalist projects of the Tamils as well as the Sinhalese.<sup>37</sup> As Maunaguru (1995) notes, “The state, political and religious organisations praised the military men as heroes, and their mothers as heroic women who sacrificed their children for the nation.” As Serena Tennakoon observes: “Male military heroes and their supporting cast of mothers and admiring wives and lovers are invoked to condone the insanity of organized male violence.”<sup>38</sup> By the 2000s, a quarter of Sinhala men in the age group of 18–30 were directly employed by the military in the Eastern Province. Furthermore, Sinhala and Muslim men were recruited as home guard units since the 1980s.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, the LTTE held strong views about the role of women in protecting Tamil culture. Through the 1980s all the way to the 2000s, at different times when women were more present in public economic and political life, there were statements/handbills laying out dress codes and behaviour codes for Tamil women. During the war years, Tamil women who travelled to Colombo were attacked. In one such instance, the official newspaper of the LTTE, Eelanathan, carried an unsigned letter titled “The Degeneration of Tamil Women in Colombo” stating that they were being physically handled by male soldiers at checkpoints and that they are losing their morals by becoming friends with Sinhala and Muslim communities. The letter demanded that young women who returned from Colombo should be punished. Similarly, in the post-tsunami context, women who were employed in non-governmental organizations were attacked for interacting with and having or assumed to be having sexual contact or any physical contact with men.<sup>40</sup>

The liberalization of the economy in 1977, combined with global changes in the Islamic world following the Iranian revolution in 1978–79, and the resultant greater global connectivity of Islamic revivalist movements, along with the escalation of the war in Sri Lanka, affected the Sri Lankan Muslim communities. Since the opening up of the economy in the 1980s there was a powerful process of Wahabi/Salafi purification against the established Sufi order. The most serious incidents related to this were between 2006–2007 in Kattankudi where there was shooting, damaging of property, burning of religious texts, and desecrating the burial site of a prominent Sufi leader. In 2005, A Sufi religious leader, Rauf Maulavi, was formally excommunicated by the *ulama* for transgressing the boundary of Islamic thought. These actions were spearheaded by a newly emerging Islamic reform movement, known under the umbrella term Tawhid Jamaat. The relationship of Muslims with their religion began to become more visible and expanded to cover many more areas of their lives. This was visible in rapid changes in dress codes of women and men; the emergence of new madrasas, financial and social institutions; sharia compliance leading to demand for more halal products; and Islamic banking and finance which created a new market and industry. This Islamic “purification project” impacted local cultural practices such as wedding, puberty and funeral rituals.<sup>41</sup>

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37. Maunaguru (1995).

38. Ibid.

39. Spencer et al. (2015).

40. Maunaguru (1995); S. Maunaguru & M. Weaver (2016)

41. Mihlar (2019); Spencer et al. (2015).

In the East of Sri Lanka, 25% of the population is Muslim; however, in terms of settlements, they occupy only 2% of the land.<sup>42</sup> According to the census data of 2012, the majority population was, therefore, Sri Lankan Tamils (380,930), with Indian Tamils being 2078, Sri Lankan Moors 133,854, Sinhalese 6797, and Burgher 2814.<sup>43</sup> Within Kattankudi, a town populated by Muslims, Tawhid mosques were located in the poorer sections where there was more pressure on housing facilities and where many migrant families lived. This area is known as the new Kattankudi. In Kattankudi labour migration to West Asia is often by men. In these communities, in the 1980s, the younger generation was educated often in madrasas rather than the government schools.<sup>44</sup> Thus, there was a fundamental generational shift in educational backgrounds among the people of Kattankudi.

In terms of the everyday experiences of women, Haniffa (2016), argues that the public political negotiations of Muslims as a “second minority,” enabled the formulation of a masculinity within the private realm that was “hyper-proficient and hyper-authoritative.” Meanwhile, the Islamic piety and reformist movement, since the 1980s, institutionalized “Islamic dress practices” and segregated male and female spaces. The Mosque Federation had the authority to dictate women’s dress codes and proper conduct for women, thus restricting women’s access to public spaces and policing their clothes.

## 1960s and 1970s: Women’s histories shared through the interviews

With free education in vernacular languages and investment in schools, many girls started accessing education in the 1950s and 1960s. The first women lawyers, teachers, and principals start emerging in Batticaloa, in both Muslim and Tamil communities, in the 1960s. Girls who were accessing schools from different communities, had space for making friends and interacting with one another. In university classrooms and hostels, women from diverse backgrounds lived and studied together. Women’s worlds were being broadened with education even as all women had to wear sari to university.

As a Tamil woman activist of an older generation reflected, her childhood home was in a community with Muslim, Tamil, and Sinhala households. She lived near the Batticaloa market with two Hindu kovils, a Buddhist temple, and two mosques in the neighbourhood. One of the mosques was an Auliya Mosque – a Sufi shrine. Her mother would get dates blessed by the Maulavi at the Auliya mosque when the children were sick as she believed that this would make them well. She remembered a woman – Muththamma – who used to visit her mother, who was Muslim. Muththamma was a common name for Tamil and Muslim women at the time. Common names, shared faith practices, and mutual visits were common across communities at that time.

Simultaneously, there were strong political debates about Tamil nationalism at the time. An older Tamil woman who was interviewed for this research, remembers her father, who was a teacher, being an ardent supporter of C. Rajadurai<sup>45</sup> who was the Mayor of Batticaloa and a Member of

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42. Spencer et al. (2015).

43. <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/abstract2021/CHAP2/2.11>

44. Firthous et al. (2021); Spencer et al. (2015)

45. Chelliah Rajadurai (born 27 July 1927) is a Sri Lankan Tamil politician and former government minister, Member of Parliament and Mayor of Batticaloa. Rajadurai was born on July 27, 1927.[1] Rajadurai was a journalist and a member of the editorial staff of the Su-

Parliament through the Federal Party in the 1960s and who had a strong political platform on Tamil nationalism. However, these political debates do not seem to have had a largely altering effect on the everyday relations and interactions at the household level.<sup>46</sup> She further noted that even during this time, there were conflicts in the border areas of Ariyampathy and Kattankudi over the boundary stones of the two villages.

Our interviews yielded information on how significant historical events had a profound impact on the lives of “ordinary women.” The Sirima–Shastri pact of 1964<sup>47</sup> which, for instance, left its mark on the life of Hameetha Umma. Her father was an Indian “Tamil Muslim” from Ramanathapuram district in present-day Tamilnadu. Even though he had married and had been living in Sri Lanka for many years, he was forcibly repatriated. Hameetha Umma’s mother went from one government office to another appealing for his return, but to no avail. “They were married for 4 years. They took him from the house and deported him. So my mother became my whole life. My mother, my sister, and myself made our life.”

Matrilineal systems of property were common in the East.<sup>48</sup> The groom came to the bride’s house after marriage.<sup>49</sup> Hameetha Umma’s mother had a house and land which she had got from her mother as her dowry. Her mother worked hard to raise them. She wove mats, made and sold string hoppers, sold cashews, wove coconut branches, and pounded flour.

Growing up, Hameetha Umma and her sister went to the nearby primary school. She used to go to school in the clothes they wore at home. She remembers a teacher who was a Tamil woman from Kallar (a town some hours away from her village), who stayed in their village so she could work in the school and even made social visits to her home in the evenings. However, Hameetha Umma and others had to go to the Kattankudi town (around 10 kilometres away) for higher education. As it was assumed that male members of the family had to take them to school, in the absence of such men, their education was stopped.

Thus, in terms of women’s negotiation of the public sphere during the decades of the 1960s and 70s, education played a crucial role and remained a complex and layered experience for women of that generation. Major historical shifts in policy during this time in the country often profoundly impacted a whole generation of women.

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tantiran weekly newspaper.[2] Rajadurai stood as the Illankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi’s (Federal Party) candidate for Batticaloa at the 1956 parliamentary election. He won the election and entered Parliament.[3] He was re-elected at the March 1960, July 1960, 1965 and 1970 parliamentary elections.[4][5][6][7] He was the Tamil United Liberation Front candidate in Batticaloa at the 1977 parliamentary election and was re-elected. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C.\\_Rajadurai](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C._Rajadurai)

46. These reflections were expressed in the interview with an older generation Tamil woman in her sixties for this research.

47. The Sirima–Shastri Pact or Srimavo–Shastri Pact (also known as the Indo–Ceylon Agreement and Bandaranaike–Shastri Pact) was an agreement signed between Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, and Lal Bahadur Shastri, the Prime Minister of India, on October 30, 1964. Officially, it was known as Agreement on Persons of Indian Origin in Ceylon. It was a significant agreement in determining the status and future of people of Indian origin in Ceylon <https://web.archive.org/web/20150128112857/http://pact.lk/29-october-1964/>; More than 500,000 plantation workers were repatriated to India, many against their will (Hoole et al., 1990).

48. Sitralega Maunaguru & Sarala Emmanuel (2010), in Penkalin Nilam: A study on Women’s Land Rights in the Post-Tsunami Resettlement Process in Batticaloa, Suriya Women’s Development Centre, Batticaloa.

49. Abdul Raheem Jeslim, Kaaththankudiyin Varalaarum Panpaadam: Mathath Thooimaivaathathin Pinpulam, Kumaran Publishers, Colombo/Chennai 2020; Firthous, A., Emmanuel, S., & Arasu, P. (2021). Of Continuing Injustices and Continuing Conversations: Women’s Collective Support Across Ethnicities in Batticaloa in Shreen Abdul Saroor (Ed.), Muslims in Post-War Sri Lanka: Repression, Resistance and Reform, Alliance for Minorities.

# Women's negotiations of the ritual space at the interstices of the public and private: Hameetha Umma's story

As was common at that time, in the community, a relative proposed Hameetha Umma's marriage and both families agreed. She was 18 years old and her husband was 21. A *koorapetti*, a container made of palm leaf, was taken as an offering by the women and some men from her house to the groom's house. This included *supari*, *maskat*, *kolukottai*,<sup>50</sup> other sweets, and bananas. Hameetha Umma got land and house as her dowry. A *thali*<sup>51</sup> was put on her. She got a blue silk Manipuri sari<sup>52</sup> in the *koorapetti* that they gave her. She wore a sari for her wedding and it was registered by the Maulavi. As her father was not there her older brother was *vali*.<sup>53</sup> As the *marathondi*<sup>54</sup> was put on the bride, she was bathed in coconut milk, they counted the number of coconut fruits in a coconut flower bunch to see how many children she would have. Seven mats were laid out for them, and each day one mat was removed. His relatives came and checked the mats to see if sexual intercourse had taken place. After seven days they went to his house for a few days.

Hameetha Umma, as shown earlier, is from a working-class background. It is of note then that she had all her children in hospital. She preferred to go the Ariyampathy Hospital in the nearby Tamil village rather than the Kattankudi hospital. She said that the Ariyampathy Hospital had women nurses and doctors and they spoke to her kindly. By contrast, in the Kattankudi Hospital, it was a male doctor, which made her uncomfortable. Apart from this she also said, "Kattankudy is wealthy. They don't treat us that well as we are not wealthy."

Hameetha Umma recalled how women were kept in a separate room inside the house after childbirth. She was bathed in water mixed with medicinal plants. An object made of iron was kept near her hand to deter spirits and avoid infections. Specific foods were not allowed for the mother. She was only given rice five days after childbirth. This was to ensure the uterus returned to its place and it was believed that scraping coconut would hinder that process and thus this activity was disallowed for women during this time. Men were not allowed into that space. Men were told that it was *theetu* (impure or polluting) to be near a woman who has just given birth as it was believed that it will reduce their fertility. Men were allowed only after 40 days.

Even as these practices were based on superstitions which may or may not be laced with some traditional knowledge about biological practices with some scientific basis, they allowed the new mother to rest.

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50. Sweets prepared for festivals.

51. The *thali*, a neck ornament that serves as a symbol of marriage for women, usually worn by those of the Hindu faith, and sometimes by those of the Christian faith in Tamil and other south Asian language-based cultures.

52. An expensive silk sari of a particular design which comes from India.

53. Guardian

54. Red decorations on the palms and hands of the bride drawn with extract from the leaves of the Marathondi tree.

Growing up, marriage and childbearing practices in Hameetha Umma's life included a diversity of cultural, ritual, and religious practices that were woven into each other. Many of these practices were common in the East among the Tamil and Muslim communities. Within these cultural and ritual practices, she also explained how women negotiated patriarchy, sexuality, and their bodily autonomy. As she laughingly said, "Women can't be like livestock, some mothers-in-law close the door and don't allow the men to come inside. In my time men having two or three marriages was common and women also didn't know that there were previous marriages. It was like a game for men, marrying young girls."

## The violence, political economy and changes in the meanings/practice of "Islam" in the 1980s and 90s in Batticaloa

The 1980s and 1990s saw brutal violence in Batticaloa, with killings and massacres that affected Tamil, Muslim, and Sinhala communities. There were many Tamil militant groups functioning in the East. The demand of the Tamil armed groups was for a separate Tamil nation state of Eelam. Simultaneously, Muslim politicians were writing and speaking in public about the marginalized position of the Muslims in the North and East. It was during this time that the Indian Peace Keeping Forces were also present in the East. In 1990, Muslim families in Batticaloa town, especially around the Batticaloa market, were forced to leave due to violent attacks by the LTTE. They were displaced and were finally resettled in Kattankudi, a small town 9 kilometres from Batticaloa, and in other parts of the country.

One of our interviewees, Fathima who lives in Kattankudi, recalled how there were many child births at home, as Muslim women were scared to travel through Tamil areas to reach the hospital. Her mother died at home during childbirth when Fathima was a child. Her school became an army camp and she didn't go to school for two years. Fathima's father was pulled out of a train and shot by the LTTE. Hameetha Umma's mother and 10-year-old son were shot by the LTTE in 1990 as well. Hameetha Umma's whole family was displaced for many years. Another interviewee Kathija recalled how her father was hiding Tamils in his office, to protect them from the Muslim mobs who were trying to kill them in revenge.

Hameetha Umma's experience of being displaced was heart breaking. She mentioned that the Muslims of Kattankudi were not happy with the displaced communities. The influx of a large number of people led to land prices going up. This led to the newcomers being seen as a problem by the older residents. As a result, Hameetha Umma could not get her daughters into a school for three years in Kattankudi. It was only after she returned to the Ollikulam village that they were able to go to school. She was diligent about her daughters having an education. She speaks of that as follows:

I made sure my daughters were educated. We have to make our daughters strong to face the world. Women should not live dependent on anyone, should not be dependent on men. Women should have their own income. When men treat us unfairly how would we face the world? Even if they leave us, let them go! We can feed ourselves, otherwise women are like slaves.

The 1980s also saw the opening up of the economy and many women started to leave to Middle Eastern countries for work. These newly emerging economic pathways went hand in hand with the spread of versions of Islam among Sri Lankan migrant workers. Mihlar (2019) notes that in the camps where male workers were living in Middle Eastern countries, there were indoctrination programmes where preachers conducted sermons about “true” Islam.<sup>55</sup> The political economy of the 1980s needs to be understood in the interstices of multiple simultaneous processes. First, the experience of the war and violence in the context of the political demand for a Tamil Eelam without Muslims as made clear by the forced eviction and violence against Muslim communities. Second, the greater access to the Middle East and an affiliation to an Islamic identity that enforces a singular version of Islam which leaves no room for diversities across time and place. Women as a result of this began to aspire to a global dress code as a way of finding global meaning to their Islamic identity in the context of feeling increasingly marginalized in their own land. The 1980s saw the emergence of Arabic Colleges which Muslim women were accessing. As Kamina, one of our interviewees reflected, the intention of these Arabic Colleges was to create *Salihah* – a good Muslim woman who respected her husband, birthed children and raised them. Women who were accessing public education, irrespective of the intentions behind such education, were becoming mobile and independent. Yet another moment which increased aid from and resultant influence of particular ideologies with regards to Islam was in the post-tsunami context. According to Kathija, who lived in Ottamavadi, in the Batticaloa District, at that time, apart from building houses and infrastructure, Saudi Arabia was also directing funds to madrasas.

According to Kathija, who was a young child at the time, around 1983/84 Iranian religious leaders arrived in Ottamavadi. Kathija remembers the introduction of the hijab in her school. Her sister first started to wear the hijab when she was in grade 7, when she was around 12–13 years old. Haniffa (2015) also notes how the practice of women and girls wearing the hijab became institutionalized, with the state distributing materials to make hijabs through the school system in the 1980s.<sup>56</sup>

Sameera, our researcher who grew up in Ollikulam, near Kattankudi remembered the Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunge government distributing school materials where girls wore hijab and boys wore long white trousers from primary school onwards. Aneesa et al., (2021) also noted how men went on scholarships to be educated in international madrasas in the 1980s.<sup>57</sup> Before this time there were only two madrasas in Kattankudi, of which only one was for women. These madrasas were mostly following the version of Islamic education that emerged from South Asian Islamic schools. Women were particularly taught how to be good housewives and raise their children within Islamic principles. The new madrasas provided religious education along with secular education. So this system produced an Alim, a religious scholar, who was also a lawyer or an engineer. These were seen as professional institutions.<sup>58</sup>

Both Kamina and Kathija struggled as children with the new ways of being that was demanded of them by their families and communities. Kamina recalled how she loved to wear frocks. However, she was punished every day at the madrasa for not wearing pajamas worn with the shalvar kamiz. She

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55. Farah Mihlar (2019).

56. Farzana Haniffa (2015).

57. Aneesa et al. (2021).

58. Ibid; Mihlar (2019) notes that a new professional class emerged who found the rationalist, modern, literal interpretations of Islam attractive with debates and discussions about what is true Islam.



was given the explanation that the Quran being a sacred, “pure,” religious text, could not be placed on the bare legs of girls as that would sully the book. Kathija and her friends were also forced to wear the hijab at home. . In contrast to this narrative Fathima chose to wear the abaya after her A/L examination. This was a decision that she took based on her relationship to her faith. She also stated that it gave her the freedom to access educational institutions on her own in Kattankudi as well as Colombo. She travelled alone and even rode a bike. She used to wear the face cover which gave her anonymity and people didn’t constantly demand to know where she was going.

Kathija observed changes in certain cultural practices, especially those practised by women. There used to be practices such as that of making and sharing *Baraath Roti* in the neighbourhood before the start of the Ramzan or Nombu fasting began. She also spoke of the practice of Kathama, where a family remembers the 7th, 14th and 100th day of a person since their death. On these days the Maulvi from the nearby mosque came home and read the Quran. Many women also practised Nethi Kadan or making wishes at the Auliya Sikarams, which were the Sufi shrines. They gave food when such wishes were duly fulfilled. With the influence of the Thowheed groups during this period, these practices were stopped as they were declared to be wrong in this rendition of Islam. Kathija remembers her own mother stopping these practices. People in general, but women in particular, had a lot faith in these practices and rituals. Around 2003/4, an Auliya Sikaram in Thoppigala was damaged by a Thowheed group. It was mostly women who used to go to these places. Stopping these practices then shrunk the opportunities for women to travel and be with one another.

It is in this context that M.C.M. Zaharan, the person who was an integral part of executing the Easter Sunday bomb attacks, emerged as a prominent young leader in 2013/14 in Kattankudi. He too started a purification discourse attacking Sufi religious leaders. In his vision he articulated a space for women and their rights, but strictly within the framework of family. He granted space for women’s Islamic education. He called dowry *haram* and pressured men to return the dowry they had received upon marriage. Women who became his followers along with their husbands gave away gold and stopped wearing gold altogether. The women, who were part of his group, were not permitted to work in spaces where there were other men. Zaharan and members of his group attacked a girl’s school on social media for organizing a dance programme for 10-year-old, year 5 students. In his interpretation of “pure Islam” all dancing and singing was *haram* or against Islam and sinful. He publicly shamed and criticized girls who were participating in sports and musical programmes. Members of Zaharan’s group also started attacking women activists and lawyers on social media who were part of the national campaign to reform the Muslim Marriages and Divorce Act.<sup>59</sup>

On the whole, a picture emerges from our interviewees of interconnected factors of political economy, conflict and religious ideologies together making for a space that both provided women with opportunities/mobility even as it shrunk them. Experiences of marginalization for the Muslim community as a whole had become more concrete during these decades. This fed into further calcification of ideologies that propagated a version of Islam that was singular, expressly oppressive towards women, and violently dominant. While all such domination may not have taken the shape of literal physical violence that would affect life and limb, these ideas made a fertile ground for the emergence of a leader such as Zahran who held ideologies that justified violent means for political ends. It was such ideology that was then executed during the bomb blasts on Easter Sunday in 2019.

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59. Aneesa et al. (2021).



# Rihana AKA Krishnakumar Gowrydevi

This case study was compiled through interviews with community-based women activists from both Kattankudi and Kaluwankerni. Visits were made to the home of Rihana<sup>60</sup> and also the home where she lived for nine days in Kattankudi. Social media posts were compiled, and a short interview was conducted with a local journalist in Eravur.

Rihana had just turned 18 when she decided to leave her home in Kaluwankerni and go to Kattankudi, the Muslim town about half an hour from her village. This was January 2019, before the Easter Sunday bombings. In Kattankudi, she was taken to stay with a Muslim woman and her two children (it was not clear by whom), where she lived for nine days. According to social media sources, on the pretext of going for classes, she was taken to Kattankudi by one of the teachers on the 29th of December 2018, to study the Quran.<sup>61</sup> Later, after returning home, she went missing on January 3, 2019. Her parents had reported a missing person at the Eravur police station. Later, she sent them a photo of herself wearing a hijab and informed them that she wanted to study the Quran and that they should not search for her.<sup>62</sup>

After she left, there were big protests organized, which mobilized the family and the village as a whole. These protests were led by Tamil politicians and included slogans that demanded that religious conversions should be stopped if coexistence is to continue. Two Muslim teachers were accused by the mobs of protesters for her abduction and conversion. A protest on January 8, 2019 called for the removal of Muslim teachers, who were allegedly converting Tamil students to Islam. The Development Society of the Kaluvankerni Vivekananda Vidyalayam, villagers, as well as former TNA parliamentarian P. Ariyanenthan and local Pradeshiya Sabha members (local council members) had organized the protest. According to news reports, there were hundreds of people who joined the protest.<sup>63</sup> Velupillai Krishnakumar, Gowrydevi/Rihana's father, told the media that the teachers who were of Islamic faith in the school had confused his daughter and set in place steps for her to convert. He implored the Islamic religious leaders to take action and return his daughter back to him. A petition containing the demands to transfer the Muslim teachers was handed over to the director of the Kalkudah Zonal Education Department, Mr. Thinakaran Ravi.<sup>64</sup>

According to Fahima, when Rihana came to Fahima's house, she was firm in her choice of leaving home and converting. At the same time, as she was a young girl who had never left home before, she also cried everyday as she missed her home and family. Fahima told us of how Rihana told

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60. We will call her Rihana as this was her preferred name.

61. <https://yarl.com/forum3/topic/222431-%E0%AE%AE%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%A3%E0%AE%B5%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%AF%E0%AF%88-%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%9F%E0%AE%A4%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%BF-%E0%AE%87%E0%AE%B8%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%B2%E0%AE%BE%0%AE%AE%E0%AF%8D-%E0%AE%AE%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%A4%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%B1%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%95%E0%AF%81-%E0%AE%AE%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%B1%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%B1%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%AF-%E0%AE%86%E0%AE%9A%E0%AE%B-F%E0%AE%B0%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%AF%E0%AE%B0%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%B3%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%B2%E0%AF%8D-%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%B4%E0%AE%95%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%B2%E0%AF%8D-%E0%AE%AA%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%B1%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%B1%E0%AE%AE%E0%AF%8D/>;

62. Ibid; this section is also based on materials shared by a local journalist in Eravur.

63. [http://www.battinews.com/2019/01/blog-post\\_12.html?m=1](http://www.battinews.com/2019/01/blog-post_12.html?m=1); <https://jaffnazone.com/news/7862#>;

64. Ibid

her that she used to be called Sonahaththi, a derogatory term for Muslims, while growing up in her village. She was even told a story that her actual parents were Muslims and had died. Fahima and another woman in the area Rifa took Rihana to the Eravur Police station. Hundreds of people had gathered outside. Videos and photographs were taken of Rihana and the women who accompanied her. They tried to cover their faces. Once they entered the police station, the women were separated. Fahima and Rifa saw Rihana looking at them. She was getting increasingly agitated about how people were talking to them and scolding them. After being separated from the two women at the police station, Rihana was sent to the hospital.

While she was in the hospital, Rifa tried to visit her, but couldn't talk to her. She went to the ward at the mental health unit where Rihana was, pretending to see another patient. They made eye contact with each other but couldn't speak to each other. The two women had no contact with her after that except for one phone call in the latter part of 2019 where she had said a marriage is being arranged for her and that she might be sent away to India. She had said that if this happened, she will kill herself.

Just as she said she would, Rihana committed suicide on March 18, 2020, at her home.

According to Fahima, she had chosen her name, Rihana. It is not clear who brought Rihana to Fahima's home. It is, however common practice for women who are in some crisis and in need of a safe place to stay for a few days, to be placed by the Mosque Federation in Fahima's home. As a woman living alone with her children, she was perceived as a person who could provide this service and she was happy to. Rihana, too came to her home in this way. When she was staying with her Fahima fed Rihana, just as she fed her own daughters.

As tensions escalated around this incident, inter-faith groups in Batticaloa stepped in. Fahima is an active member of these inter faith groups. She tried to return Rihana's laptop and other belonging through the inter-faith group. They met in town at the office of a church-based NGO. Rihana's parents came without her. Fahima's daughter had sent a letter hidden in her things to Rihana. Rihana later told them on the phone that her parents had shown her the letter and then torn it before she could read it.

When the research team visited her village, women leaders from the village women's groups said that Rihana grew up in an extremely poor household. Her father was a *poosari*, the traditional temple priest in a small Sivan temple which was in the same compound as their house. When we visited her home, her parents said that she was named Gowrydevi as she was born after many years of not having children and her mother had worn a Gowry Kaapu, a ritual thread worn by women while making wishes, for many years. Rihana was believed to have been born as a result of this and was thus called Gowrydevi. According to her mother, Gowrydevi had been engaging in Islamic practices for over four years before her death. She had been observing the Ramzan fasting or *nombu*. She wore pajamas and long sleeved tops. She had stopped wearing a *pottu*, the marker of Hindu faith in Sri Lanka worn on women's foreheads.

Since Rihana's suicide, her mother has had another child. The family now believe that this child is Gowrydevi returning to them in another form, as per the Hindu faith systems. Her father has also constructed a monument for her in the cemetery, presumably with support from the community without which he may not have been able to afford such a thing. He said that he goes there regularly. In a sense this monument exists as a possible space to propagate ethnic tensions between the two communities by harking back to the story of Rihana and blaming her suicide on the Muslim community rather than the complex set of factors that left a young woman feel an abject lack of power which pushed her to end her own life.

In summary, Rihana left home to convert to Islam in January 2019. This incident created outrage within the Tamil community, particularly over social media. There were protests within the village. Rihana was brought home to her parents against her wishes, within the same month. Interfaith groups, predominantly of men, participated in mediating the return of Rihana to her parents without much concern for Rihana's wishes. That was not a priority and was not worth considering in a context where, if tensions escalated further, it could lead to physical violence. Once Rihana was "returned," the tensions in the public sphere faded away as the patriarchal order had been restored. This restoration of order, being the default for people, especially men, of both communities, was enough to end the tension.

A few months after this incident, in April 2019, the Easter bombings happened. During investigations into the Easter bombings, another young woman's story became prominent. This was the story of Pulasthini/Sara. Sara, born as Pulasthini, a Tamil Hindu, left home after she married Hastun, a Muslim man, in August 2015. The story however gained attention in the media only after the Easter bombings. Hastun, who was earlier a member of Sri Lanka Towheed Jamaat had later joined National Towheed Jamaat. He was the suicide bomber at the Katuwapitiya Church in Negombo. The security forces never found Sara. It is alleged that she left the country.<sup>65</sup> Sara and Rihana got connected in public discourse even among women's groups. Any space that Rihana might have had to speak about her choices vanished after April 2019 and discourses in the media such as this, where she was connected to choices made by others such as Sara, were very different from her own. Any space for this complexity and nuance was lost in the din that followed the Easter bombings.

While compiling the information for this case study some key questions arose for us: How terrible would it have been for Rihana to choose to commit suicide? The decision would have been made even harder as the act of suicide is a sin according to the tenets of Islam, the faith she chose against all odds. There also remains the nagging question of whether she did indeed commit suicide or was killed. Below are translations of some of the comments on the social media posts about Rihana's case.<sup>66</sup>

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65. <https://island.lk/saras-mother-tells-pcol-zahrans-wife-must-be-aware-where-my-daughter-is-easter-sunday-carnage-probe/>

66. <https://yarl.com/forum3/topic/222431-%E0%AE%AE%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%A3%E0%AE%B5%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%AF%E0%AF%88-%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%9F%E0%AE%A4%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%BF-%E0%AE%87%E0%AE%B8%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%B2%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%AE%E0%AF%8D-%E0%AE%AE%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%A4%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%B1%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%95%E0%AF%81-%E0%AE%AE%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%B1%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%B1%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%AF-%E0%AE%86%E0%AE%9A%E0%AE%B-F%E0%AE%B0%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%AF%E0%AE%B0%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%B3%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%B2%E0%AF%8D-%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%B4%E0%AE%95%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%B2%E0%AF%8D-%E0%AE%AA%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%B1%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%B1%E0%AE%AE%E0%AF%8D/>

No, No, to Muslim Teachers who convert.

Muslim society, don't impose your religion on us.

Stop conversion to Islam in our area.

Don't increase ethnic conversion and encourage ethnic conflict.

Mathaveri – obsessed with religion. These people should be sent out of the country.

East is theirs (Muslims). They are very strong now.

Tamil Eelam will become Islamic land.

Cowards – in things like this, Muslims come together. Governor also Muslim, Provincial Education Director also Muslim – Manzoor.

Wake up Tamila against Muslim conversion!

Where are all the Tamil nationalists? Tamil inam(race) is struggling to survive.

Tamils are like old kanji.

Sumanthiran should bring Gnanasara out. Because he is inside (jail) Muslims are behaving like this.

A boundary has been crossed.

To that teacher, religion is like your underwear, you should wear it inside, not impose it on others. Wear your own underwear.

Conversion is like sexual bribery – poor people in the East, given money to change religion. This is to change the demographic of the East.

Religious conversion is a business (mathaveri). Going house to house to convert. Christians and Muslims.

Jihadi boys who use girls as sex slaves...

There is also a conspiracy to make them fall in love – make women fall in love to convert?

An analysis of the social media response to this incident highlights the following: First, the fragility of the relations between the Tamils and the Muslims was palpable. For this relationship to remain peaceful, separations and boundaries must be carefully maintained. Even though certain relationships, particularly of trade, are “allowed,” religious conversion and inter religious/inter-ethnic relationships and marriage are seen as a major breach of boundaries.

Second, in the East, these tensions are also a reflection of the struggles for political and administrative power. References to Tamil Eelam now becoming a Muslim land in many social media posts clearly exposes the long history of battles for real and imaginary homelands of the Tamils, which explicitly excludes any coexistence with Muslims. There is an insistent call for Tamils to wake up and act against such incidents which are portrayed as a “threat” to the existence of the Tamil community.

These calls even suggest aligning with Sinhala racist Buddhist monks such as Gnanasara who has, for long, dehumanized Tamils, in order to “control” the Muslims.

Third, the sexualized discourse of the “threat of the Muslims” becomes very palpable in this incident. Love, used interchangeably with marriage, is seen as weapon and a strategy that is deliberately used for conversions. Conversion, in turn, is equated to sexual slavery where women who fall in love with Muslim men are perceived as becoming sexual slaves to the Jihadi Muslim boys. The Muslim school teacher is told, for instance, to wear his religion like his underwear, inside.<sup>67</sup> Given the nature of this discourse, it isn’t surprising that Rihana/Gowrydevi was sent to the hospital to check if there had been any sexual activity while also assessing her mental health status. She was discharged soon after she received a clean chit on both counts medically.

The element that is lost in all this noise is the fact that Rihana actually converted because of her faith. From multiple accounts it becomes quite clear that she was firm on this count in both the police station and the hospital. However, her individual choice is made irrelevant in the Tamil imagination and discourse around ethnic and community identity. One Tamil woman from the same village illustrates this reality with the following statement: “In our village, 28 women (Tamil) have converted to Islam. Some people said at the time, **let her be, if it’s her choice, let her be.** But can we just wait, **can we let this one also go?**”<sup>68</sup> (Emphasis added)

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67. Social media comments on the post - <https://yarl.com/forum3/topic/222431-%E0%AE%AE%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%A3%E0%AE%B5%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%AF%E0%AF%88-%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%9F%E0%AE%A4%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%BF-%E0%AE%87%E0%AE%B8%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%B2%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%AE%E0%AF%8D-%E0%AE%AE%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%A4%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%B1%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%95%E0%AF%81-%E0%AE%AE%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%B1%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%B1%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%AF-%E0%AE%86%E0%AE%9A%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%B0%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%AF%E0%AE%B0%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%B3%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%B2%E0%AF%8D-%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%B4%E0%AE%95%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%B2%E0%AF%8D-%E0%AE%AA%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%B1%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%B1%E0%AE%AE%E0%AF%8D/>

68. Women leader from same village as Rihana, informal conversations.

# Life of a former militant woman of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Vijaya

As elaborated by Satkunanathan<sup>69</sup> women were part of several Tamil armed groups and youth movements in the 1970s and 1980s. By the time Vijaya joined the LTTE in 1994, there were well established organized structures for military and civilians within the LTTE. Thamilini, the head of the women's wing, which was a political division of the organisation, writes in her autobiography *Orukoorvalin Nizhalil* (2016, published after her death in 2015), "I joined with the dream of fighting for the freedom of the Tamil people."<sup>70</sup> However, Vijaya's motivations were quite different.

Vijaya was the eldest in a family of five children. Her father was a fisherman and an alcoholic. He was extremely violent at home. When she got her first period at age 12, was when she started worrying about her safety. Her mother was going to leave for the Middle East as she couldn't bear the violence anymore. Vijaya faced terrible physical, emotional and possibly sexual violence at the hands of her father. She said several times "My father treated me so badly... I have a daughter and I don't want her to be affected by her father like I was. I am still affected by that." Her father also began to arrange a marriage for her. During this same time, another boy had become interested in her and was harassing her on her way to school. Later she heard that he had joined another armed group. This made her even more scared for her safety as it was well-known that girls were kidnapped and forcibly married by men from armed groups. She said, "He could have done something to me."

Surrounded by danger on all sides, her only route for escape was to join the LTTE. She had two uncles who were already leaders in the movement. She saw them as heroes. One day, Vijaya and two of her friends, left their village to join the movement. They were 14 years old. They had to walk through the forest for hours. These forest areas were full of army units and if they had been caught it would have not ended well for them. They spent a night in a house where an old woman had been kind to them. The next day, they reached the training camp.

After three months of intensive training, they were ready to be sent to the North. The journey North, again through forests, lagoons, marsh areas and the sea took many weeks. They were attacked by helicopters while they were making the journey by foot and the leader who was in charge of her group died in that attack. Vijaya was sent to the frontlines soon after. All of them were young fighters like her and were from the East.

One of the experiences she spoke of was about her unit being surrounded by the army. While some of them, including Vijaya escaped, those who didn't, about 20 women cadre, bit the cyanide capsule on their necks so that they wouldn't be taken alive. Later when they went to get the bodies, they had been terribly mutilated. Committing suicide to avoid capture by the army was part of the

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69. Ambika Satkunanathan (2022), *Women's agency and gendered impact of violence in Sri Lanka: Tamil nationalism and violence*, Women and Media Collective.

70. Ibid.

training within the militant movement. For women like Vijaya, it was also to do with avoiding sexual violence and torture at the hands of the military.

Within a year of joining the movement, Vijaya was injured in an attack. Her leg was amputated at an LTTE hospital. She was bedridden for three months and then started using crutches. After her injury she was moved to the communications and reporting unit and later to the political unit where she worked closely with Thamilini. During her time at the political unit, she remembered the ceasefire agreement being negotiated. She recalls feeling extremely hopeful that the war may end soon. However, key leaders had been targeted and killed during this time and the talks failed. Following this, in 2004, the cadre from the East were sent home on leave. During this time the LTTE eastern faction split from the northern faction. Vijaya could not get back to her unit. She was taken and jailed by the eastern faction for over two months. Her memories of being captive involves that of some leaders in the East who were terribly violent and killed their own. Later she was released to come back home. As she was under constant surveillance in those years, she got married hurriedly. Many other women who had been fighters married quickly as a way to ensure their safety from state surveillance.

However, her marriage too was extremely violent. Her husband was drinking heavily and assaulting her regularly. She had asked him to leave the house many times, but he hadn't. The house was in his name as she was living in government housing given after the tsunami. All state houses given as rehabilitation were in the man's name as the head of household even though traditionally there exists a system of matriliney within land ownership among most communities, across religion and ethnicity, in the East.

Vijaya's motivations for being a member of an armed struggle was very personal. She joined as a child soldier at the age of 14 as the LTTE had an institutional strategy of recruiting children to be trained as militants. Within a year or two she was injured and had a leg amputated. She holds within her memories of fellow women soldiers committing suicide and their bodies being mutilated by the Sri Lankan military. She also holds memories of fighters within the LTTE, torturing and killing each other as the splits emerged within the movement. Her passing remark about most frontline fighters at that time being young and from the East, like herself, alluded to possible regional and class disparities within the movement.

As a young child, Vijaya's body was being abused, controlled and claimed by different men in her village, including her father. Given the context of war, men with weapons could abduct, rape and "marry" any woman or girl. For young girls like Vijaya, joining the LTTE was the only escape. It gave her and women like her a sense of control and empowerment. Meanwhile, in the war, women cadre were trained to bite the cyanide capsule to avoid capture and possible sexual violence. Even when she returned home, her safety from the state military and the surveillance apparatus was to marry a man who, in turn, also unleashed violence upon her.



Her narrative shows clearly that the LTTE had no impact in her village or home space, in terms of intervening in domestic and sexual violence. This could partly be because her village was in an army-controlled area. However, as Satkunanathan (2012) states, even though the LTTE had a punitive stand on violence against women in the Vanni (North), leaders like Thamalini were also slow to accept that this was an all-pervasive issue in Tamil society. We don't have reliable evidence on whether the LTTE did or did not take a strong stand against domestic and sexual violence in the areas where they exercised state-like control. Nevertheless, Vijaya expressed a feeling that women were safe and had freedom under the LTTE regime. Similar discourses are found in Thamalini's book where she says "Thalaivar (The leader) had given us full equality and there is absolutely no problem related to gender in the Vanni."<sup>71</sup>

In conclusion, Vijaya's story illustrates how women and girls navigated patriarchy and violence in their lives in the context of war. In terms of women's experiences within the movement, Satkunanathan (2012) and Maunaguru (1995) noted that even though the LTTE was puritanical and controlling in terms of sexuality, the movement provided an alternative patriarchy for women like Vijaya. She moved from being a victim of patriarchal violence as a girl, in her home and village, to becoming a fighter and a leader in a war, and back to being a victim of violence in her marriage. Today, Vijaya stands tall with self-respect and dignity as she plays a leadership role in groups working for the rights of persons living with disabilities in Batticaloa. Her identity as a former fighter contributes to that respect she commands in the public sphere, even as her private sphere, both due to marriage and state surveillance, remain sites of violence.

## Batticaloa Case Study Conclusion: Women's resistance and actions for change

Kathija and Kamina, who were interviewed for this research, engage in public discourse through social media. They have been accused of being kattikudukaraakkal or "traitor" by their own community for highlighting social issues from within the community in the larger public sphere. They are also living with the constant fear of being co-opted by the Islamophobic lobby or by the state security apparatus for their critique of their community.<sup>72</sup> Nabeela Iqbal writes about the challenges of having a public profile on social media. From facing cyber bullying, to being "cancelled" by those from her own community. The process is like walking on a tightrope.<sup>73</sup>

Aneesa Firthous spoke of holding on to and strengthening collective women's spaces across ethnic identities in the aftermath of the Easter bombings.<sup>74</sup> These spaces became crucial for women to connect across fraught lines, build trust, and take over public space as a collective voice against extremism and violence. Batticaloa has a history of such women's spaces which continue even today.

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71. Satkunanathan (2012).

72. Interview with Kamina, a Muslim woman in her forties.

73. Iqbal (2021)

74. Firthous (2021)

According to Kamina, extremism can be observed by looking at how a particular community (ethnicity or religion) treats those who question norms of their own society and/or choose to live outside of such norms. Often these norms are gendered and are to do with control of sexuality and is tied to the honour of the family and the community.

Kamina shared three stories of her school friends, who ran away from home as they wanted to marry non-Muslims. In one case, the family publicly denounced their daughter. In another, the family kidnapped their own daughter twice to stop her from marrying a Tamil man. These women then have had to give up family ties, community support, access to land/property and have had to live ostracized lives. In one situation, the man was transferred to Eravur as he was a school teacher. She could not live with him in her own home town of Eravur. They met only during the weekends in Batticaloa town.

In the story of Rihana, her choice of converting to Islam was seen as dishonouring her family and the whole Tamil community. There were built up fears about Tamil women converting and marrying Muslims in her community, through hearsay and on social media. The only way that honour could be restored was when she was returned to her family with the involvement of the police and religious leaders who were men, of both communities.

Even though Vijaya joined the LTTE to avoid violence, including possible sexual violence in the home and her community, she also spoke of her friends in the movement biting on the cyanide capsule to avoid being captured by the Sri Lankan Army. She too had to marry to be seen as respectable within the community and to be safe from the military surveillance apparatus.

For Kamina, the test for extremism is how a particular community responds to those who are from the LGBTQI community; those who are non-believers; or to women who challenge social norms. She herself was targeted for speaking about sex workers in a BBC interview and had to leave her home. She remains afraid to return to her village to date.

Meanwhile, Hameetha Umma who is from an older generation than all these women discussed above says, "There is no connection between Islam and how you dress. Just because you wear a pardah doesn't mean you are a follower of Islam. It is all a performance. I follow the Islam my mother taught me."

It is in the context of this complex terrain of women's negotiations with violence and patriarchy in the every day, that feminist spaces were being created since the early 1990s. Here, space was made for women to question and challenge patriarchal control in their own homes, cultures, and religions. The older generation of Tamil women activists stopped wearing a pottu, their symbol of Tamilness, to protest the forcible eviction of Muslims by the LTTE in 1990. Some have not worn a pottu ever since. Yumuna Ibrahim who was from Jaffna had been displaced to Colombo when the LTTE forcibly expelled all the Muslims from the North within 48 hours. It was in Colombo, in the displacement camps, that she started working together with Tamil, Muslim, and Sinhala women and brought together Muslim and Tamil women to talk about their experiences of war and violence

in the “refugee camps.” Yumuna herself faced a lot of challenges for being an unmarried Muslim woman who didn’t cover her head and was often called un-Islamic. She was one of the people involved in setting up the Suriya Women’s Development Centre, a feminist space, in 1993.<sup>75</sup>

Drawing from these feminist histories of resistance to war and violence discussed above and other histories of building movements against domestic violence, along with the post-tsunami response from women’s rights activists, in 2014 the Tamil Muslim Sinhala Sisters (TMS) Group was created. TMS is a space for women from different ethnic and religious communities to come together. It was directly in the aftermath of the violence in Aluthgama in the South of Sri Lanka. Many Muslim businesses and properties were destroyed and people killed following the violence instigated by Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thero, the general secretary of the Sinhala Buddhist fascist organisation, the Bodu Bala Sena. The monk spoke at a large rally in Aluthgama and called for retaliation against members of the Muslim community for allegedly attacking a Buddhist monk in the area (Haniffa et al., 2014, quoted in Gunetilake 2021). This rhetoric moved into communities in the East and fed the existing communal tensions. TMS was a response in Batticaloa to this escalating tension.

In the aftermath of the Easter attacks, in the evening of April 21, 2019, several women activists including Aneesa, met in the house of a Tamil activist. They collectively decided to issue a statement condemning the Easter attacks and also categorically dismissing the anti-terror discourses as those that invariably translate into human rights violations. The statement noted that

Whatever our ethnic identities might be, we can all understand and deeply empathize with the devastated hearts of all those who have lost their children, brothers, sisters and parents. We know the history of the blood that has flowed in the East coast since the 1980s. Because of this long-standing experience, we have no reason to invest our faith in anti-terror laws that propagate violence and repression as a solution to such brutality. We strongly believe that the lasting solution to such hatred are our fundamental human relationships and support that has withstood the brutalities of war for decades. It is all our responsibility to work together to make sure that there is no room for the re-emergence of ethnic conflict, disruptions to everyday life, and loss of peace and harmony in the East. WCDM, April 23, 2019.<sup>76</sup>

Following this the TMS group quietly visited homes where people had died or were injured in the attacks and held small collective memorials. The space was used by members to openly express as well as challenge prejudices and fears among the group and reinforce trust. Tamil women were living in homes and communities where anti-Muslim rhetoric and feelings were strong. They chose to come to TMS as a way of regaining some sanity by sitting, eating, and sharing their thoughts and feelings together. Some of the women from the group also started visiting homes where the men were taken away under the Prevention of Terrorism Act following the bombings. Ninety-eight men from Kattankudi have been arrested under the PTA in the post-Easter bombings period.<sup>77</sup> TMS

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75. Maunaguru, & Weaver. (2016).

76. The Women’s Coalition for Disaster Management is an independent feminist network in Batticaloa working collectively since 2005. It comprises of community-based women’s organisations and individual feminist activists as well.

77. At least 2,299 people had been arrested since the Easter Sunday bombings, according to the police. While most were later re-

members focused on supporting the women with practical aspects such as prison visits, getting access to medicines, getting schoolbooks and help to access the Human Rights Commission.<sup>78</sup> As such a space was already created and sustained before the bombings when the bombs happened, it became a trusted space to have difficult conversations and heal together across communities. On August 10, 2019, a group of women across communities met to remember the death of a young woman in the bombing of the Zion Church in Batticaloa. Her mother and sisters were there along with Muslim and Tamil women from the locality. Such a space was very rare in Batticaloa during those troubled months and still is at most times.

The picture that emerges from Batticaloa in terms of women's negotiations in everyday life makes it amply clear that violence of different kinds is all pervasive. This may take the form of imposing codes of conduct on all persons, especially women and literal physical, sexual violence unleashed upon women's bodies. In this dance between all that is allowed and disallowed an individual person's choices, agency, thoughts, feelings and lives are seen as secondary if not irrelevant. These affected persons are primarily women given that they are accorded an oppressed position within patriarchy that cuts across all the different communities.

At the same time, women have constantly found ways to survive, resist and even thrive. They have ensured the survival of their children through myriad moments and processes of violence. They have stood by one another in times of duress within their communities. In, what is perhaps the most inspiring aspect of women's resistance, they have connected to each other as women across communities even during times when the tensions between such groups have been heightened. This process of standing together during times of tension has become, and will continue to be a profound act of peace. This peace is not simple and is indeed very fragile and complicated. Nevertheless, women have tended to this peace over many years in the Batticaloa area and this has provided them a space of solace in these many years of conflict and war.

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leased on bail, over 500 remained in custody. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/03/sri-lanka-muslims-face-threats-attacks>; [https://thesouthasiacollective.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/PTA\\_Terrorising-Sri-Lanka-for-42-years-English.pdf](https://thesouthasiacollective.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/PTA_Terrorising-Sri-Lanka-for-42-years-English.pdf)  
78. Firthous (2021).

## CASE STUDY

# NEGOMBO

What follows is a broader socio-political and cultural history of Negombo. It has been collated based on a diversity of sources. While some information is from existing research papers, reports, and online sources, other details are from interviews with key informants and information collected through focus group discussions. This description is not one that strictly follows scholarly conventions of evidence-based provenance. It is presented here for the rich tapestry of facts, memories, perceptions and opinions that the diverse people from Negombo are able to provide for us.

# Background

The city of Negombo is situated in the Negombo Municipal Council Area of Gampaha District in the Western Province on the west coast of Sri Lanka. It is located 35 km from Colombo and 7 km from the Katunayake Bandaranaike International Airport, which is also home to the Free Trade Zone.<sup>1</sup> It is bounded to the North by the Maha Oya river, South by the Diya Honda Ela lake, East by the Roma Ela lake and the West by the lagoon and the Indian Ocean.<sup>2</sup> Negombo has a coastline of 22.5 kilometres. The Negombo lagoon, which provides livelihoods to many fisher communities, is spread over 3328 hectares.<sup>3</sup>

The total area of the Negombo Municipal Council is 2800 hectares consisting of 39 Grama Niladhari Divisions, the smallest local governance units, which in turn fall within the boundary of the Negombo Divisional Secretariat.<sup>4</sup> Negombo was declared an Urban Development Area under the Urban Development Authority Law through two gazettes in November 1997 and 2001. The first significant urban development intervention of Negombo city was initiated in 2001 after declaring Negombo as a growth centre governed by three major local government authorities. The first Development Plan for a 20-year period for the Negombo Municipal Council was initiated by the Urban Development Authority in 2004. Thus, in the last 20 years, Negombo has been actively developed as an urban centre by the state which has meant monumental changes for the people who live there. According to the Department of Census and Statistics 2012,<sup>5</sup> the Negombo divisional secretariat division consists of 82.2% Sinhalese, 7.7% Tamils, 9.7% Muslims. The Muslims includes Moors and Malays while the remaining small percentage are Burghers, Indian Tamils, and other small communities. More than 90% of the population of Negombo are Catholic and/or Christian.<sup>6</sup> About 30% to 40% of the housing falls into the category of urban poor housing by virtue of families in those houses receiving state support for those below the poverty line known as Samurdhi.<sup>7</sup> In terms of economic activities, 45% of the economy is based on fisheries, 35% on tourism, and 20% on commerce and other services. Negombo supplies 16% of the nation's fish, 80% of this being marine fish, and 20% lagoon fish. Negombo is also known for shrimp and prawn cultivation.

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1. The Free Trade Zone or Export Processing Zone in Katunayake was demarcated in 1978 and is governed by the Board of Investment. In order to attract foreign investment, the government provides a number of incentives, including duty-free import and exports, preferential tax, double taxation relief and up to 100% foreign ownership. The Katunayake FTZ houses over one hundred multinational industries, predominantly in the garment and clothing industry. From its inception, the FTZ the workforce was predominantly young female migrants from rural villages, mainly from economically and socially marginalised groups. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katunayake>

2. Negombo Development Plan 2019 -2023, Gampaha District Office, Urban Development Authority, August 2019.

3. Peter Kaniyut Perera (2020), Aluth Ahasak, Aluth Polawak: 40 years journey of Janavaboda kedraya, Janavaboda Kendraya, Negombo.

4. Negombo Development Plan 2019 -2023, Gampaha District Office, Urban Development Authority, August 2019

5. <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/pophousat/cph2011/pages/activities/Reports/District/Gampaha.pdf>

6. <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/pophousat/cph2011/pages/activities/Reports/District/Gampaha/A4.pdf>

7. City Profile Negombo Municipal Council (2002), UNDP / UN-Habitat - Sustainable Cities Programme (SCP) Sustainable Colombo Core Area Project (SCCP II)

# Methodology

For this study we interviewed the following women: two younger Muslim women in their twenties, one Sinhala Catholic younger woman in her thirties, one older Sinhala woman from a Catholic background in her fifties, an older Muslim woman in her fifties and an older Catholic nun in her sixties, who was an activist involved in the response to the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks in Negombo. Names have been changed in instances where names have been used, to ensure confidentiality. The interviews were broad-ranging and involved life-story narratives, with a focus on the period before and after the Easter Sunday bombings which took place in Negombo as well. We conducted a focus group discussion with Catholic Sinhala women activists to understand their responses during this time. The following narrative draws on these discussions, to describe the impact on women's lives and analyze how women negotiated family, community, and the nation state during this time. The narrative also describes the resistance and responses of women during this time of heightened tensions and violence.

## Histories

Negombo has a rich record of local histories. This research refers to two such records – one, an article written by Amathur Raheem, a resident of Negombo who used to regularly contribute to the local newspaper *Meepuravesiyo*, and the other, a book written by Peter Kaniyut Perera, documenting 40 years of the *Janavaboda Kendraya* (introduced below). Women activists who were part of the larger network of the *Janavaboda Kendraya* and Ms. Raheem's daughter were interviewed for this research. Therefore, these documented local histories added richness to the place, context, and people, who were interviewed.

Folklore narratives say that Negombo was named *Meevathagomuva* because when the queen *Vihara Maha Devi* was pregnant with Prince *Gemunu*, she had a craving for bee's honey. People in her kingdom found a huge beehive on an abandoned boat in this area. This place was then named *Meegomuva*, which means beehive. Other folktales say that in *Ravana's* time it was called *Nigumbheela* which means a pure waterbody. This water body was said to be near *Kamachchodai*. *Kamachchi*, who was *Ravana's* younger sister, lived close to the water body, and hence the place got its name, *Kamachchodai* meaning *Kamachchi* stream. During the *Seethavaka Rajasinghe* reign (from 1581 to 1592), Negombo had the largest harbour on the island.<sup>8</sup>

In the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, Negombo had large cinnamon plantations. There were many traders who came to the island during this time and many Arab traders settled around Negombo. Arab traders were involved in the trade of spices such as cinnamon, cloves, vanilla, and pepper as well as pearls and red stones. There are also histories of Arab sailors settling for some time of the year in Negombo during the monsoons. They would dock their sail ships in the harbour and settle further inland near the lagoons or the *Maha Oya* river. The Arab sailors had a large ship repairing

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8. Peter Kaniyut Perera (2020), *Aluth Ahasak, Aluth Polawak: 40 years journey of Janavaboda kedraya, Janavaboda Kendraya, Negombo*;



industry. They also introduced technologies for preserving meat using spices. Malayali Muslim and Tamil workers from the port of Cochin in present-day Kerala on the south-west coast of peninsular India came to work in the ship repairing industry. Many of these workers settled in an area nearby called Kammalthurai. They were skilled workers who could make a boat out of a single tree bark.<sup>9</sup> During the Dutch colonial period in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Hamilton Canal that extended from Colombo to Puttalam along the west coast was built to enhance trade. With the introduction of coconut and coffee plantations in the 19th century during British colonial rule, other migrant populations were settled in Negombo. The railway lines to Negombo were built in 1907, enabling the growth of a vibrant market around the railway station.<sup>10</sup>

Catholicism was introduced in Negombo by the Portuguese in the 16th century. It was based on the caste system which was the dominant system of social organizing in this area. The church used caste as a way of reaching out to the population and encouraging conversions and also for organizing the church hierarchy. Sometimes different castes had different churches that were separate but close to each other. If the congregation was mixed caste, then each caste had different lay leaders and different *novenas* (special mass) during the church feast. It remains very rare to have priests who hail from oppressed castes in the churches of Negombo. As a result of this relationship between the Roman Catholic church and caste, most Catholics in Negombo are of the *karava* or fisher caste.<sup>11</sup> Within the karavas there were subdivisions with *vasagama* names (surnames) of Warnakulasuriya, Mihindakulasuriya, and Kurukulasuriya.<sup>12</sup> Oral narratives that have been passed down generations in the area show that these names can be traced back to ancient warriors. These tales of lore are expressed spatially in each sub-caste of a specific name being settled in specific areas: the Mihindikulasuriyas in Duva, Warnakulasuriyas in Mahaveethiya and the Kurukulasuriyas in the Vallaveethiya area. To date, tensions and conflicts between these sub-groups continue, sometimes coming to head at sea.<sup>13</sup>

In Negombo town, Vellaveethiya and Munnakaraya are where the Tamil-speaking fisher communities live. Even though they have spoken Tamil for generations they strongly feel that they were Sinhala. As a result, the school in the area, which used to be Tamil medium, became Sinhala medium in the 1980s, coinciding with the anti-Tamil riots of 1983 (discussed below) and the commencement of the war in the North and East of Sri Lanka.<sup>14</sup> There is an area called Fernandopullai where Tamil-speaking people live. Their origins are said to be from the Southern Indian peninsula and the community is referred to as Cochchi. These communities speak Sinhala now but their ancestors were Tamil-speaking. They also are visibly different as they are tall with light-coloured eyes and red skin. They were traditionally engaged in the toddy tapping occupation, seen within the

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9. Amathur Raheem, May 16 2020, <https://www.meeepura.com/%E0%B6%86%E0%B6%BB%E0%B7%8F%E0%B6%B6%E0%B7%92%E0%B7%80%E0%B6%BB%E0%B7%94%E0%B6%B1%E0%B7%8A-%E0%B6%B8%E0%B7%93%E0%B6%9C%E0%B6%B8%E0%B7%94%E0%B7%80%E0%B7%9A-%E0%B7%83%E0%B7%92%E0%B6%A7%E0%B7%92-2/>

10. Peter Kaniyut Perera (2020), *Aluth Ahasak, Aluth Polowak: 40 years journey of Janavaboda Kendraya, Negombo*

11. Ibid

12. R. L. Stirrat (1982), *Caste Conundrums: Views of Caste in a Sinhalese Catholic Fishing Village* in Dennis MCGilvrey (ed) *Caste Ideology and Interaction*, Cambridge Papers in Social Anthropology 9, Cambridge University Press <https://books.google.lk/books?id=n-8AAAA-IAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=true>

13. Peter Kaniyut Perera (2020), *Aluth Ahasak, Aluth Polowak: 40 years journey of Janavaboda Kendraya, Negombo*

14. FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group, Negombo.

caste system as being inferior.<sup>15</sup> In Pitipana and Duva there are Sinhala-speaking Catholic fisher communities.<sup>16</sup> Some of the leadership of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka come from Negombo. For example, Bishop Nicholas Marcus Fernando was from Munnakaraya, in Negombo, as was Cardinal Thomas Cooray.<sup>17</sup>

During the war years from 1983 onwards till 2009, Tamils from fisher communities who were displaced from the North and East often came to Negombo. These communities did not have much acceptance due to the structures of caste-based discrimination.<sup>18</sup> The women from these communities were involved in the fishing industry. However, due to changes in the traditional trade arrangements as well as the increase of wage labour from surrounding villages, women were gradually pushed out of the industry.<sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup> Younger generations from these communities, particularly women, now find work in the garment factories in the Free Trade Zone which is nearby.<sup>21</sup>

The Paravars, also known as the Bharathas, were seafarers and pearl divers who later became traders and philanthropists. They initially settled down on the coast of Mannar in the north-west of Sri Lanka where many of their descendants remain. In the villages of Ettukal in Negombo and Vankali in Mannar, 99% of the residents are Catholic Bharathas with exclusive places of worship and burial grounds.<sup>22</sup>

Telugu-speaking communities also lived along the seashore on Alles Road in Vellaveethiya in Negombo. These communities were extremely poor and lived in temporary slum dwellings made of cardboard and plastic. There were around 20 families who were traditionally snake charmers and palm readers. Even when representatives from the community approached government services, they were driven away. They did not have any access to schooling or health. These communities were affected during the Tsunami disaster of 2004 and lost their homes. They faced discrimination even in the displacement camps. They later moved to resettlement areas in Kochchikade where they got some housing assistance from Catholic organisations.<sup>23</sup>

Historically, Muslim communities lived in Negombo town, in areas such as Lazarus Street, Mosque Road, Abeysinghe Pura/St Anthony's Road, Poruthota, Kamochodai and Kochikadai. There are 14 mosques affiliated with Sunni Islam (the most prominent is called Loku Palliya – Big Mosque) and one Ahmediya Mosque (locally called Podi Palliya – Small Mosque) in these areas. The Ahmediya<sup>24</sup> areas are Praja Seva Road and Finco Road.<sup>25</sup>

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15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. The wholesale fish markets (Iellama) in Duva are owned by the fisheries cooperative, the Duva Catholic church, and the fisheries society. Another big fish market is given on a tender basis by the Wellaveediya Catholic church.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. <https://thuppahis.com/2020/03/17/the-bharathas-of-sri-lanka-roots-and-tales/>

23. Peter Kaniyut Perera (2020), Aluth Ahasak, Aluth Polowak: 40 years journey of Janavaboda Kendraya, Negombo; FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group Negombo.

24. Ahmediyya is an Islamic revival movement that originated in nineteenth-century British India and has since spread across the globe. Ahmadis are widely stigmatized (by Wahhabi groups in particular) and sometimes persecuted; Ahmediyya's claim that its founder was the Muslim messiah is deemed heretical (Klem 2011).

25. Interview with Sinhala male social activist 2.

One male Sinhala social activist in the area narrated the presence of Muslims in the area through these images:

In the 1960s and 1970s Muslim girls came to school in bullock carts covered with curtains. There has always been a fear in Sinhala communities about Muslims. The general perception was that they are very organized and even violent to outsiders. They had their own youth wings and mosque committees. There was a fear about the burqa. The generally held view was that Muslims were dirty, like dogs. There were areas where Sinhala communities were living, which gradually became mixed with Muslims buying land, for example in Abeyasinghapura. There were also instances of violence between the Podi Palliya and Loku Palliya areas. A friend, Rasheed, from Podi Palliya, was killed by people from the Loku Palliya. Loku Palliya people also beat up some Sinhala boys for hitting a Muslim girl. Culturally there was nothing in common between the Sinhalese and Muslims in Negombo. Sinhala and Tamil people married often, but marriage with Muslims was very rare. In Negombo's political history there have only been a few powerful Muslim politicians for example, Halaldeen, Sari Raheem, and Nasmiya (UNP/SLMC).<sup>26</sup>

By the 1980s, there was greater mobility for young women across communities. Everyone had to use public transport and faced similar experiences of sexual harassment. Schools became spaces where girls from different communities could mingle and become friends. There were more opportunities for friendship among women.<sup>27</sup> There were many women leaders from all communities in various people's movements. For example, in the Kadolkale housing struggle,<sup>28</sup> 10 Muslim women were fully involved.<sup>29</sup> However, Muslim women had to, and still have to negotiate their involvement in public life every day. Sometimes the phone is answered by a man in the house even when it's a call related to the woman's work outside. Muslim women do not speak to the media and rarely speak on public platforms.<sup>30</sup> In the post-Easter attacks context, Muslim women withdrew even more from public activism.<sup>31</sup>

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26. Interview with Sinhala male social activist 1.

27. FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group, Negombo.

28. In 1979, on Paradise Road, there was fire on Christmas day and 77 homes were destroyed. With the mobilization of these families through the Janavaboda Kendraya, many others who were landless in Negombo joined the movement for housing rights. Through continuous collective actions, the housing rights movement met the then Prime Minister R Premadasa in 1983, and he agreed to release 77 acres of acquired state land in Kadol Kale. 225 families were given 7 perches each in the first phase, 155 families were given 5 perches each in the second phase, and 325 families were given 5 perches each in the 3rd phase (Peter Kaniyut Perera (2020), Aluth Ahasak, Aluth Polowak: 40 years journey of Janavaboda Kendraya, Negombo;FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group, Negombo.

29. FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group, Negombo.

30. Ibid

31. Ibid

# The impact of the 1983 Riots in Negombo

The government had started a Sinhalization project by establishing Sinhala colonies in the Tamil areas of Negombo from the 1950s.<sup>32</sup> During the 1977 and 1983 anti-Tamil riots, many Tamil businesses and homes were destroyed in Negombo. Before the riots, most businesses in central town were owned by Tamils and Sinhala business people. However, as Tamil businesses were sold and they left Negombo, they were bought by Muslims. As a result of this process, the central business area of Negombo town is now mostly owned by Muslims. This is very visible as, during Friday prayers, the whole business area is closed.<sup>33</sup>

One narrative of the 1977 riot goes as follows:

K. Suntheralingam was carrying on a textile shop in Green Street, Negombo, in a building which contained 4 Tamil shops. His stock was worth Rs. 90,000. On 19th August, his shop was attacked at 6.30 p.m. by a Sinhalese mob, and he ran away. On the 20th he found that his shop had been looted and smashed up. He stated that about 10 or 12 Tamil shops in Negombo suffered in the same way.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, when the violence erupted in 1983, many Tamils were killed and Tamil-owned shops were burned in the area. As reported in a newspaper article in the *London Times*, on August 2, 1983, A British tourist who was in the area at that time said:

Last Wednesday a taxi driver took us into Negombo... and the whole town was smouldering. All the Tamil property in the centre of the town had been burnt down. The cigarette factory had gone up in smoke together with a cinema and a garage. There was smoke everywhere and the whole area was a burnt-out mess. There was no sign of any Tamil anywhere. We were told that Tamils were being grabbed off buses by groups of people wielding iron bars. We also saw young Sinhalese stopping cars to siphon out the petrol so they could use it to start fires.<sup>35</sup>

Simultaneously, during the 1983 riots, migrant fisher communities from Duva and Pitipana who were in Kokilai and Nayaru in the North at that time, were attacked by Tamil militants. They were perceived as being Sinhala and thus attacked. Some fishermen were killed while many lost their boats and other livelihood-related equipment. When they returned to Negombo, the Janavaboda Kendraya provided refuge and relief to these families. Those who were affected by the violence had so much hatred against the Tamils.<sup>36</sup>

The present-day Tamil community in Negombo town are wealthy and hail primarily from the business community in Jaffna, some having moved during the war years. This community does not have much involvement in public community work or in working collectively with others in Negombo.<sup>37</sup>

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32. Sivathamby (1987).

33. Interview with Tamil male Catholic social activist and journalist.

34. Report of the Presidential Commission of Inquiry into the Incidents which took place between 13th August and 15th September, 1977; Session Paper No VII – 1980.

35. Tamil Nation. Indictment against Sri Lanka. Black July 1983: the Charge is Genocide. <https://tamilnation.org/indictment/genocide83/gen04.htm>

36. Peter Kaniyut Perera (2020), *Aluth Ahasak, Aluth Polowak: 40 years journey of Janavaboda Kendraya, Negombo*.

37. Interview with Sinhala woman journalist of the Meepuravesiyo in her thirties.

# Segregations in Areas of Residence and Schools

Even though Negombo is known to be a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious town, there are segregations in terms of areas of residence which in turn leads to segregation in schooling. Negombo can be spatially marked along ethnic and caste lines. This is directly reflected in the composition of schools.

Christian schools in Negombo have very few Muslim students. The Wijeyaratnam Hindu Central College is a Tamil-medium Hindu co-educational school, while the Harishchandra National College is a co-ed Buddhist school, and Al Hilal Central College is a Tamil-medium Muslim school.<sup>38</sup> Both Tamil-speaking and Muslim communities have often chosen to access education and speak in Sinhala. There is a perception that this provides a way of ensuring safety and access to a better life.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, if one were to go to a school of a different religion from one's own, it was compulsory to study the religion of the school. That was seen as a burden.<sup>40</sup> Apart from this, internal conflicts exist, like the Ahmadiyas being discriminated against within the Muslim community. In one of the interviews, the interviewee said that even though he was a highly qualified principal he was never appointed to a Muslim school because he was Ahmadiyya, but was given a Tamil-medium Catholic primary school.<sup>41</sup> Within the school system, schools such as Maris Stella College (boys), Ave Maria Convent, St Peters College (co-ed) and St Mary's College (Catholic boys' school) used to also have the Tamil medium. However, those sections have been closed during the 1980s and the schools function in the Sinhala medium.<sup>42</sup>

The Welihena Roman Catholic Tamil School had both Sinhala and Tamil children. There were several attempts to close it down stating that there were not enough children in the school. This school had around 300 children and it was the school where children affected by the war or were under the custody of the court system, were placed.<sup>43</sup> In order to close it down, grade 1 admissions were stopped for five years. Teachers who opposed the closure were transferred.<sup>44</sup>

On the whole, the mapping of ethnic divisions upon spatial segregation in Negombo and its lasting effect on school composition is not a factor to be ignored. The segregation of schools along religious, ethnic, and language lines makes for a structural separation of communities from childhood. This is a system that is least conducive to peaceful coexistence in what is an intrinsically mixed and hybrid area. Instead, it keeps in place structures that can be used for long- and short-term deep hatred, vengeance and violence amongst communities, despite their shared histories within the vibrant terrain of Negombo.

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38. Wijeyaratnam Hindu Central College and Al Hilal Central Collage function in the Tamil medium

39. Interview with male Ahmadiyya journalist also a former school principal.

40. Case study interview young Muslim woman 2 in her twenties.

41. Interview with male Ahmadiyya journalist, also a former school principal.

42. FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group, Negombo.

43. Interview with male Ahmadiyya journalist also a former school principal.

44. Ibid.

# Girls Negotiating the Segregated School System

The focus on girls' education spanned across generations in the households of the young Muslim women we spoke to. Sometimes it was connected to mothers becoming heads of households due to the death of a husband or divorce. At the same time, schools became the spaces where rules on sexuality were imposed and strict segregation was maintained. As one young Muslim woman said,

I went to a Muslim girls' international school in Colombo. There were lines drawn. We couldn't be seen with a boy, even a boy from the school service van could not walk with us. After we got our first period we couldn't sing in front of men, even our own parents. Even in sports – netball or sports meets – older girls couldn't participate as the fathers would be in the audience.<sup>45</sup>

Schools that had students from different communities were more accommodating in some ways and social control got enforced in other ways. As one young Muslim woman said, only the Methodist school allowed Muslim girls to wear a trouser and a shawl to cover their heads. Muslim girls also did sports like javelin, high jump, and track. Muslim girls usually wore long tights while participating in public sports events. They would wear a head scarf and long sleeves while going to these events. Other children participated in these sports in track pants and t-shirts alone.<sup>46</sup>

However, even in these spaces, where there was some space for Muslim girls institutionally, their own community members, particularly women, ensured that particular values were adhered to. One story was shared by a young Muslim woman about the walk to school. She came to school that morning wearing the school t-shirt and jeans. However, when she got there, a female Muslim teacher and other Muslim parents insisted that she wear long sleeves and a scarf. Even though she argued back with her teacher, she had to finally give in and change. She was told that she had shamed the whole community. Later, her prefect's badge was taken away from her for arguing with the teacher. Ostracizing of this student who was in the Methodist school was led by a Muslim teacher. It became so unbearable that she stopped going to school. The institution did not intervene in this case. The bullying by the teacher only stopped after the student's father threatened legal action against the principal. The student said: "No one said anything about what that teacher did to me. Finally, I had to wear the scarf for the walk. It is not healthy for a school child to be judged by what you wear and don't wear."<sup>47</sup>

The experience of being policed in schools and the complex dynamics in this process across different ethnicities makes the impact of inter-ethnic fear, hatred, and violence upon all communities involved among themselves amply clear. Women and girls invariably bear the brunt of the shrinking spaces for personal expression, freedom, and dignity. This curbing of space is done both by people of their own community as well as others. If familial support is available, like in the case of the student above, the young women are able to fight for their space to some degree. For most young women there is no familial support either, thus leaving them in this crossfire between different communities which leads to the rigidifying of social norms, a process that is enacted upon their bodies, spaces, and lives.

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45. Interview with young Muslim woman 1 in her twenties.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

# History of Social Movements and People's Participation in the Public Sphere In Negombo

Negombo is also home to a range of social movements, within and across the different communities that live in this area. This is a crucial part of its history, especially when considering the context and historical background of the responses that followed the Easter Sunday attacks in Negombo. A few crucial strands within this history are discussed below.

## **Janavaboda Kendraya**

According to the book *Aluth Ahasak Aluth Polovak* (Perera, 2020), which documents the 40-year journey of the Janavaboda Kendraya, in 1979, there was a fire in Paradise Street where fisher communities lived. All the homes were burned down. Subsequently, seventy houses were rebuilt by the Fisheries Ministry, leaving out six families who still needed housing. Along with these six families, other landless and homeless groups joined the struggle for housing rights from Munnakaraya, Kamchchodai, Vallaveethiya, and Thillanthuva in Negombo. This later became a broad-based people's movement for housing and land rights.

This book documents how in the 1980s, caste conflicts continued in the areas where they worked. In the Athgala housing project, for instance, 100 very poor landless families were to be resettled. This project faced opposition from surrounding villages as the landless families were *Maalukarayo* (a derogatory way of saying fisherfolk) of the fisher caste. The people of the surrounding villages declared that they did not want "that culture" in their area. They took issue with the fact that the fisherfolk were not Sinhala Buddhist. Local Buddhist priests also joined the opposition protests. Eventually, the housing rights groups had to give in to the opposition and look for alternative land. Janavaboda Kendraya has been in existence for more than 40 years, and still functions as an important space for social and political activism in Negombo.

## **Meepuravesiyo**

Meepuravesiyo is a community newspaper started in the year 2001. When this newspaper came on the scene, there were already a few local newspapers such as Aaranchi which was published in the 1980s. These newspapers carried stories on workers' labour issues from Katunayake, issues around urbanization, citizens' rights, media's role, public health and corruption issues. The basis for coverage in the local newspapers was the understanding that the development of a city requires the active involvement of local citizens. These newspapers largely believed that local histories and contributions of diverse communities should be valued and highlighted.<sup>48</sup> These newspapers have now also gone online on sites such as Wayamba Today and Negombo Today.<sup>49</sup>

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48. Interview with Sinhala woman journalist of the Meepuravesiyo in her thirties.

49. <http://www.wayambatoday.com/>; <https://www.negombotoday.lk/>



Given this history, it is not surprising that Meepuravesiyo did a lot of work to challenge and correct false news at the local level following the Easter attacks. They reported on the impact of the discrimination and racism against Muslim women following the Easter attacks. Women were confined to their houses and those among them who wore hijab faced a lot of problems in public, particularly when accessing the Negombo Hospital. It is important to note here that 25% of the readership of Meepuravesiyo are women.<sup>50</sup>

### **Left and Trade Union Organizing**

Apart from this, there is a vibrant history of left political parties in Negombo since the 1970s, specifically the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP),<sup>51</sup> There were strong protests organized by the NSSP against the 1979 constitution which laid the foundation for the neoliberal economy in Sri Lanka. They also protested against the Prevention of Terrorism Act in 1978. Brito Fernando and Leena Fernando were key political activists within the NSSP in Negombo.

In the 1980s, there were solidarity committees formed in support of the General Strike.<sup>52</sup> Various existing groups working towards social change printed and pasted posters in public spaces in support of the General Strike. However, some of leaders who were involved in the strike said, “No Muslims joined with us.”<sup>53</sup>

### **Theatre, Cultural Work and Social Change**

Negombo is culturally rich in terms of theatre and film. The Minerva Theatre Group based in Negombo was involved in the early film industry in Sri Lanka. Theatre was also an integral part of the Catholic church during church feasts and easter performances. Tamils and Sinhalese were involved in the film industry and in these theatre groups. Street theatre groups from Negombo were performing in war-torn border villages as well. These productions were in both Sinhala and Tamil languages. One such street play was about a dead body found on the border between a Sinhala and Tamil village. Both villages say the body does not belong to them. Then a doctor initiates a dialogue about the human body and how it does not have an ethnic identity but is only human.<sup>54</sup> As art is often a marker of the vibrancy of a particular time and place, Negombo, from the 1970s onwards, remained a culturally and politically vibrant space.

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50. Interview with Sinhala woman journalist of the Meepuravesiyo in her thirties.

51. The Nava Sama Samaja Pakshaya is a Trotskyist political party in Sri Lanka founded in 1977.

52. The general strike of 1980 involved nearly 100,000 state and private sector employees jointly staging pickets, demonstrations, protests, and meetings opposite their workplaces thus crippling the Government's administrative functions and daily services. However, due to brutal state crackdowns, 40,356 public and private sector employees lost their jobs for the first time in the history of Sri Lanka. The strike was due to the rising prices and the working class demanded a monthly wage increase of Rs. 300 (Rs. 10 per day) and an allowance of Rs. 5 every rising cost-of-living index. <https://www.ft.lk/article/555660/How-the-1980-general-strike-was-smashed>

53. Interview with male Sinhala social activist 1.

54. Peter Kaniyut Perera (2020), Aluth Ahasak, Aluth Polowak: 40 years journey of Janavaboda Kendraya, Negombo.

## Community-based protest movements

Negombo is also home to movements with socialist ideology and those involved in land struggles. These movements have been directed against the Catholic church. For example, there was a practice of the fishing harbour giving money to the church as a tax. These movements mobilized the fishing communities to stop this tax.<sup>55</sup>

In the post-war context, there were several protests by the fishing communities against the sea plane project<sup>56</sup> that would have created havoc in the coastal ecosystem and livelihoods. Fisher communities confronted armed military personnel who were sent to stop the protests. The fisher communities kept insisting on protecting the lagoons and their livelihoods.

Ms K. A. Raheem, a retired school principal, has been an active voice in community-level development processes in Negombo. In 2014, she wrote in the local newspaper, *Meepuravesiyo*, putting on record the need for numerous community support programmes for the Periyamulla area. This included the need for a maternity health clinic, drinking water, better drainage, playground, local markets etc. These were fundamental needs which had not been included in the massive development project planned for Negombo.<sup>57</sup>

## Women's involvement in evangelical Christian movements

Women played a vital role in doing the house-to-house visits to persuade people with regards to religious conversion on behalf of evangelical churches. One such group was Muratamba who were working in Colombo and Negombo. There were also popular "healing services" through these churches and women accessed them extensively. Often the leadership in these services was held by women.<sup>58</sup>

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of these healing services happened online with a wider reach. In 2006, Athuraeliya Rathana Thero of the Jathika Hela Urumaya brought a private member's bill to parliament on anti-conversion, primarily attacking evangelical churches<sup>59</sup>. The Catholic church also supported the Thero in this. Meanwhile in Negombo, local radio channels such as Seth FM have regular prayer and healing services listened to largely by women. After the Easter Attacks, this radio channel started propagating false news such as one where they claimed there was a bomb in a vehicle near the airport. These messages were slipped in between the prayer services thus creating panic among their broad base of listeners<sup>60</sup>.

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55. Peter Kaniyut Perera (2020), *Aluth Ahasak*, Aluth Polowak: 40 years journey of Janavaboda Kendraya, Negombo; Interview male Sinhala social activist 2.

56. Ibid.

57. <http://www.meepura.com/%e0%b6%b8%e0%b6%b8-%e0%b6%af%e0%b6%b1%e0%b7%8a%e0%b6%b1%e0%b7%8f-%e0%b6%ad%e0%b6%bb%e0%b6%b8%e0%b6%a7-%e0%b6%b4%e0%b7%99%e0%b6%bb%e0%b7%92%e0%b6%ba%e0%b6%b8%e0%b7%94%e0%b6%bd%e0%b7%8a%e0%b6%bd-2/>

58. Interview with male Tamil Catholic social activist and journalist.

59. <http://archives.dailynews.lk/2006/04/07/pol01.asp>;

60. Interview with male Tamil Catholic social activist and journalist.

In this manner, Negombo has a long history of people's participation in the public sphere, including women. Individual and collective voices and movements putting forth needs of the people and speaking up against unfair practices were prevalent. All sources of power, be it the church or the state, have been challenged at different points in history by the people of Negombo. This process continued and coexisted along with the diversity, conflict, and tension between different groups of people in Negombo.

## Easter attacks and its aftermath in Negombo<sup>61</sup>

Nine suicide bombers detonated their devices in six locations around the country on Easter Sunday 2019 and reports of the explosions first came in at about 08:45 a.m. on the 21st of April. Three blasts were at churches: in the Kochchikade district of Colombo; in Negombo, to the north of the capital; and in the eastern city of Batticaloa. The churches were packed with worshippers celebrating Easter.<sup>62</sup> After the easter bombings, Muslims were attacked all over the country. Following the bomb blasts, the Ahmadiya Muslim refugee community who were residing in Negombo also got attacked in retaliation.<sup>63</sup>

In Negombo, at the Katuwapitiya Church, 149 people died and many more were injured in this bomb blast.<sup>64</sup> A year later, there were many stories, including of a man who slept at the cemetery as he lost his entire family in the bomb blast. The church had to find new land to bury the large number that were dead. Since some bodies could not be found, the church made crosses for the empty graves<sup>65</sup>.

Soon after the Easter attacks, a strong presence of Ravana Balaya and Bodu Bala Sena, Sinhala Buddhist fascist groups, was discernible among those aligning with the church. Ravana Balaya kept making public statements like "Refugees are like the Rohingya who are destroying Buddhism like in Myanmar, by marrying our people."<sup>66</sup>

Anti-Muslim violence took place in Daluwakotuwa and Ulupotha within Negombo. These are areas where Nimal Lanza and Dayan Lanza<sup>67</sup> are very powerful.<sup>68</sup> They have been implicated in instigating the violence. In Nattandiya<sup>69</sup> Muslims were being arrested as suspects by the police.<sup>70</sup> The police were also extorting money in return for not arresting people. Meepuravesiyo, in line with its

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61. The incidents documented in this section are from the interviews and FGDs done for this research for more information on the attacks in the Aftermath of the Easter attacks see <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/ASA3748632021ENGLISH.pdf>

62. BBC, April 21, 2020. Sri Lanka Attack; Easter Sunday Bombing marked one year on. <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52357200>>

63. 134 Interview with male Tamil Catholic social activist and journalist.

64. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/8/11/after-the-easter-massacre-sri-lanka-nun-heals-religious-tension>;

65. Interview with male Tamil Catholic social activist and journalist.

66. Interview with male Tamil Catholic social activist and journalist.

67. Interview with male Sinhala social activist 1.

68. Nimal Lanza and his brother Dayan Lanza are politicians from the Sri Lanka Podu Jana Peramuna and Sri Lanka Freedom Party from the Gampaha District where Negombo is situated. Nimal Lanza has been a Member of Parliament since 2015 and has held several ministerial posts. Dayan Lanza was appointed the Mayor of Negombo in 2018.

69. In the North Western Province, adjoining the Western Province where Negombo is situated.

70. FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group, Negombo.

long-standing practice of local reporting, reported on this.<sup>71</sup> Meanwhile lawyers of the Provincial Bar Association in Marawila had publicly stated that they would refuse to appear for any Muslims arrested following the Easter attacks.<sup>72</sup> The Human Rights Commission issued a statement on this asking for clarification from the Bar Association President.<sup>73 74</sup>

A veeduru kade, a glass shop near the St Sebastian Church was broken after the bomb blast. It was owned by Muslims.<sup>75</sup> Fareeda from Vallaveediya who used to cook and supply food at the hospital was stopped after the bomb blasts.<sup>76</sup> Many Muslim women who used to make lunch parcels couldn't sell their packets any longer. Rumours were rampant that Muslim women were putting medicines that made men sterile in the food.<sup>77</sup> In the focus group discussion with Sinhala women activists one person said that the commonly held discourse was:

The Muslim population was increasing, they were having more and more children, and the other populations were decreasing, because they were putting something in the food.<sup>78</sup>

Some young Muslim people came with water bottles in a lorry to give to the survivors of the bomb blast immediately after. Non-Muslim youth in Katuwapitiya stopped the lorry and asked the driver to drink one full water bottle, then another and another. Eventually they were asked to leave saying, "We don't want your water bottles."<sup>79</sup>

In Poruthota, also in Negombo, a dispute between an auto driver and another person escalated into a mob attack on the nearby Muslims shops.<sup>80</sup> There was a march of Sinhala businessmen and politicians in the Negombo town soon after the Easter attacks shouting Thambi elavamu – Awake, Brother!<sup>81</sup> There were stories circulating that people were throwing eggs at those who entered "No Limit," a Muslim owned large clothing store chain.<sup>82</sup> In some areas Sinhala people protested about the morning prayers and the police asked the mosque to turn off the loudspeakers.<sup>83</sup> The Catholic church priest in Periyamulla said in his sermons, "Don't sell land to *thoppikarayo* (Muslims)."<sup>84</sup> The chicken shops owned by Muslims in the area were closed down. A Sinhala caterer who brought chicken from a Muslim supplier was boycotted by Sinhalese saying he was supporting Muslims. Finally, a Sinhala man opened a chicken shop.<sup>85</sup>

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71. Interview with Sinhala woman journalist of the Meepuravesiyo in her thirties.

72. <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/racist-lawyers-refuse-to-appear-on-behalf-of-muslim-arrestees-sri-lankas-human-rights-commission-again-urges-basl-to-take-action/>

73. Marawila is a town in the Puttalam District in the North-Western Province which adjoins the Western Province where Negombo is situated.

74. <https://www.hrsl.lk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/HRCSL-Letter-to-Bar-Association-of-Sri-Lanka.pdf>

75. Interview with young Muslim woman 3 in her thirties.

76. FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) with women activists' group Negombo.

77. Ibid.

78. Ibid.

79. Interview with male Tamil Catholic social activist and journalist.

80. Interview with male Sinhala social activist 2.

81. Ibid.

82. Ibid.

83. Ibid.

84. Cap-wearing men.

85. Interview with male Sinhala social activist 1.

In Minuwangoda, three motor bikes were set on fire and 20-50 houses in five Muslim areas were attacked. As this happened after curfew was declared, it was less likely that people came from outside. Thus, this violence was perpetrated by people of that area on their neighbours. In this area the one mosque there was also attacked.<sup>86</sup>

One Muslim woman and her child were asked to leave their rented home. They had to walk long distances looking for a place to rent. The child was thirsty and no shop on the way would give them water. They walked all the way to Fathimawatta, a Muslim area, before they could get water.<sup>87</sup> Many Muslim children were pulled out of pre-schools by parents due to fear.<sup>88</sup>

All the food stalls that remained open late at night in Periyamulla and served the long-distance buses had to close down. The rumours of the sterilization tablets in Muslim food shops had spread and buses didn't stop there anymore.<sup>89</sup>

Three to four weeks after the bomb blast, a head of a pig was hung in front of a pharmacy owned by a Muslim family 1.5 kilometres from the Katuwapitiya church where the blasts occurred.<sup>90</sup>

## Impact on the Ahmadiyya Refugees

There were close to 1200 refugees living in Negombo. Many of them have been living there for several years. On the 23rd of April house owners asked the refugees to leave immediately. Shops stopped letting them in or selling to them. Three-wheelers refused to take them.<sup>91</sup> Following this, they had to be moved by the state to different places. In each place, communities protested against them being brought there.<sup>92</sup> Most of them were living in the Negombo Police Station, and then were moved to the Pasyala Ahmadiyya Mosque, then to the Sarvodaya women's centre in Panadura, and back to the Negombo Al Hilal Muslim School and finally the Vavuniya Poonthottam camp, which was set up to house internally displaced people of the war in Sri Lanka.<sup>93</sup> Even Muslims living in Negombo didn't want to help the refugees. They said they themselves were afraid couldn't protect them. While this may be true, it is also relevant that the Ahmadiyyas are generally discriminated against within the Muslim community. In Negombo, the Muslims hailing from the Loku Palliya and the local divisions between different areas further exacerbated the discrimination.<sup>94</sup> An international organization working on refugee issues, ZOA, had to move office as there were protests against them by the people in the area.<sup>95</sup>

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86. Interview with male Ahmadiya journalist, also a former school principal.

87. FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group, Negombo

88. Ibid.

89. Interview with male Tamil Catholic social activist and journalist.

90. Interview with male Ahmadiyya journalist also a former school principal.

91. Interview with male Tamil Catholic social activist and journalist.

92. Ibid.

93. Ibid.

94. Ibid.

95. For more information on these attacks see <https://reliefweb.int/report/sri-lanka/sri-lanka-refugees-threatened-attacked>; <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/pakistani-refugee-murdered-negombo>; <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/scared-muslim-refugees-in-negombo-flee-homes/article26950518.ece>

On the whole, the Ahmadiyyas, being Muslim and the most vulnerable among them as a persecuted refugee community, became the target of the non-Muslim perception of all Muslims being responsible for the brutal killings on Easter Sunday.

## Women's responses after the Easter Sunday attack

In Duva, a low-income fishing community in Negombo, women had internalized the fear and prejudice against Muslims. A Sinhala Catholic woman in Negombo said, "I had gone for the night service, I got to know in the morning about the bomb blast. I had had a dream of a church fallen and people injured and blood everywhere. So, it was very disturbing for me to hear the news the next day."<sup>96</sup>

She further stated that, "They are planning to finish all the Sinhala Catholics. We heard there were swords in the mosques. We heard there could be poison in the food and water. We heard the schools will be attacked next. COVID might be their plan too. Why did it come so suddenly?" When we asked her how she knew all this, she said her husband read the newspapers and then told her what was written in them.<sup>97</sup> Surani, who hails from the fishing community, gave us background on the women's position in her community. Women were largely involved in fish processing. Women of earlier generations used to go fishing with the men. Even though those of the fishing community had relatives in the North, in Kohilai and Mulaitheevu, they identify themselves as Sinhala. Her life was full of uncertainties as the houses in her village had got washed away due to the construction of the Port City.<sup>98</sup> Now she lives without a house or toilet.

We used to live near the sea and in 2019 our houses got washed away because of the sand dredging and other activities connected to the setting up of the Port City. We were promised alternative housing but haven't received it. We were living in tents and temporary shelters without electricity, toilets, or running water. I have two teenage daughters aged 18 and 15. We really suffered for a long time. It was only due to local media attention that we finally managed to get a piece of land.<sup>99</sup>

About the day of the bomb blasts and after she said,

Our children were very scared for long after. They had heard that there were swords and that they will be cut to pieces. We had to drop them at school and pick them up for weeks after. They were really scared to go about alone. The children's school is a Catholic school. There are no Muslims. If there were Muslims it won't be attacked, no? It's always the children and their future that is affected. I am scared for my children's future. There is no future in fishing. The place where we live, Duva, will be washed away soon. The Port City has affected all of us. Because of these bomb blasts and Covid, children's education is getting affected. They will have to struggle to get jobs.<sup>100</sup>

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96. Interview with Sinhala Catholic woman in her forties.

97. Ibid.

98. The Colombo International Financial City (Port City) is a special economic zone and International Financial Centre located in Colombo, Sri Lanka, which is currently under construction on reclaimed land adjacent to the Galle Face Green.

99. Ibid.

100. Interview with Sinhala Catholic woman in her forties.

When asked directly, she said she didn't know what extremism meant. However, her reality consists of her everyday challenges of economic struggle, the injustice meted out to her community by large development projects, the resultant destruction of traditional livelihoods, and the struggle to educate her children and ensure a good life for them in the midst of it all. These challenges could easily be collapsed into and diverted into fear and hatred towards the entire Muslim community. Neela is a social activist who works in 15 Grama Niladhari divisions in Wellaveethiya, Kudapaluwa and Munnakkaraya with community groups working on housing and land rights. These groups have members of all ethnic communities as members. She related numerous stories which provide for a rich tapestry of women's responses at the local level to the bomb blasts and its aftermath. In Kamachchodai women protected the mosque and made sure that their Muslim sisters were not asked to leave their community-level groups.<sup>101</sup> In areas such as Fathimawatte and Daluwakotuwa women couldn't continue their home-based food production businesses. Muslims who were living on rent were asked to leave by the house owners. Sometimes the women's groups were able to negotiate with the house owners to not evict the Muslim families. Muslims were also afraid to keep coming to community meetings and so women leaders of the other communities visited them in their homes to convince them to come. In spite of such efforts Muslim women were unable to take part in joint inter-community activities or public events.<sup>102</sup>

Local activists like Ruvani continued to talk in public through the local media about the need to provide solidarity and support between different communities in Negombo.<sup>103</sup> Sister Renu with other nuns started to visit and support the refugees as she found that there was enough support for the victims of the bomb blast but not enough for the refugees who were also victims of this violence. She cited her religious calling as the reason for her actions. She wanted to support those who were most vulnerable, and in this instance, she felt it was the Ahmadiya refugees. When she went to buy provisions for the refugees she was asked, "Are you not ashamed to help those who attacked us?" Even the police asked her, "Do you trust them?"<sup>104</sup>

In families where there were mixed marriages, tensions increased after the easter attack. Women in these households were not allowed to go out. There was constant surveillance from within the community about where they were going and who they were meeting.<sup>105</sup>

A public event was organized by the Al Hilaal Central College, which included a band and students going in a procession through the streets. This event was stopped and the reason given was that it was not safe for Muslims to be seen in such celebratory public events. However, the actual reason for the cancellation was that the girl students were also supposed to be included in the public procession and the leaders in the community wanted to stop that from happening.<sup>106</sup>

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101. FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group Negombo.

102. Ibid.

103. Ibid.

104. Interview with Sinhala Catholic nun in her seventies.

105. FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group Negombo.

106. Ibid.



As external threats to the Muslim community as a whole increased, the patriarchal control of women and girls' mobility and freedom from within the community also increased. This reality coexisted with the women's unwavering attempts to support one another, in this case especially across communities during this fragile and tense time in Negombo.

## Civil society responses in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks

Even the longstanding activist networks fell apart in the post-Easter attacks context. A senior social activist reflected, "We had come together to raise our voices against the war in the North and East. This time though people felt that they were attacked – "apitane gahuve" This time, it was not about violence that happened in a distant place anymore."<sup>107</sup> There was constant reportage in the mainstream media of swords in mosques which created a lot of fear and led to the widespread perception that mosques were breeding grounds for "terrorists." For all those living in Negombo, this violence was personal and real. The initial response from these groups was to donate blood and help the wounded. Very quickly, they had identified two sets of victims of this brutal attack – the victims of the bomb blasts themselves and the Ahmadiyya refugees who bore the brunt of anti-Muslim violence that ensued soon after.<sup>108</sup>

There were active women leaders in environmental struggles in Rathmalgama in the nearby Puttalam district. These leaders were Muslim women who had negotiated patriarchal controls in their own homes and faced challenges from the mosque leadership. They were strong leaders who got water to their village within 40 days through a massive signature campaign where they collected 680 signatures by going door to door. These movements had fought and won battles against garbage dumping, salt companies, and cement factories in the Puttalam district. The young men who were active in these movements suddenly came to be viewed as a threat and were asked to regularly report to the police station.<sup>109</sup>

In spite of intense fear and the circular nature of the relationship between fear and possibility of violence, the existence of certain structures helped to negotiate the reality, reduce the fear, and maintain some order. The Cardinal, local Bishops and the larger structure of the church intervened and urged the people to uphold peace and non-violence. Similarly, those responsible within the mosque structures could talk to those within the church about ways to keep the peace. Civil society structures could organize and work towards building trust between communities. This is a special feature of Negombo and its long, complicated and vibrant history of coexistence of multiple communities.<sup>110</sup>

Members of civil society organisations worked with the police to ensure protection and response to mob violence. There were meetings with the Deputy Inspector General at the Wayamba Police about identifying places where violence might occur and deploying police there for protection. They

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107. Interview with male Sinhala social activist 2.

108. Ibid.

109. FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group Negombo.

110. Interview with male Sinhala social activist 3.

also contacted ministers such as Ruwan Wijewardene, State Minister of Defence and non-cabinet Minister of Mass Media at that time, to ask for increased protection from the air force and army. In spite of this, there were some incidents of stone throwing. These, however, were stopped before escalating into more serious violence.<sup>111</sup>

On Tuesday, April 23, 2019, when the mass burials were due to happen, civil society groups worked with mosque committees to have banners displayed of condolences and prayers. Some Catholic priests even participated in the Kamachchodai mosque prayer service. However, their own church officials followed them, threatened them, and enquired about who gave them the permission to attend the Muslim prayer.<sup>112</sup>

Nevertheless, these efforts at maintaining peace helped to prevent violence until April 30, 2019 in Negombo. In the night, news spread that a local politician, Lanza, had organized a gang, attacked several Muslim houses and damaged 30 three-wheelers in Palangathurai and Daluwakotuwa.<sup>113</sup> On the 21st of May, civil society groups organized a public rally in Negombo calling for peace and humanity, where more than 300 people participated.<sup>114</sup> This was the same time that Athuraliye Rathana Thero was carrying out an *upavasaya* (a fast) in front of the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy asking for the removal of the three Muslim politicians from Parliament. The slogan for the public rally was coined by a woman activist – “Yesterday, today, tomorrow, we stand for humanity.” Needless to say, many women from different community groups were part of this public rally.<sup>115</sup>

## Media complicity

One of the interviewees who was Muslim principal of a school in Katuwapitiya was also the local correspondent for Sirasa, a National Sinhala language private TV channel and Veerakesari, a national Tamil language newspaper. Once the news came out that people of the Islamic faith had executed the attack, he became suspect in spite of his excellent credentials. Even though he is a known local journalist who has been reporting from Negombo for the past 21 years, he was harassed by the police and not allowed to enter certain spaces in spite of his press ID. Other journalists did not stand with him. Mainstream media stopped reporting on the attacks on Muslim homes. In Poruthota he heard news of two dogs’ heads and remains of cows being hung in front of Muslim shops. In Palawathura three-wheelers were burnt. Fifty motor cycles were damaged in Dalupotha and houses were looted in Periyamulla. None of these incidents we reported. Even though there were estimates taken of the damages by the Grama Adhikari and by the mosque, no compensation has been given.<sup>116</sup> The media in Negombo and otherwise turned complicit in covering up the extent to which Muslims were attacked in the aftermath of the bombings. Thus, the media became complicit in the hatred towards Muslims that turned violent at this time. Lack of media coverage made it close to impossible for Muslims affected by the violence to ask for justice or compensation.

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111. Ibid.

112. Interview with male Sinhala social activist 2.

113. Ibid.

114. Ibid.

115. Ibid.

116. Interview with male Ahmadiyya journalist, also a former school principal.

# Forced cremations of those who died (or allegedly died) due to COVID-19

Even as tensions and anti-Muslim sentiments continued to prevail in Negombo, the COVID pandemic brought the whole world to its knees. In 2020, the Sri Lankan government decided to forcibly cremate all those who died from COVID-19 citing scientific reasons related to the spread of the disease. Even though such reasons were debunked locally in Sri Lanka and internationally, the government proceeded with this action. The forced cremation of family members was heart breaking for Muslims as it was a gross violation of their religious principles.<sup>117</sup> The first Muslim person who was cremated after this rule was enacted, was from Negombo. He was cremated in the night to avoid any attention. Even a silent vigil that was organized in the area against the cremations was cancelled due to political pressure. For non-Muslims it was not clear why this rule was so hurtful to Muslims. Bogus science and alleged logic were forefronted even when there was more than enough information from reliable sources such as the Human Rights Commission and the World Health Organization which could easily allay any doubts or fears with regards to the dangers of burying those who died of COVID. One woman in our focus group discussion summarized this lack of logic and irrational fear with these words: "lighting can travel through sand, so maybe corona can too."<sup>118</sup>

## Muslim young women's everyday negotiations in the aftermath of the Easter attacks

Even though those interviewed stated that the people of Negombo have long histories of cohabiting and having neighbourly relations, the aftermath of the easter attacks made it abundantly clear that these relationships were extremely fragile. Acts of ostracism and racism between communities were sometimes direct and at other times through being silent when others were saying racist things or engaging in hateful actions.

One young woman said, "Our family was the only ones going to the funerals (of those known to them who were killed in the bomb blast). It was very uncomfortable what people were saying. My father was called to the police. Many other Muslims were also there. Our home was checked twice. It was only because we spoke Sinhala that the military was o.k. with us when they came to check the house."<sup>119</sup>

Another young Muslim woman noted that "The school did not ask my parents to volunteer with checking the bags in the school."<sup>120</sup> Another young woman observed that "No matter which kind of Muslim we are, others see everyone as the same." One woman said that "School teachers, gym friends, tuition teachers, were attacking Muslims. There were anti-Muslim posts on my FB page."

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117. <https://reliefweb.int/report/sri-lanka/sri-lanka-covid-19-forced-cremation-muslims-discriminatory>

118. FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group Negombo.

119. Ibid.

120. Interview with young Muslim woman 3 in her thirties.

Another person shared the story of a child who was stopped from entering the tuition class as she was wearing a head scarf. The security guard was shouting at her while other parents watched without speaking up. It was only after the teacher came and told the security guard not to behave this way, that the child was allowed in.<sup>121</sup> Suddenly everyday practices that were totally normalized became sites of danger. One young Muslim woman said, “We are afraid to share cooked food with neighbours and friends. We only share fruits from the trees.”<sup>122</sup> The Muslim women also began to get exhausted by this social onslaught in their everyday life. As one woman put it, “sometimes I tried to convince my friends and sometimes I just couldn’t”. In spite of all of this, one young woman shared a small act which gives hope as follows: “Our small group of friends decided not to post or share hateful messages.”<sup>123</sup>

In everyday intimate spaces across ethnic and religious identities, a young Muslim woman had to negotiate these dynamics. These young women were asked repeatedly, “Why do you have swords in the mosques?” Many relationships between young women across ethnicities did not survive these bitter fights. This will come to bear on an entire generation of women in Negombo who may now grow up without any or too many friends across different ethnicities/religions.<sup>124</sup>

## Young women negotiating changing social norms and controls within Muslim communities

Similar to the reality of most girls in Sri Lanka, who negotiate sexual harassment and patriarchy every day, Muslim girls too learned how to “behave” in public in their own communities as well as other public spaces such as buses and markets. Below are a few statements from Muslim and non-Muslim girls with regards to social norms that they need to adhere to:

My father says adjust according to the situation – even to go out of the house to the shop I wear a scarf.<sup>125</sup>

The abaya is comfortable. It is for security. My umbrella and my abaya are my weapons against sexual harassment on the bus. I travelled alone for work.<sup>126</sup>

To get my driving license I had to find a lady teacher because otherwise people would start talking. There is so much pressure.<sup>127</sup>

Catholic parents also did not easily allow girls to be out in public spaces alone. And very strict about marriage outside the religion.<sup>128</sup>

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121. Ibid.

122. Interview with young Muslim woman 2 in her twenties.

123. Interview with young Muslim woman 3 in her thirties.

124. Interview with young Muslim woman 1 in her twenties.

125. Interview with young Muslim woman 1 in her twenties.

126. Interview with young Muslim woman 2 in her twenties.

127. Interview with young Muslim woman 1 in her twenties.

128. Interview Sinhala woman journalist of the Meepuravesiyo in her thirties.

As the last statement illustrates, another enormous pressure all women have to negotiate is that of marriage. Marrying outside one's own ethnic community and religion is disallowed and looked down upon in most communities in Sri Lanka. Women reflect on this reality of their struggle with the institution of marriage as follows:

Opportunities given to Sri Lankan women are already less. When extremism comes, even that is snatched away. I became afraid of Muslim men. What are they thinking? Whom can I trust? I knew what I didn't want. There was a huge pressure to marry. Every day relatives came with proposals. My only escape was to leave for my studies.<sup>129</sup>

At the end of the day if kids are not sent for higher education and are married off at an early age, they should at least get maximum from their school days. My best friend from Kattankudi was married off at 16. Even privileged families give the girls in marriage at a very young age.<sup>130</sup>

The women we interviewed also made observations about the changes in religious practices and dressing practice across generations in their own families. Sometimes the changes came with marriage and at other times due to the pressure of other women in the community. Sometimes it was also due to women's own personal changes in the understanding of their faith. The women identified class mobility and urbanization as factors that mediated their negotiation of their presence in the public sphere.<sup>131</sup> Simultaneously, there is also the influence of global Islamic movements reaching their lives through elders in their families who are exposed to them.<sup>132</sup>

My granny wore sari. My mother wore sari. She was an English teacher at Al Hilal. She started wearing abaya as all the other teachers were wearing abaya. She also went to Haj in 2005.<sup>133</sup>

My grandmother was sad about me wearing abaya. She wanted me to wear sari as a teacher. She had saved two saris for me to wear for work. But I never wore sari.<sup>134</sup>

We need to cover hair, legs, and breasts. Because it attracts attention. Posh Muslims wear denim jeans and blouses. Dancing and singing are discouraged, especially in public – so drawing is the only space for creativity. Earning from drawing is not discouraged or stigmatized. It is seen as being better than saying that I dance for a living.<sup>135</sup>

Malays in Colombo had a different culture. Women wore short dresses, didn't cover the head or chest. They wore western-type clothes. My grandfather didn't like this. He has

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129. Interview with young Muslim woman 1 in her twenties.

130. Ibid.

131. Interview with young Muslim woman 2 in her twenties.

132. Ibid.

133. Ibid.

134. Ibid.

135. Interview with young Muslim woman 3 in her thirties.

studied Arabic and Islam and didn't like how his sisters and aunts were. He didn't want his daughters to be like that so he moved to Negombo. Even in my husband's family (he is from a Malay family) his mother and sisters all wear abaya. His older sister is married to a Nalimi.<sup>136</sup> They live in Canada. He is an Islamic scholar and on video he does classes for us. He speaks Tamil, Sinhala, and English. We have a family group and during COVID the Nalimi did bayaan.<sup>137</sup> All the children joined and they are encouraged to ask questions. My son asked why we have these different bending rituals for prayer. So the Nalimi sent a lot of readings for him.<sup>138</sup>

For my son's school farewell, he said he didn't want to order pizza from Pizza Hut as its not halal. His friends said it was on the halal list, but my son was not sure and wanted to check the certification. The cake was from Fab. Muslim children didn't eat it because there is no halal certification. That is their personal wish.<sup>139</sup>

## Online as a space of engagement

One of the young Muslim women we interviewed was involved in the online world of gaming and Anime. She started an anime club in her higher education institution. She even led a public march of her institution for cosplay, a form of costumed re-enactment game that has a huge following across the world. Currently she works for a US company online. She says, "For Muslim girls who don't like to socialize they should follow online jobs, they can keep their dress codes while earning a good living. Sarah (her friend) is an illustrator but outside she is quite like a tortoise. She had so many restrictions from her family about where she could travel. But Sarah is fully involved in online design. She illustrates for Manga Comics. In the online social world, there are many Muslim girls socializing."<sup>140</sup> In a very specific way, this young woman found a space to express herself with anonymity and safety, all while also making a living in the online world. This very freedom, mobility, and dignity was disallowed to her in the real world.

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136. Religious scholar.

137. Religious preaching.

138. Interview with young Muslim woman 2 in her twenties.

139. Ibid.

140. Interview with young Muslim woman 3 in her thirties.

# Negombo Case Study Conclusion: Gendered experiences of autonomy, coexistence and marginalisation

The narrative about Negombo presented above is, in many ways, quintessentially Sri Lankan. It gives a picture of historical coexistences and hybridity of different ethnoreligious communities even as these relationships have always remained a mixture of relative peace and conflict. In the context of the impact of inter-ethnic tensions and conflict, young Muslim women have borne the brunt of the discrimination and verbal attacks in public spaces, including online spaces in the aftermath of the Easter bombings. The women of Negombo have undertaken negotiations within myriad spaces and relationships including neighbourhoods, schools, religious institutions, community organisations, media, civil society spaces etc. The dominance of groups such as Ravana Balaya and Bodu Bala Sena and the discriminatory rumours being spread against the Muslim community impacted women's everyday behaviour, livelihoods, and mutual relationships.

The state complicity and inaction with regards to the violence was apparent. The targeting of young Muslim men who were community leaders by asking them to report to the police station every day and the lack of effort to protect the Ahmadiyya refugees are but two examples. The national level imposition of cremations on Muslim communities also began with Negombo.

Along with the state, other institutions perpetuated fear and discrimination. Some church priests were spreading anti-Muslim rhetoric even as the role of the Cardinal in ensuring a stop to the violence in Negombo, was recognized by many as having saved many lives and keeping the peace. Schools, institutions that could have contributed positively to maintaining non-discriminatory practices, instead kept Muslim parents away from the new practices of checking school bags. Anyone who was responding to and supporting the Ahmadiyyas, even if they were Christian nuns, were treated with suspicion and anger. The refugees, meanwhile, faced homelessness and multifaceted discrimination and violence without any institutional support to turn to. In spite of local community media organisations such as *Meepuravesiyo* who consistently challenged false news and reported on all vulnerable communities, the mainstream national media and social media spread misinformation and hatred. In the context of the complicity of so many societally significant institutions, poorer working women who were interviewed for this study, directed their anguish about the future of their children, which was due to political and economic policies, towards hating the Muslim community even though they had been neighbours, albeit complicatedly, for generations.



## **CASE STUDY**

# **KURUNEGALA**

The historical background of Kurunegala that follows is based on scholarly literature, online sources, and the oral narratives of those interviewed for this research.

# Background

Kurunegala city is the capital of the North-Western Province (NWP) of Sri Lanka. It is situated 116 km from the western urban centre of Colombo and 42 km from the central urban centre of Kandy. The Kurunegala District covers an area of 4816 square kms, which is 7% of the total area of Sri Lanka and 61% of the province. Of this, 4624 square kms is land and 192 square kms is water bodies.<sup>141</sup> The population of Kurunegala district is 1,618,485 – the third largest population per district. The population is categorized by the Census Department as being 91% Sinhala, 1.11% Sri Lankan Tamil, 0.1% Indian Tamil, 7% Sri Lanka Moor, 0.07% Sri Lankan Malay, and 0.05% are Burgher.<sup>142</sup> The North-Western Province ranks third in its contribution to the Gross Domestic Product of Sri Lanka at 10.7% of the total of which 5.6% is contribution from the service sector.<sup>143</sup> As of 2001, 27% of those employed in Kurunegala were in defence, public administration, education, health, and social work; 21% in mining and quarrying; 18% in manufacturing and construction; and 9% in agriculture.<sup>144</sup>

With the economy opening up to the global market in the 1980s, women from all communities started to go abroad as migrant workers. Muslim women who returned invested in small businesses. Women also started working in garments and plastic factories set up during this time. There was also a lot of employment opportunities for women in the agencies that were sending more women to work in West Asia. With education, employment, and income, women began buying property and could even make the independent choice not to marry.<sup>145</sup> According to the Central Bank of Sri Lanka statistics 2019, in terms of foreign migrant labour, Kurunegala has the highest women migrant workers and ranks sixth for male migrant workers in the country.<sup>146</sup>

In terms of land use, 21.8% is coconut plantations and 18% paddy lands. These lands have been declared as mostly underutilized or non-productive by the Urban Development Authority. Of the employed population, 9% work in agriculture and forestry.<sup>147</sup> Villages such as Hammaliya were settlements which were created in the 1990s when land belonging to wealthy landowners was given to landless Sinhala and Muslim households.<sup>148</sup> There are 3,694 cottage- and large-scale industries. These industries employ 11,618 people in the Kurunegala local governance area.<sup>149</sup>

Kurunegala has a history of large-scale mobilization of farmers against the water tax introduced in 1984. The tax applied to all water ways, even the small ones that supply water to paddy lands and each piece of land was taxed separately. Many women farmers joined this struggle. Farmers were arrested for not paying the tax. On court days there were massive crowds outside the courts.

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141. <https://publications.iwmi.org/pdf/H041009.pdf>

142. <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/Population/StaticalInformation/CPH2011/CensusPopulationHousing-PreliminaryReport>; <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/abstract2021/CHAP2/2.11>

143. [https://www.uda.gov.lk/attachments/devplan\\_detailed/Development%20Plans%202019-2030/Kurunegala/English.pdf](https://www.uda.gov.lk/attachments/devplan_detailed/Development%20Plans%202019-2030/Kurunegala/English.pdf)

144. <https://publications.iwmi.org/pdf/H041009.pdf>

145. Interview with Sinhala feminist activist in her fifties.

146. [https://www.cbsl.gov.lk/sites/default/files/cbslweb\\_documents/statistics/otherpub/ess\\_2020\\_e1.pdf](https://www.cbsl.gov.lk/sites/default/files/cbslweb_documents/statistics/otherpub/ess_2020_e1.pdf)

147. <https://publications.iwmi.org/pdf/H041009.pdf>

148. According to Neela Akka the wealthy land owner passed away leaving no heirs. Following which the land was taken over by the state and distributed to landless families in the 1990s – Interview with Neela Akka,

149. [https://www.uda.gov.lk/attachments/devplan\\_detailed/Development%20Plans%202019-2030/Kurunegala/English.pdf](https://www.uda.gov.lk/attachments/devplan_detailed/Development%20Plans%202019-2030/Kurunegala/English.pdf)

Manouri Muttetuwagama, a well-known human rights lawyer in the 1980s, appeared on behalf of the farmers. In the 1980s, in the Reiththagoda Watte coconut estate, a worker was assaulted by the superintendent and when the workers went on strike to protest the incident, the management stopped paying their wages. The villages surrounding the plantation supported the workers by providing food.<sup>150</sup> There have been workers' struggles in the 1990s, demanding higher wages and labour rights in the graphite mines in Kahatagaha. These people's movements had a strong base in Deva Sarana.<sup>151</sup>

Kurunegala also has a history of syncretic religious sites such as Galebandara,<sup>152</sup> named after a mythical Sinhala-Muslim prince who was turned into a local deity by god Kataragama or Muruga. Galebandara is said to have been assassinated by secret agents following orders of Buddhist monks and had turned into a demon after his assassination. This religious site is shared by both Buddhists and Muslims. On the site there are three separate sites of worship – the Mahadevalaya which is officiated by two Sinhala lay priests, the Ziaram officiated by two Muslim priests, and the shrine dedicated to the Muslim mother of Galebandara – Manamma.<sup>153</sup> The places of worship co-exist parallelly and do not share any practices with one another. However, devotees across Buddhist and Muslim communities visit this site asking for the blessing of the Sinhala-Muslim Galebandara deity. The site is visited predominantly by women with problems such as, not getting pregnant, conflicts with husbands, praying for the success in marriage proposals, safe delivery at childbirth etc. Unsurprisingly, in the current context, the Galebandara cult has come under attack by Islamic reformist groups who want the Ziaram shut down.<sup>154</sup>

Overall, Kurunegala continues to play an important role in both the agriculture economy (including plantations and mines) as well as industries. With the opening up of the economy a significant population has also become migrant workers. While the district is majority Sinhala Buddhist it has a long-standing history, not just of a few syncretic spaces of worship but more importantly, people's struggles, involving a large number of women, for socio-economic rights that cut across ethno-religious communities.

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150. FGD with Sinhala women social activists.

151. Deva Sarana was a Anglican church-based social transformation space which was built in 1957. Deva Sarana provided space for rural farmers and youth to meet and mobilize for their rights, including land rights, farmers rights and women's rights. Deva Sarana supported the All-Ceylon Farmers Federation, and the Progressive Women's Front during the time period 1980-2000 and published the newspaper "Goviya (farmer)". See Dewasaranaya. Living Dialogue Devasarana 30 years Alongside People (1957 -1987) [https://dpul.princeton.edu/sae\\_sri\\_lanka\\_dissidents/catalog/4fa3dd22-d40b-431d-b92f-771b25974850](https://dpul.princeton.edu/sae_sri_lanka_dissidents/catalog/4fa3dd22-d40b-431d-b92f-771b25974850); <https://srilankabrief.org/sevaka-yohan-devananda-a-memory-that-should-be-kept-alive-sunanda-deshapriya/>

152. (Silva, 2022).

153. Galebandara cult belongs to the category of Bandara cult in Sinhala Buddhism. For Muslims Galebandara is an Awliya, a category of saints in the Sufi tradition. The Bandara deities are typically believed to be reincarnations of important local notables who made a significant impact, either positive or negative. In the Sufi faith, saints too were powerful human beings who became saints following their death due to exceptional good deeds they did while living...The main Galebandara shrine is located at the foothill of the Ethugala rock located in the middle of Kurunegala town. There are two hereditary Sinhala priests, one from the Goigama caste and the other from the drummer caste, who conduct affairs of this shrine...There is another Galebandara shrine conducted by Muslim priests who also claim that they are hereditary custodians of the Muslim shrine. Having no land holdings of its own, the Muslim shrine depends entirely on contributions by those who visit the shrine to secure blessings or any other services. This is a Ziaram (Sufi pilgrimage site with the tomb of a saint) containing the elevated tomb of Galebandara Awlia (Silva et al., 2016 p.16).

154. Ibid.

# Methodology

This case study is based on a focus group discussion with Sinhala Buddhist women and interviews with two older generation Sinhala women in their fifties and sixties, two older generation Muslim women, one young Sinhala woman in her twenties, one young Muslim woman in her twenties, a Sinhala Catholic nun who has been working on social cohesion in Kurunegala in her twenties and a Sinhala sex worker in her forties.

## Tamils in Kurunegala

A caste group known as the Chettiars who live in Kurunegala as traders were historically part of the Kandy, Dambadeniya, and Yapahuwa kingdoms<sup>155</sup>. They are Tamil-speaking people. The Chettiars owned oil mills, coconut plantations and were also local money lenders. The areas where they lived were named Hettiyapola and Hettiyawatte. A historical ambalama, a travellers' rest house, was built by the Chettiars in Pussella in 1924. There is a locality called Demaladeniya which means "Tamil field," but there are no Tamils living there now.<sup>156</sup>

Sekaraliyawatte is a Tamil village with about 250 people from about 50 families. They work in rubber plantations belonging to the powerful and well-endowed Buddhist temple, the Gangaramaya Temple. Close to 30 women have left from this village as migrant workers. With their earnings they have bought some land and built small homes for themselves. These are a few very poor communities which are acknowledged even by the state structure; the local primary school provides a meal for the children.<sup>157</sup>

Wilgoda Road is an area that is made up of extremely poor families that live in line houses – a form of housing found in plantations and in settlements of the urban poor in Sri Lanka. They mostly work as sanitation workers for the Urban Council.<sup>158</sup> Most of them work as contract labour and are not permanent staff. There is no development of public infrastructure in this area. Very few children go to the Wayamba Royal and Maliyadewa Boys' School which are good quality schools located nearby. Instead, they go to the Hindu Vidyalaya on Wilgoda Road, which is not endowed with nearly as many resources as the other schools. This area consists not just of Tamil-speaking people but also people from oppressed castes. The area is also fraught with other social issues such as drug use.

These are just a few examples of the various socio-economic groups and special locations where a diversity of Tamil-speaking people, who are a minority in Kurunegala, live. There are also Tamil communities working in some of the coconut plantations (discussed below). The differences among the different Tamils are also considerable as illustrated above.

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155. Interview with Tamil male social activist.

156. Ibid.

157. Focus Group Discussion Sinhala women activists.

158. Tudor Silva et al., (2009) describes similar caste-based discriminations in relation to urban sweepers and sanitary workers in Mahayawa Kandy, naming it as urban untouchability.

# Communal violence against Tamils and Muslims

Kurunegala saw communal violence in 1977/78 when Tamil workers in the coconut plantations were attacked in their line houses. Following these riots, many Tamils were packed into lorries and taken away. Kandy Garments, a factory in Malkaduwawa owned by a Tamil, was burned down. So were cinema halls owned by Jaffna Tamils. This violence led to the setting up of refugee camps for Tamils in Kurunegala where there were more than 400 people.<sup>159</sup> The shops that were looted and burned were later taken over by Sinhala traders who set up their own businesses there.

The Sansoni Commission, which was appointed by the then President J.R. Jayewardene on November 9, 1977 to inquire into the communal violence in 1977, describes this violence as follows:

## Kurunegala Town

(5) About 2 miles from Dambulla is a village called Ibbankatuwa. Some 50 Tamil families, who earlier worked on up-country estates, cultivated about 300 acres there. Close to it, a colony of Sinhalese had sprung up in connection with the Mahaveli Development Scheme. Witness V. Kandasamy stated that on the night of 17th August, the Tamil houses were all set on fire and the occupants ran into the jungle colony. When the Tamils returned to their homes on the 18th when an armed crowd attacked them. One Sunderarajah was cut on his hand and later died, leaving 2 young children; one Poopalan was stabbed by a man called Wije, and fell dead after running up to the witness V. Kandasamy; one Suppiah was clubbed and cut and he died on the spot. The witness also spoke to 3 cases of rape. His sister-in-law Seetha Letchumi was raped by Wije; a girl named Desy was raped by 5 men; and yet another girl Mariamma was also raped. The witness also spoke to having seen the bodies of 2 other Tamils, whom he knew, in the Dambulla hospital mortuary. These 50 families have since left Ibbankatuwa, and many of them have gone to Kilinochchi where they work as casual labourers. Senior State Counsel informed me that 6 suspects were on bail in M.C., Dambulla, Case No. 7924, in respect of the deaths of the 3 persons mentioned above, and the connected papers have been forwarded to the Director of Public Prosecutions.<sup>160</sup>

In 1976, there was anti-Muslim violence in Puttalam and Anamaduwa districts adjoining Kurunegala District. Due to this violence, some Muslims moved to the Kurunegala District.<sup>161</sup> Large populations of Sinhala labourers migrated to Puttalam to work in the Cement Corporation factory and the Ceylon Transport Board bus depot. Some families had also been settled under the Land Reform Act 1978. Over time, they outnumbered the Muslims. The tensions were based on economic factors, such as Sinhala traders coming into establish shops in the business centres in the Puttalam town, and rice hoarding due to food scarcity. Based on an accusation that Muslim *nattamis* (goods loaders and cart pushers) were stealing rice from Sinhala women who were transporting rice (illegally), the bus stand was moved to a Sinhala area (Palavi) of the town. With such rising tension, violence

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159. v Report 1977.

160. Ibid.

161. FGD with Sinhala woman social activists.

broke out with many Muslims being shot and injured and property destroyed.<sup>162</sup> One of our interviewees who is a Sinhala woman, describes the violence as follows:

I remember seeing smoke and shops were attacked in our village too. All of them had left their homes and were hiding in the forests. Houses were broken. Meherubanu was my friend and classmate, they were hiding in the rice mill and the rice mill was set on fire. Her hands and feet got burned running out of the rice mill. Our village people hid them and looked after them and helped them to come back home.<sup>163</sup>

Kurunegala was also affected by Janata Vimukthi Peramuna insurrection in the late 1980s and the consequent violent crackdown by the then government.<sup>164</sup> Between 1988 and 1992 a notorious detention camp was operated in Wehera in Kurunegala. Thousands were held and hundreds were tortured, subjected to enforced disappearance, and became victims of extra judicial killings. This camp was run by Major General Janaka Perera who was later given a position of Sri Lankan High Commissioner to Australia in 2001.<sup>165</sup> One account of this violence from the Consultation Task Force report from 2016 goes as follows:

Actually, we do not know who asked our father to come (he never returned). We don't know if it was the Army, we don't know if it was to take revenge, we don't know if it was the JVP. I pray that we would never see another such a bheeshanaya period.<sup>166</sup>(CTF 2016: 126)

In the 1990s, there was a mass displacement of 75,000 Muslims from the North enforced by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Most of them settled in Puttalam and gradually, Muslim households moved to Kurunegala District as well, also leading to an increase in the Muslim population in the district. After this, the pressure on other communities to not sell land to Muslims became strong. Nevertheless, the increase in population made the Muslims in this area an electoral constituency. They became significant in local government and at the provincial level. Political parties then had to take this into consideration and begin working with the community, including fielding Muslim candidates.<sup>167</sup>

### **Wayamba Jayagrahanaya<sup>168</sup> in Kurunegala**

Wayamba Jayagrahanaya is a Sinhala Buddhist organisation set up in the 1990s. Their main demand is for Sri Lanka to be a Sinhala Buddhist country. They were instrumental in building a huge Buddha statue on a rock overlooking Kurunegala town with the support of the Sinhala traders' associations. The intention behind this choice of location was so that the shadow of the statue would fall over the town. Wayamba Jayagrahanaya also worked towards consolidating economic

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162. Nagaraj & Haniffa (2017) <https://ices.lk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICES-Toward-Recoverig-Histories-Book-WEB-3-with-references.pdf>

163. FGD with Sinhala women social activists.

164. Interview with Sinhala feminist activist in her fifties.

165. <https://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?artid=6105&catid=13>

166. Participant at a CTF Public Meeting in Kurunegala. Bheeshanaya (Terror) period refers to the late 1980s, when the JVP led an insurgency against the Sri Lankan state, which was violently squashed through the abducted torture, killing and enforced disappearance of thousands of people by state forces. This period also saw attacks and killings of politicians, other left leaders, businesspeople and military personnel by the JVP as well.

167. Interview with Sinhala feminist activist in her fifties.

168. Victory of the Wayamba Province

power in the hands of the Sinhalese and being a strong voice against Muslim businesses while also challenging the power of the Catholic church.<sup>169</sup> Following similar trajectories and goals of the Wayamba Jayagrahanaya, Dharmasinghe points to the emergence of several other monk-led organisations like the Sinhala Veera Vidhana (SVV) – the Order of the Sinhala Heroes – with the leadership of seven successful Sinhala-Buddhist middle- and upper-class businessmen in the mid 1990s.<sup>170</sup> She says,

It is also important to point out that the SVV's emergence accompanied the State's neoliberal economic policies that rapidly privatized state-owned industries. For instance, in the mid-1990s, there were certain attempts taken to privatize the Paddy Corporation that was established to buy paddy directly from farmers at a fixed price. The objective of its establishment was to save the farmer from losing his livelihood even if he/she doesn't make profit. There was resistance from farmers to the privatization. Amidst this political economic scenario, the SVV went to villages for instance, in Mahiyangana in the Uva Province and Polonnaruwa in the North-Central Province, with a plan to buy paddy directly from farmers (p. 6).

The impact of the war in Kurunegala was very marked. In 2019, there were 317,000 armed force personnel in Sri Lanka.<sup>171</sup> Kurunegala has been one of the districts of very high recruitment. The monument built in Kurunegala dedicated to the war heroes of Kurunegala and Puttalam districts displays the names of about 4,135 persons from the tri-forces and the police.<sup>172</sup> Military families from other places were also settled in Kurunegala with land grants, particular from the mid 1990s. These were often women who were widows of men in the armed forces, women married to soldiers who were living with disabilities etc. Kurunegala had the highest number of military widows – 28% – in the whole country.<sup>173</sup> Following the military victory against the LTTE under the leadership of the Mahinda Rajapaksa government in 2009, he chose Kurunegala as his electorate to stand for parliamentary elections in 2018.<sup>174</sup> This exemplifies the role of the people of Kurunegala within the armed forces as a common livelihood, which then contributed to a culture of nationalist fervour among the Sinhalese in the district.

## Women's involvement in social movements

As mentioned earlier, many women farmers were part of struggles for farmers' rights from the 1970s onwards in Kurunegala. From 1995 onwards women, including Muslim women, got involved in politics and organized themselves into collectives. They worked for political parties. They began engaging as women across ethnic identities on common issues such as women's political partic-

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169. Ibid.

170. Geethika Dharmasinghe (2022), Sovereignisation of the Sangha, Formations of the recent radical movement in Sri Lanka, Women and Media Collective unpublished paper.

171. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=LK>

172. <https://www.news.lk/news/political-current-affairs/item/20484-re-established-wayamba-war-heroes-monument-will-unveil-tomorrow>

173. <https://cejsrilanka.org/wp-content/uploads/Sexual-Bribery-Of-Military-Widows-English.pdf>

174. The Economic Times, July 2015.



ipation and domestic violence.<sup>175</sup> In general, the presence of Muslim women in the public sphere within social movements has been low. However, oppression and aggression from other communities, has led Muslim women to come together and engage in collective action.<sup>176</sup>

One such important woman in the history of Kurunegala is Ahamed Shamshad Begam. She was a poet who contributed to the Goviya newspaper – a left leaning farmers’ newspaper – published in Kurunegala in the 1980s. “Nageva lantha gnanakayyaniyen sarasi” she wrote in one of her poems – “Woman adorn yourself with knowledge” in response to the panchakalyaniya, which was what was traditionally valued as endowments for women. Panchakalyaniya included *dantha* (even, white teeth), *chavi* (healthy skin), *kesha* (long hair), *maansa* (a good figure) and *vayang* (youthful looks) and was about physical and external beauty alone.<sup>177</sup>

## Administrative segregation

One of the women in the FGD spoke about administrative segregation of communities on ethnic lines even though their everyday lives were intimately connected. “There is a mosque in front of my house. There are two other Muslim villages close by called Nallaachchiya and Harambewa. This is a mixed village. There is a Buddhist temple close by also. Even though we live close to each other these are different GS divisions,” she said.<sup>178</sup>

A local woman politician described her electorate as follows: “There are 3,900 women in my electorate who are called vathu demala (plantation Tamils). They live and work in a coconut estate belonging to the military. They are extremely poor and really suffering. They live in line houses. Eight households don’t even have toilets.”<sup>179</sup> It is the administrative segregation that has led to this area not being granted any support for building up basic infrastructure. This segregation is built on foundations of colonial plantation-based spatial administrative arrangements. This foundation fits beautifully with present-day majoritarian ethnic and military interests within administrative organisation.

## Segregation of schools

Just as with administration, school are also separated on ethno-religious grounds. Similar to the situation in Negombo, many of the larger schools in Kurunegala are also segregated by religion. The bigger Buddhist schools do not allow Muslim girls to wear trouser and shawl and insist that everyone wear the same uniform. These schools do not have Muslim teachers or prayer rooms. As one young Sinhala woman explained, there was name calling and ignoring of Muslim girls in the school.<sup>180</sup> Another young Muslim woman we interviewed stated that she was educated in a Buddhist school and studied Sinhala and Buddhist Civilization for her A/Ls as is came with her subjects of interest, which were classical violin and sitar.<sup>181</sup>

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175. Interview with Sinhala feminist activist in her fifties.

176. Ibid.

177. Ibid.

178. Focus group discussion Sinhala woman social activist.

179. Focus Group discussion Sinhala woman local government member.

180. Interview with young Sinhala woman 1 in her twenties.

181. Interview with young Muslim woman in her twenties.

In the Hammaliya village, which is a settlement village from the 1990s, all the boys used to go to the same school. Leeka Akka, one of our interviewees, stated that her son's best friend was Muslim. His friendship changed since 2014/16 since the Podi Palliya, the small mosque, came to their village. His friend became more distant. The Podi Palliya propagated wahabi ideals which were different from the Islam his friend would have grown up with till then.<sup>182</sup> Now, there are different schools for Sinhala and Muslim children now.

A young Sinhala woman shared her experiences of school. She mentioned that her school, Aswedduma Kanishta Vidyalyaya was a mixed school with many Muslim, Tamil, and Sinhala children. "In my class I was the only Sinhala child. The medium was in Sinhala but mostly the students were Muslim. They had the option of wearing the uniform of trousers and the shawl after they got their first period." She observed that she is struggling to hold on to those memories and relationships of trust with the current overpowering discourses of fear. "I have some connections with them (her school friends). But my (Sinhala) friends and relatives in the village tell me to not interact with them. I have a sekaya (doubt) in my mind. There were swords in the mosque and swords were found in the homes of the main people of the mosque."<sup>183</sup>

Sometimes the segregation in schooling was enforced from within the household. Minna, an older Muslim woman who was one of our interviewees, said that as a child her father didn't want her to go to a Sinhala school because she will mix with and get influenced by other cultures. When she became a teacher, her first appointment was to a plantation school and her mother hid the letter from her. She didn't want her to take the position as she said, "Those people use alcohol, and you are far away from home. You shouldn't be mixing with other cultures." Minna ultimately had to fight to take her first posting as a teacher in a plantation sector school.

One of the young Sinhala women said that she had Muslim friends who went to the same school as her. She firmly believed that going to school together was essential to build trust and good relationships between divided communities.<sup>184</sup>

Even though women may have some opportunity to make friends across ethnic lines, once school life ends, it is hard for most women to maintain any friendships. One of the young Sinhala women said, All my Muslim friends from schools are now married. I am 24, they married after their O/Ls and some before their O/Ls. I don't meet them, but we message sometimes. I live alone, I am working, I am not married. They are married and with families. So our situations have changed so much and so we don't hang out. I had many Muslim friends, but after the Easter attacks, we heard that they found swords in the local mosque in Aswedduma village, so Sinhala people got very afraid."<sup>185</sup>

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182. Son of elderly Sinhala woman activist who shared his experiences as we were talking to his mother.

183. Interview with young Sinhala woman 2 in her twenties.

184. Interview with young Sinhala woman 2 in her twenties.

185. Ibid.

## Socio-economic fissures coloured by the lens of ethnicity: A sex worker's perspective

In many ways, sex workers being outside normative society by virtue of their profession, have a standpoint from which they can interact with and evolve perspectives on all sections of society across all social differences and hierarchies. Kusuma, a Sinhala woman, is one such sex worker. Her mother was among the women who left as a migrant worker when Kusuma was a child. Kusuma grew up with her relatives in conditions of poverty. She faced sexual violence and abuse as a child from her male relatives. When she tried to tell her aunt about it, she was blamed for enticing the men. Kusuma also escaped to the Middle East as a migrant work with falsified documents when she was 17 years old. She faced many more incidents of sexual violence in Saudi Arabia and returned to Sri Lanka pregnant. As an unmarried woman she and her baby were stigmatized by her family and her village. Her son was called *avajathika* (without an identity/nation). A local thug raped her when she was nine months pregnant on the road while people watched. The police did nothing. She said, "They tell the whole world that they are Buddhist, but Sinhala men raped me as a child in my own family. A Sinhala man raped me on the road. The Police are Sinhala. If they were really Buddhist, they shouldn't have done all this."<sup>186</sup>

Now Kusuma is engaged in sex work to feed and educate her two children; and to pay her mother and older sister to look after the children while she works. Soldiers in the military are her clients. "Sometimes Sinhala clients say don't go with those men with cut cocks (circumcised penises). But they are not going to cover all my expenses, are they? Besides, Muslim and Tamil men are fair. They don't cheat me. Muslim men are not afraid to come to me unlike Sinhala men. Often their wives have gone as migrant workers. So they don't hide. Sinhala men often don't pay the agreed amount. They take me and then there are three or four men when there was supposed to be one. I have faced a lot of violence from them as well. Muslim men like to enjoy sex because their women are not free like me. Muslim women don't even remove their clothes during sex. So the men enjoy coming to me. But those same Muslim men will punish the Muslim women for doing sex work. I heard from a Muslim client that a Muslim sex worker was whipped in the mosque. I know a Muslim sex worker. She does the work secretly. She was abandoned by her husband with two children to care for. She has no other income. The mosque or anyone else didn't help her. On some days, when she has no income, I give her some money for food."

She continues, "I have a code of ethics in my work. Confidentiality is important. What is also important for me is fairness – paying me what was agreed on, being clean and kind. Humaneness is what is important, not ethnicity or caste or anything else. I have clients from all the communities." She further adds that in her area they are all poor. She says, "In the *watte* (low-income neighbourhood) where I live, there hasn't been any violence among the different communities. It is a very mixed area. My father remembers Muslims settling in our *watte* in the 1980s. Inter-marriage is also quite common."

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186. Interview with a Sinhala sex worker in her fifties.

From the vantage point of Kusuma's life, existing divisions and ongoing conflict among different communities can be seen in a different, more complicated light. Furthermore, her unfaltering focus on ensuring economic means, fairness, and justice as her main priorities gives her a perspective that is not overwhelmingly coloured by her ethnic identity. Moreover, being mistreated by all communities, including her own, gives her the experience from which to see social identities for what they are – not a means of egalitarian belonging but a tool of ensuring power to some while reducing others to worthless lives that can be taken or disrupted without a second thought.

## The aftermath of the Easter attacks in 2019<sup>187</sup>

This section draws heavily on the findings of the fact-finding report on Kurunegala compiled by three teams comprising civil society actors, lawyers, and journalists, who visited the locations which were attacked in the aftermath of the Easter bombings. This fact-finding report was later handed over to the governor of the North-Western (Wayamba) Province. Other studies have also documented the incidents of attacks in Kurunegala in the aftermath of the Easter attacks, see for example, Gunatilleke (2021).<sup>188</sup>

In May 2019, in Kuliypitya, Nikaweratiya, Panduwasnuwara, Hettipola, and Narammala, Muslim communities were attacked by local men. Properties were destroyed, homes were attacked, and mosques were vandalized. On the 12th of May, hundreds of young men had gathered in Kinyama after the false news of weapons being found in the Mosque. They proceeded to attack the Kinyama main mosque. Close to 2000 men then moved to the Podi Palliya in Kinyama. Witnesses noted that there were at least 10 policemen in the crowd who did nothing to stop the mobs. In the early hours of the 13th of May, in Puvakgahakadawala, mobs gathered around the local mosque and attacked the building. Witnesses said that they were men from the surrounding neighbourhood. They also stated that the Bodu Bala Sena, Mahason Balakaya and Sinha Le groups had been mobilizing people in the villages in the previous months. Two petrol bombs were thrown at the Madige Midiyawela Mosque and two Muslim-owned shops were also set on fire on the night of the 13th. Only six persons had been arrested by the Hettipola Police for the violence on the 12th of May in Kinyama. Even those six were moved by Minister Dayasiri Jayasekara to the Ingiriya Police Station from where they were later released on bail. Even though these attacks were done by neighbours, who all would have known each other, no other Sinhala persons intervened to stop the violence.<sup>189</sup>

In the Hettipola area, the Buddhist temple demanded that Sinhala people should immediately stop working in Muslim establishments. This pressure was before the Easter attacks. They were told that if they continue to work in Muslim business establishments, they will not be allowed to take part in religious ceremonies at the temple.<sup>190</sup>

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187. This section draws heavily on the findings of the fact-finding report on Kurunegala compiled by three teams comprising civil society actors, lawyers and journalists, who visited the locations which were attacked in the aftermath of the Easter attacks.

Kurunegala Civil Samaja Ekamuthuwa, (2019), (Fact-finding report on Kurunegala), Deva Sarana, Ibbagamuwa.

188. Gehan Gunatilleke (2021); Meera Srinivasan (2019) "Mobs Attack Mosques Muslim Owned Shops and Homes in Sri Lankas Kurunegala District", <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/mobs-attack-mosques-muslim-owned-shops-and-homes-in-sri-lankas-kurunegala-district/article27119473.ece>

189. Fact Finding Report, Kurunegala, 2019.

190. Ibid.

The Madige Annukana village was attacked on the 13th of May. The mosque, 24 homes, 8 business establishments and many vehicles were damaged, looted, and set on fire by close to 300 men. Even though the police arrived at the location, they could not or did not control the mobs. Witnesses mentioned that there was a woman who came with the mobs and identified the Muslim houses to the mobs. Witnesses also stated that there was one person in Buddhist monastic robes who even hit a Muslim woman.<sup>191</sup>

In the focus group discussion with the Sinhala Buddhist women activists, some of whom were military war widows, they shared their reflections and everyday experiences following the Easter attacks. This included them negotiating strong anti-Muslim discourses and actions within their own families.

After the Zaharan incident, everyone became hateful about the Muslims. No one would go to their shops in Galgamuwa. Earlier, we used to share rides on motorbikes to the main road. After the Zaharan incident my child kept telling me don't get on their bikes.<sup>192</sup>

My son will not go to Muslim shops, won't eat in a Muslim shop. He will never go. I have also reduced going.<sup>193</sup>

At the Galgamuwa hospital, a woman who came to give birth was told to remove the abaya and come. Crowds were shouting. They said to not let those in abaya standing in line, into the hospital.<sup>194</sup>

Alongside these events, yet another terrible story unfolded around Dr Segu Shihabdeen Mohamed Shafi, commonly referred to as Dr. Shafi. On the May 23, 2019, the Sinhala language national newspaper Divayina published a front-page article called "Sterilization of 4000 Sinhala Buddhist women after caesarean deliveries." The article further stated that he was a member of the National Towheed Jamaat, which had been named by then, as being responsible for the Easter attacks. Two days later he was arrested on money laundering charges. The police asked any women who had information to come forward.<sup>195</sup>

Prof. Channa Jayasumane of the Rajarata University first started sharing the photo of Dr. Shafi along with the Divayina article.<sup>196</sup> Athureliye Rathana Thero, a powerful Buddhist monk and a Member of Parliament led protests, primarily with women, outside the Kurunegala hospital and the Kurunegala Magistrates Court.<sup>197</sup> In collaboration with the Deputy Inspector General of Kurunegala and the Superintendent of Police of the area, aided and abetted by the Kurunegala Magistrate's wife Weerabandara who was an anaesthetist at the Kurunegala Teaching Hospital, manufactured a forcible sterilization scandal that eventually drove the Muslim doctor and his family out of his home-town. An exhaustive CID investigation into the charges levelled against Dr Shafi found the

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191. Ibid.

192. Focus group discussion with Sinhala Buddhist women activists.

193. Ibid.

194. Ibid.

195. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-doctor-insight-idUSKCN1T71HS>; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/03/sri-lanka-muslims-face-threats-attacks>

196. Ibid.

197. <http://www.adaderana.lk/news/56743/protest-march-against-dr-shafi-creates-traffic-jam-in-kurunegala>

entire scandal to have been manufactured, a criminal conspiracy to persecute a Muslim surgeon and taint his family with links to terrorist groups in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday bombings. Evidence surfaced that proved that some of the women had been offered money to lodge complaints against Dr. Shafi. At least one of the female complainants was found to have been three months pregnant when she claimed Dr. Shafi had sterilized her without her permission. She has subsequently given birth.<sup>198</sup>

The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) in July 2019 informed the Kurunegala Magistrate's Court that the investigation carried out so far had not proven that Dr. Shafi had blocked the fallopian tubes of mothers, amassed wealth in an illegal manner, or maintained links with a terrorist organisation. Later, the Court of Appeal ordered the Ministry of Health to pay his salary arrears and reinstate him. Dr. Shafi returned the money to the Ministry to buy essential medicines.<sup>199</sup>

Karuna, one of our interviewees, has a child, who was four at that time, who was born with congenital disabilities. As the noise around Dr. Shafi grew with the heavy involvement of other professionals and Buddhist monks such as Rathana Thero, she thought that maybe he did something to her as no one else could explain to her how a healthy baby became like this after being born. The more women she had met the more she got convinced. Even in the regular clinic at the hospital for her son, she had met many other Sinhala Buddhist women with male children born like her son. They all started reaffirming each other's opinions that male Sinhala Buddhist children were being medically affected by Dr. Shafi. Her grief about her son got channelled into this mass mobilization and frenzy around Dr. Shafi. As a result, she and her husband went for all the meetings that were called at that time and later even filed a police complaint.

Women like Karuna, who is a teacher, easily believed and followed monks such as Rathana Thero and other local monks whom she knew and trusted. She also took as fact the words of Sinhala Buddhist doctors, such as the director of the Kurunegala Hospital who was making these allegations. One of her own family members, a local government council member also affirmed these false facts and resultant hatred. A year later, when it emerged that Dr. Shafi was not at fault, she felt that her emotions were used for a political agenda. No one, at the end of the day, cared about her hardships or her son's life anymore. She wasn't going to get answers to her medical questions which is what she actually sought by blaming of Dr. Shafi.

The attack on Dr. Shafi and the other attacks on the Muslim community epitomized the impact of the Easter attacks on the Muslims of Kurunegala. Their socio-economic place in Kurunegala society was shaken up, disrupted, and destroyed through violent means. These means were employed by neighbours upon those they have lived among for generations. The discourse that accompanied these attacks are largely gendered where the anxieties with regards to protecting one's community from the "other" is written on to women's bodies in rather literal terms.

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198. <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/gmoa-does-stunning-u-turn-on-kurunegala-hospital-director-weerabandara-who-led-persecution-against-dr-shafi/>

199. [http://www.colombopage.com/archive\\_22A/Jun13\\_1655133834CH.php](http://www.colombopage.com/archive_22A/Jun13_1655133834CH.php)

# Muslim women negotiating public space – within the labour force, culture, religion and marriage

As discussed earlier, Muslim women have always had to fight the uphill battle of ensuring a space for themselves, be it in the home, within their natal or marital families, in the workforce etc. This process got further complicated by the threat to the Muslim community from others.

Minna's mother went to the Middle East in 1982, her older sister dropped out of school to look after her siblings. Minna became a teacher. Minna was married into a family that lived by Thowheed principles of a much more conservative Islam than the one she was brought up with.

I never wore an abaya before marriage. I trained in beauty culture. My husband is a Maulavi and worked in a jewellery shop. After marriage my husband insisted that I cover. He also stopped me from working after my first child was born. The Sunni Thowheed are simple. They don't have big weddings. Women wear only black. They don't wear gold jewellery. So parents are happy to give their daughter in marriage to such families as they are religious and simple. As a result, we (Muslim women married into such families) live under two laws, the law of the country and the law that governs us according to our culture and religion. Either way, women cannot question the men.

Women's mobility was severely restricted in these families. Minna expresses this as follows:

Gethara avoth vitharai mahaththaya (He is your husband only when he is at home). Women can't ask where they go, what they did outside. I don't go outside even if a beggar comes, I send my son.

Women like Minna also find ways to make sense of and justify the practices that are being imposed upon them. She states, "Black is best because everyone can wear it. Everyone cannot afford the different colours."

Minna is of a generation that still remembers the coexistence of different forms of Islam. She remembers Sufis coming from house to house and singing when she was small. Singing is banned by more conservative renditions of Islam like the one practised in her husband's family. She noted that she doesn't see the singing Sufis anymore.

She observes the difference between her life and that of other women in her own community. Based on these differences she has made some decisions that emerge from her own current situation. She says,

My best friend's (who is Muslim) daughters who are 18 and 19 are now going to salons and wearing makeup and dressing differently. We are not allowed to show our feet, we have to cover our hair. But these girls are learning beauty culture. They don't even wear a shawl. I don't talk to my best friend anymore.<sup>200</sup>

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200. Interview with older Muslim woman in her fifties.



Nushra, also a younger Muslims woman in Kurunegala hails from the same village as Abdul Cader Fathima Hadiya, who was married to Zaharan Hashim at the age of 14. Nushra said that Fathima Hadiya's family was part of the Thowheed Jamaat.

Nushra's family, on the contrary, was one of artists. Her father and brothers played music and sang. Her grandmother recited the Qaseedha (religious verse). She used to sing and play the violin too. She participated in the singing competitions on TV such as Sirasa Superstar and Derana Dream Star. She has a lot of friends online. Nushra rides a bike. She worked at the presidential secretariat for one year. After her marriage, her husband, also from a family similar to Minna's husband's, asked her to stop all of this. She tried to sing without him knowing but he found out and has now asked her to stop all of it. She lives on a three-acre piece of land and so she sings and plays the violin at home because no one can hear her. She is teaching her daughter music. After marriage she started wearing a black abaya, as she declared, "to not have attraction." She said that since the Easter attacks, there was a lot of harassment of Muslim women, even in the hospital. Even though she was very active on social media, after the Easter bombings she stopped responding to social media posts.<sup>201</sup>

As is clear from Minna and Nushra's life, Muslim women are subject to intense control in their homes, especially from newer, more conservative iterations of Islam that have influenced younger generations of men and their families in Sri Lanka. In order to negotiate this reality, these young women engage in emotional and physical manoeuvres to retain their sense of self and autonomy in any way possible. In many instances this also involves finding ways to agree with the controls placed upon them and realign their social relationships accordingly as well. At other times it involves finding ways to flout these rules while trying to remain physically and emotionally safe. Nushra's daughter's relationship to music that Nushra is actively cultivating, then becomes our realm of hope for the future.

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201. Interview with young Muslim woman in her twenties.

# Sinhala women's perspectives within the broader discourses of hate

Just as Muslim women evolve a relationship with and negotiate the controls placed upon their personhood, so do the Sinhala women in Kurunegala. The following narrative will clarify further why it was possible for Karuna to easily believe that Dr. Shafi must have done something to her or her child. While carrying out the FGD with Sinhala women, upon being asked what they thought was extremism, they articulated the following thoughts:

Firstly, they recognised that there was international financial support, due to the centrality of oil extraction in the world economy, to spread what they viewed as Muslim extremism (anthavadaya) in Buddhist countries. Arguments that they perceived as being historically grounded were made that many Hindu and Buddhist places in South Asia have become Muslim (or is under the threat of becoming Muslim). They gave the examples of the ancient site of a university set up by the Buddhist King Ashoka – Thakshila – which is now in present-day Bangladesh. They gave the example of Muslims in Myanmar whom they viewed as a threat to that Buddhist nation.

Referring to the Islamic ritual journey of Haj to Mecca, they said:

Ape Budhuhamuduruvange siri patula (the blessed foot of our Lord Buddha) – one is in Makkama (Mecca), one is in Siripada. Why do Muslims go to Makkama? they go to keep their head on ape Buthunvaanse. I don't know where Makkama is. Makkama used to belong to Bharathaya. They have taken over our things. Even Siripada they were trying to Allana, athata ganna giya (take over). They said it was theirs. They worship our Buddha and then go and break our buddha statues. Globally, temples are being built in all countries because of this threat. This is why they are trying to destroy our things. This is extremism.

Secondly, different disconnected events were put together to build the argument that there was a real threat to Sinhala Buddhism and that all Muslims were dangerous. They said,

Many organisations in Muslim communities were responsible for conflict and violence. They broke Buddhist statue in Mawanella,<sup>202</sup> they were responsible for the conflict in Digana,<sup>203</sup> then they attacked churches, and hotels. All these actions were by Muslim anthavaadi (extremists)...In Kurunegala about 3,000 swords were found. Why? Thanakola kappana genava kiwwuwa?" (The (Muslims) said they had swords to cut grass!)

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202. Adding to the terrorism discourse following the Easter attacks, in 2021, 17 men were indicted under the Prevention of Terrorism Act for destruction of a Buddha statue in Mawanella in 2018. <https://www.newswire.lk/2021/04/20/indictments-filed-against-17-over-destruction-of-buddha-statues-in-mawanella/>

203. The Bodu Bala Sena was powerfully active in Kandy since 2013, agitating against Muslims. In the Digana Teldeniya area the Mahason Balakaya (Mahason means deamon of Sinhala mythology, Balakaya is force) was very active prior to the riots in 2018 (Fact-finding Report on the Anti-Muslim Violence in the Kandy District March 2018, Law and Society Trust, Colombo). At least two people were killed, mosques and shops attacked by mobs in Digana in March 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/07/sri-lanka-blocks-social-media-as-deadly-violence-continues-buddhist-temple-anti-muslim-riots-kandy>.

Thirdly, particular characteristics were attributed to Muslim communities, particularly Muslim men. When accidents happen – the whole village of Muslims come together and become really angry. They support the Muslims. I met with an accident and they were really threatening me, they didn't even consider that I was a woman! But if an accident happens in a Sinhala area people are neutral and try to find out what happened and who is at fault.

The position of Muslim women was understood as follows:

Muslim women don't have a sadness in their lives. They have food and they are wealthy and comfortable. They can't leave the house, that's all. They are not poor and suffering. Anyway, there is a change in Muslim women in recent times in Kurunegala. They are more educated; many are studying in international schools. Many ride scooter bikes and are also working. Now they don't want to cover also, they want to look like us!

The above narratives make it clear that conditions of socio-economic duress are read on to the manufactured hatred for Muslim, some of whom are well off. This in turn paves the way for having to evolve a cultural argument for islamophobia, which is found in the imagined threat to Sinhala Buddhist culture from an international, well-endowed Muslim community.

## Gendered experiences of women and social control

The views expressed above take on a whole new magnitude when we observe how they play out within state and social spaces in everyday life. They often feed into community-level monitoring, surveillance, and social control. The local Civil Protection Committee, a community-based structure created during the war to enable surveillance, the Police and the CID worked together as instruments of surveillance and interrogation of a woman from Kattankudi who lived in Kurunegala. Her being from the same town as the Easter Sunday attackers immediately made her suspect. Along with this was the social pressure and control of Niluka, a Sinhala woman, who was ostracized by her own community for bringing a Muslim woman into the village.

In February a Muslim woman Rehana, came to our village. Her Sinhala friend Niluka who she met in the Middle East had helped her come to our village. She had married an American man while she was working in the Middle East. She was from Kattankudi. People had called 119 and we also went as the civil protection committee. We asked her why she came here and that she should register with the Grama Sevaka. We then wrote to the Kattankudi GS to verify her identity. The Kattankudi GS sent the letter in Tamil and we had no way to get it translated. She was getting things from abroad from her husband. She was also buying things for the children in the village like bicycles and books. Then the CID took her away. If anyone visited her, the police came. Now her husband has joined her and they are living together. She has bought land also. No one now talks with Niluka because she had brought a Muslim to our village. People don't even visit her for the New Year.<sup>204</sup>

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204. Focus Group Discussion with Sinhala Buddhist women social activists.

Thus, the space for friendships and support across communities has not just shrunk but is also mostly non-existent. If such choices of relationships are made by a woman, then she is subject to intense control and ostracization, primarily from her own community.

## Discourses around women's bodies and sexuality as part of conjuring inter-ethnic division and hatred

However, the fears about Muslims soon turn towards sexualized hate. This includes<sup>205</sup>

### **Fears about conversions of Sinhala women to Islam**

"In a village close by, 180 Sinhala women have married Muslims and converted."

### **Fears of the abaya and what is "hidden" under it.**

"Thopi mehema vahagena yanawa." (you hide/close yourself like this and move around).

### **Fears about sterilization pills in food from Muslim shops.**

"In a food shop, how we are served and how Muslims are served, are different."

"If a friend sends food, I eat, but I don't eat in Muslim shops – it's not only fear but it's also kalakireema (being fed up). Why are they doing this? Why do they think like this?"

"My son eats at Mafas. He doesn't follow any of this. They think all these stories about the food in Vanthapeithi is full of lies. But there is a fear that this group will come again. Even in the media, this fear is kept alive, even the Cardinal expresses these fears. Because there is so much international support for groups like Zaharan. Our children might face a huge impact from these people in the future."

"As their population increases and increases, there are only a few Sinhala children, so what will happen to our children in the future? We study, go to university, find work, buy some land, build a house, buy a car and then have babies. So then, we have only one or two children. But they marry young and have many children early. So there is a fear that they will take over the country (*rata allagena, yatath kara gani*) Like in Bangladesh and Pakistan. Even in other countries they are in power. Once they take power in the future what will happen to our children?"

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205. Ibid.

## Fears of sterilization pills in underwear

“Bras and panties. An akka I know found hoonu bittara (gheko eggs), in the cup of her bra when she washed it. She was pregnant she has a child who was breast feeding. Its not a lie. After that I don't go to No Limit. Muslim women don't buy those bras. Also, the scooter seats we sit on it, the bike service place said don't put those seats because Muslims brought it. We don't know if they put some chemical in those seats for sterilization.”

## Women's modes of internalising discourses listed above

The Sinhala women didn't see themselves as having extremist views. They explained these views as coming from fear. Another justification for these views was that it was coming from Jaathialaya – love for one's own race – and the strong belief that the Sinhala race was the majority and therefore their racist views expressed as fears, about other communities, were legitimate.

Women articulated ideas of the role of religion in a modern liberal nation state and society, within the bounds of the assumed majority and dominance of Sinhala Buddhist identity. They justified the enforced burials during the pandemic through this. One young Sinhala woman said,

Everyone knows that this is a Sinhala Buddhist country. Everyone respects that. We have to respect **other** cultures also. But we all have to follow the law and health guidelines. Even Catholics bury, I am a Catholic. We shouldn't give special exception to Muslims.

Simultaneously, there was a recognition of how these views and feelings are spread through Buddhist monks who are politically active and are working closely with politicians. Dharmasinghe (2022) exposes in detail how the monk-led groups/organizations, as well as certain lay groups/organizations that are numerically small such as the Sinhala Urumaya, Jathika Hela Urumaya, Bodu Bala Sena, Sihala Ravaya, Ravana Balakaya, Mahason Balakaya and Nava Sinhale have gained power in political and governance structures through electoral politics. He further notes that the monks' leadership of all the organizations can be traced to one common root, the Jathika Hela Urumaya, the first political party in Sri Lankan political history that enabled nine monks to enter Parliament in 2014.

Sinhala women in the FGD strongly felt that Zaharan's wife was *anthavadhi* (extremist):

Muslim kattiyage heti. (Muslims are like that) – what the husband says they don't question. We would have divorced if we didn't agree with what he was doing. Muslim women are not working, they don't have an income. They have food and comforts but cannot question the men. Also, they got so much money. Zaharan included his wife in all his planning. He put in place a future plan for several years to supports all his family members. This is anthavaadhaya extremism.

According to them, the LTTE was also anthavaathi. With some distance and the passing of time, and more importantly with having spaces to meet and listen to women in the North and East, the Sinhala Buddhist women had a complicated analysis of those who were part of the LTTE. They recognized that many people in the North and East had lost loved ones and property because of a few leaders who they identified as anthavaadhi. They recognized that many who were forced into these movements were therefore innocent. They explained that the boy who put medicine on the Tamil fighters injured during the fighting were not anthavaadhi.

According to some of the women, anthavaadhi meant listening only to what is said as religion as stated by the mosque. When you don't do your own research, find out what other religions are saying and don't question the palliya – the mosque – it is extremism. However, they didn't see themselves as anthavaadhi even though they too sought direction from what they perceived were religious principles and followed what the temple/monks state without question.

When the women were speaking there was an easy moving between the terms Koti<sup>206</sup> – a Sinhala slang word meaning tiger that refers to the LTTE and other Tamil militants and Zaharan. They said – “Koti genalla themma” (the tigers were brought here) or “Koti gahanne kohitada” (where are the tigers going to attack?). The old fears and prejudices against the Tamils were stoked and connected with the fears against the Muslims.

## Community-level responses to the violence

In Hammaliya, the Masjeethu Thakwa was attacked in May following the Easter attacks. This was called the Podi Palliya. More than 100 men had come on motor bikes and attacked the mosque but by the time the police came they had gone. The Podi Palliya used to provide free access to water to all the homes including Sinhala homes. Now this has stopped. The mob also set fire to the house of a Muslim family. Neela Akka's son and friends put the fire out. Neela Akka kept three Muslim families in her home for many days.<sup>207</sup>

Feminist organisations such as Women's Resource Centre (WRC) organised women in Bandaranayakapura and Malkaduwwa villages across diverse ethnic communities (Muslim, Tamil and Sinhala). Together they formed women's vigilance committees. Women leaders were trained on how to respond if violence arose in their communities. The WRC also had consultations with Muslim women and prepared a report on their gendered experiences in the aftermath of the Easter Attacks. One of the most important concerns that emerged in this report was language-based discrimination, particularly in accessing health services and in public health notifications in the COVID 19 context. Muslim women shared that they experienced difficulties and harassment in hospitals, government offices and by Public Health Inspectors during the pandemic as all government communication was in Sinhala making it inaccessible to them thus exposing them to harassment. This report led to a petition with 500 signatures which was handed over to the Governor of the Wayamba Province and other relevant state officials .

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206. Koti (tiger) the derogatory slang used for Tamil militants of the LTTE.

207. Interview with Neela Akka Sinhala Buddhist woman in her seventies.

Women who were part of civil protection committees also mobilized in some villages to respond to possible threats of violence. One such member of a committee, a Sinhala person said, “We heard that there was going to be attacks. Muslims were also worried that their houses will be attacked again like in the 1970s. However, we were organized as civil protection committees and managed to diffuse the tensions.” She further informed us that “since the Digana incident (of attacks on Muslims) we have done several actions to build reconciliation. For example, the *thorana* (religious pandol) at the local temple was painted by young Muslim men. Women came into the temple wearing shawls in one *sanhinthiyawa* (reconciliation) programme. That day, all the food was made by Muslim women. Boys play volleyball together so that there are opportunities to meet.”<sup>208</sup>

In some areas, local politicians visited mosques in the local areas along with Buddhist monks to ask if there were any issues. Locally, religious leaders, local politicians and the police were vigilant to avoid violence.<sup>209</sup>

As one woman who was a military war widow remarked, “We also changed because we started travelling to the North and East and Puttalam after the war ended. We sat and listened to those women who shared their pain. These interactions really moved us. This helped us to focus on humanity and equality and respond during this crisis time as well.”<sup>210</sup>

In terms of understanding these experiences from the standpoint of women’s lives the words of a Sinhala Buddhist feminist activist who was interviewed for this research become extremely important.

Fundamentalists have a constructed ideology that they follow. Radicals are changing and challenging hegemonic ideologies. However, in all these movements there is a *jathivadaya* (racism) and strong patriarchal elements. You never see a woman leader in these movements. Radical politics also protects patriarchy.

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208. Focus Group Discussion Sinhala Buddhist Women social activists.

209. Ibid.

210. Ibid.



## Kurunegala Case Study Conclusion: “Alu Ata Gini”<sup>211</sup> (burning embers)

The Kurunegala case study illustrates the ways in which the state has empowered structures of discrimination and everyday violence against Muslim communities, particularly women. In the aftermath of the Easter attacks, many mosques, shops, and homes of Muslim communities were attacked by organized mobs that were instigated and supported by political actors. Sinhala women were told resolutely that the Sri Lankan state is Sinhala Buddhist. This discourse encouraged a love for the Sinhala race and the strong belief that it is superior to the Tamil and Muslim race (*jathiya*). Within this overarching context, the otherwise numerically small monk-led organisations in Kurunegala have gained credibility and political power. Most worryingly, such power has been garnered through democratic political processes.

Sinhala women expressed fear about attacks to the Sinhala Buddhist population which were highly sexualized – including *vanda pethi* (drugs to cause infertility) in food or tablets in underwear. The most tragic example of this was the women who came forward to make complaints against Dr. Shafi. In this case there was systemic complicity and deliberate actions by the health sector, police, and other law enforcement officials as well as the media. Together they manufactured “truth,” based entirely on false claims targeting doctor Shafi. For one of the Sinhala Buddhist women who made a complaint, the aligning of state systems, health professionals, the police and other agents of the law, whom she perceived as legitimate and “neutral,” along with powerful Buddhist monks and mainstream media, spouting these falsities about the doctor, made it easy for her to believe and go along with the relentless attack on Dr. Shafi. Simultaneously, the standpoint of a sex worker exposes everyday sexual violence from men in her own Sinhala community while identifying class and not ethnicity as the defining structure that mediated her experiences of violence as well as access to justice and dignity.

The impact of militarization in their everyday lives also became clear as they interchangeably spoke of *koti* (“tigers” – the derogatory slang used for LTTE militants) and Zaharan when describing their fears of attacks.

Both the Muslim and Tamil minority communities in Kurunegala have lived with a history of marginalization and communal violence, including numerous brutal gang rapes during anti-Tamil riots in 1977. However, there has also been a history of syncretic religious practices such as the worship of Galebandara Deiyyo. The impact of the war was felt both in terms of large numbers of men joining the military, as well as large populations of displaced Muslims from the North settling in Kurunegala.

Women’s everyday negotiations and interactions are strongly influenced by the ethnic segregation of state administrative structures and the religious segregation of schools. Additionally, young Muslim women have been negotiating access to education, work, and mobility in the context of

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211. A phrase used by the Sinhala Buddhist women to describe Kurunegala in the Focus Group Discussion.

the growing influence of global conservative Islamic ideologies in their families and home spaces, along with institutionalized racism in accessing state services.

Young Sinhala women spoke of the importance of having friends from other communities, particularly through school systems that allowed for diversity of religious identities and ethnic identities. Community women's groups have continued to create spaces for collective trust building and other forms of collective action. This has taken the form of identifying common issues for women, such as exploitative migrant work and domestic violence about which they can work together. The rich history of rural mobilizing, class-based struggles and the existence of spaces of resistance to state violence gives a strong foundation for women to continue to resist structural violence and discrimination.

In conclusion, Kurunegala paints a picture simultaneously of seemingly unsurmountable segregation, division, difference and hatred between communities, along with efforts at coexistence or tolerance at least among women and in some instances, the labouring classes, to work together on common issues.

# CONCLUSION

The Sri Lanka study explores how women experienced and navigated the forces of violent extremism in their lives in relation to the structures of marriage, family, community, and nation. Having delved deeper into three regions in Sri Lanka, a few broad conclusions can be discerned from the above narrative.

This study places women's everyday experiences within broader processes of state formation in Sri Lanka. Since independence, deliberate actions were taken to ensure that Sri Lanka became a Sinhala Buddhist nation, including giving this religion the foremost place in the constitution. Tamil minority communities faced discrimination in language rights and Plantation Tamils lost citizenship rights and went through several processes of repatriation. In this context, the gradually evolving imagination of Tamil nationalism (focused on the Tamil language and cultural consciousness) gained momentum and became demands for self-determination. This Tamil nation had no place for Tamil-speaking Muslims as it became clear in the forced eviction of Muslims by the LTTE from the north in 1990 and the Muslim-Tamil tensions that have continued since. This paper highlights the feminist scholarship that has explored the gendered impacts of this Tamil nationalism. It is within these broader political processes that we place Hameetha Umma's everyday life. She lived her life with the impact of losing her father who was of Indian origin, as he was forcibly repatriated back to India under the Sirima-Shastri pact.

Several laws that deliberately target minority ethnic and religious communities including the Prevention of Terrorism Act, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Act and other laws with regard to land, were used to alienate minority communities from their lands. In the aftermath of the Easter attacks, emergency regulations were passed directly affecting Muslim women who wore the niqab, as these laws prohibited clothing that concealed the full face. In the post-COVID-19 context, regulations that forced the cremations of loved ones, again impacted the religious rights of Muslim communities. All of these laws contribute to punitive and discriminatory measures against minorities both in terms of direct legal action as well as using the law to affirm the existing climate of hatred.

The three case studies highlighted the realities of spatial, administrative, and educational segregation based on religion and ethnicity. These structural factors have had an impact on the everyday lives of women and girls in profound ways.

In each location, we documented histories of violence by different actors including militant political movements, state-sanctioned mob violence and riots particularly against the minority Muslim and Tamil communities. In terms of the public political sphere, we documented state inaction when violence happened, including, for example, when the Ahmadiyya refugees were targeted in Negombo. Also, community members shared experiences where young Muslim men were asked to report to the police station every day as all Muslims were treated as suspect by state and society after the Easter attacks. In Kurunegala and Negombo there was involvement of monk-led political groups, including monks who were members of parliament, espousing hate speech propagating attacks

on Muslim businesses. Muslim men such as Dr. Shafi were targeted individually destroying his long-standing contribution to his community – both Sinhala and Muslim – and making it impossible for him and his family to live in their own home. Community structures such as civil defence committees, where some of the women interviewed were also active members, continued to play complicated roles. They are gate-keepers and the surveillance mechanism of the state who also execute militarized responses on behalf of the state. At other times, these same structures stepped in to prevent violence and initiate proactive measures to build trust within the communities.

These incidents are placed within the broader political economic changes that took place in each site, including struggles for power and control of markets and businesses, increasing populations of internally-displaced people and mass-scale labour migration to West Asia. This study also documents class-based experiences of many poor working-class people such as one Sinhala Catholic woman who lost her home in Negombo due to coastal erosion caused by the Port City in Colombo. She then channelled her anger about this into fear and hatred of the Muslim community in her neighbourhood.

For young women, educational spaces, including schools, tuition classes, and school-based online forums became where they directly experienced racism and discrimination. In the Batticaloa case study of Rihana, and with the teacher at the Sri Shanmuga Hindu Ladies College in Trincomalee, the school administration, teachers, parents, local Tamil media and Tamil politicians collectively mobilized to define and protect the “purity” of their ethnic identity and to stop the “polluting” of this identity through conversion or even exposure to the “other” religion, in this case, Islam.

Online spaces also were identified as forums where religious ideologies were shared, sometimes within family groups, and sometimes within large religious online services. This was particularly true in terms of some Christian evangelical movements. These spaces were predominantly populated by women. In the Batticaloa case study, we documented the racist comments within Tamil social media sites against Muslims, following the story of Rihana’s religious conversion coming into the news.

In the continuum of patriarchal controls, bodies and sexuality of all persons become an important site upon which power and violence are enacted. Muslim women negotiated controls upon their bodies and lives in complicated ways to ensure education, employment, mobility and relative freedom. One Malay Muslim woman described how her relatives were “western-type” in Colombo, her mother wore sari and she wore the abaya. However, she travelled, was educated, and earned an income with her “abaya and her umbrella as her weapons.” Thus, women exist in the interstices of these multiple layers of control and their negotiation of the same is far from simple. Young Muslim women have been negotiating access to education, work, and mobility in contexts where influences of global Islamic reformist ideologies had placed constraints on their choices. These ideologies and constraints were often practiced in the private realm in their families and home spaces. At the same time Muslim women had to engage in fraught negotiations in accessing public spaces of education, work and mobility due to institutionalized racism.

For all the women interviewed, their primary site of struggle was within the family and the institution of marriage. For Rihana, it was her struggle to choose her religious beliefs. For a Catholic Sinhala woman in Negombo, it was to choose not to marry. In Kurunegala, it was a young Muslim woman's struggle to sing and play music in public. For another Sinhala Buddhist woman, her attempt to be safe from sexual violence in the home was her fundamental negotiation. In the story of Rihana, her choice of converting to Islam was seen as dishonouring her family and the whole Tamil community. There were built up fears about Tamil women converting and marrying Muslims in the community she grew up in through hearsay and on social media. The only way that honour could be restored was when she was "returned" to her family with the involvement of the police and religious leaders who were men from both communities. These negotiations within the family and institution of marriage exist in a continuum and occur at an individual level while being amplified and affirmed by the collective. All these practices are snugly housed within a system that declares what a religion, community, identity etc. MUST entail and anything that goes beyond these norms is declared to be non-belonging.

Sinhala women, while they did not perceive themselves as having extremist views, expressed fear about sexualized attacks on the Sinhala Buddhist population – including by the inclusion of *vanda pethi* (infertility drugs) in food and through pills placed in underwear. The most tragic example of this was the women who came forward to make complaints against Dr. Shafi. In this case, there was systemic complicity and deliberate actions from the health sector, police, and law enforcement, as well as the media that came together to create a false truth targeting Dr. Shafi. For one of the Sinhala Buddhist women who made a complaint, the aligning of state systems that she perceived as "neutral", health professionals, the police, other agents of the law, powerful Buddhist monks and mainstream media, made it easy to believe and go along with the relentless attack on Dr. Shafi. The relationship between longstanding deep seated racism in the Sinhala community against Muslims and this consolidated propagation of racism by structures of power are intertwined with one another.

As the reflections of Vijaya from Batticaloa illustrate, she continued to negotiate patriarchal control and violence in her home, within the LTTE which she joined as a child soldier, and when she returned home and married an abusive man for her "security". Her body was constantly at risk of violence and abuse, by her father, by the military if she was caught and in her marriage that was to ensure her "security" and yet she faces daily violence by her husband. For the Sinhala Buddhist women in Kurunegala, some of whom were military widows, the LTTE and by extension, Vijaya, would be an "extremist," as she is part of what they see as an 'extremist movement'. However, Vijaya spoke of her membership in the LTTE with pride. The movement gave her a sense of identity and meaning in a life that was otherwise one where she held barely any agency. At the same time, she also has a critique of hierarchies within the movement among fellow militants based on class, region and gender. These multiple truths exist within her along with myriad complicated emotions. The rendition of her as a violent extremist leaves no room for such complexity. Interestingly, if space for such complexity was made possible, perhaps the Sinhala women who saw her as an 'extremist' may even observe some similarities between the complexities in their own lives and that of hers.

Women who were part of Zaharan's group found space and meaning for social action. Women's rights were articulated within the framework of the family. Dowry practices were prohibited and women who were part of his group stopped wearing ostentatious gold jewellery completely. Women were permitted to work in spaces where there were no men. Opportunities for Islamic education were made available for women. Through the institution of marriage, women and girls from extremely poor families were 'taken care of' and 'given protection'. Sinhala Buddhist women in Kurunegala, had mixed views about Zaharan's wife, who was from a village in Kurunegala. Some felt she was "extremist" as she knew all his plans and benefited from his wealth. Others felt, based on stereotypical generalization about Muslim society that, as she was within a Muslim marriage, she could not question her husband. We do not know the truth of Zahran's wife. But from what we are able to glean from this research, her reality – both her private realm and her political ideas – like the women we spoke to and heard of in Kattankudi, would have been more complicated.

Some of the women interviewed have engaged with the discourse around violent extremism and have tried to critically explore its meanings in gendered terms. According to Kamina, extremism can be observed by looking at how a particular community (ethnicity or religion) treats those who question the norms of their own society and/or chose to live outside of such norms. Often these norms are gendered and are to do with control of sexuality and is tied to the honour of the family and the community. She gave specific examples such as how a particular community responds to those who are from the LGBTQI community; or those who are non-believers; or to women who challenge social norms. A Sinhala Buddhist feminist activist reflected that fundamentalists have a constructed ideology that they follow. Meanwhile radicals, according to her, are changing and challenging hegemonic ideologies. However, in all these movements there is *jathivadaya* (racism) and strong patriarchal elements. She said, "you never see a woman leader in these movements. Radical politics also protect patriarchy."

In Kurunegala, in their everyday interactions, young Sinhala women spoke of the importance of having friends from other communities, particularly through school systems that allowed for a diversity of religious identities and ethnic identities. Community women's groups have continued to create spaces for collective trust- building and collective action. This has taken the form of identifying common issues for women, such as exploitative migrant work to work together on. The rich history of rural mobilizing, class-based struggles and the existence of spaces of resistance to state violence gives a strong foundation for women to continue to resist structural violence and discrimination.

The online space is an important one for women's expression. Young women were part of many social groups on WhatsApp and Facebook. In the aftermath of the Easter attacks, these spaces became hostile with friends and teachers posting and sharing hate speech. However, fantasy spaces of cosplay, anime and gaming provided freedom for expression and interactions for young women of a particular socio-economic class, even as they negotiated the patriarchal control of mobility and work options IRL (In Real Life).

The case studies documented histories of women's activism in the local settings. This included long-standing housing rights struggles in Negombo, farmers' struggles in Kurunegala, as well as women's rights movements and peace-building efforts in extremely divided and contested terrains. Neela Akka protected Muslim families in her neighbourhood, in her house, when the mosque in her village was attacked in the post-Easter attacks violence. The TMS group in Batticaloa continues to promote coexistence and nonviolence in Batticaloa. These small but significant spaces play a crucial role in shifting the public political discourses away from "violent extremism" towards a discourse of solidarity, justice, and rights. "Yesterday, today, tomorrow, we stand for humanity" a slogan written by a Catholic Sinhala woman activist was the overarching framing for some of the big public actions in Negombo in the aftermath of the Easter attacks.

Overall, a picture emerges of myriad ways in which ethnic/religious difference exists in a hardened way in different parts of Sri Lanka. These differences are strongly reaffirmed by structures such as administration and education that are segregated rather than being used as a means to build coexistence. The expression of these differences is often written upon the bodies of women, both by those within their own communities and by those of the "other." Simultaneously, all these sites have a history of hybridity, syncretism, or at least mutual coexistence. It is possible to trace the different processes within and beyond each community that has manufactured the discourse as well as current experiences of seemingly irreconcilable differences and resultant conflict that is viewed as inevitable. Women are consumers of this manufactured truth as it emerges from legitimate voices within state and society.

Thankfully, there are also histories of community-level mobilization for truth-telling, prevention of violence, peace-keeping, and enabling societies of coexistence. Women have been an integral part of this as those affiliated to religious organisations, teachers, social activists, or just individual young people who wish for a stable and peaceful life.

These parallel processes of division/conflict and peace-building/coexistence are all housed within a context of consistently increasing economic and political duress that affects all working poor across ethnicity/religions – differently but equally. Situations of war and conflict further exacerbate these economic stresses. Holding all these factors together are the multifaceted experiences of women's everyday lives.



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