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## **Gendering the Internally Displaced: Problem Bodies, Fluid Boundaries and Politics of Civil Society Participation in Sri Lanka**

Sandya Hewamanne<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

In this paper I argue that the internally displaced Muslim women's experience of displacement and their perception of new developments since the last round of peace initiative between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE are significantly different from their male counterparts in that the women find these experiences as empowering in some respects. The paper also offers evidence that this empowerment is differently experienced by women belonging to different social classes. Women have been identified as a problem body within the Muslim community and restrictions on Muslim women have been justified through discourses on family honor and frivolous women. The forced regional boundary crossing had resulted in Muslim women playing a different role in public space as the targeted population for NGO activities. They have become "a needed body of persons," through a skillfully negotiated traversing among fluid boundaries, most of which are not physical. While the state, the humanitarian agencies and the urban Muslim community in which they live now all shape the gendered subjectivities of internally displaced Muslim people, the very same discourses allow women to transcend barriers they formally faced in entering public space and to negotiate positions within and against the subjectivities created for them.

*Keywords:* Muslim women, Sri Lanka, qualitative research, internal displacement

"Nobody likes to be called refugees. We like to be called "IDPs" because that shows we have another place to go back to." Shanaz said this using the English letters IDP to denote Internally Displaced People. "And the place we have there is huge. It is hard to describe. It is not a congested slum like here. There was blue water, green trees and the air was pure. Fruit and vegetables taste fresh and healthy there. No one would go hungry in our village," she added. Variations of this sentiment were expressed by many internally displaced Muslim women I talked to individually or in focus groups in Puttalam, a district on Sri Lanka's West coast. Their eyes glittered and arms opened wide while talking about the villages they had left. This paper will discuss how they perceived and responded to the new possibilities in the internally displaced people's settlements in Puttalam and envisioned their future connections to their villages in Mannar.

These Muslim women and their families were driven from their homes in the war-torn northern and eastern provinces by the chauvinistic Tamil separatist group LTTE (Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam), who in their quest to create an ethnic Tamil homeland

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in the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka, committed grave atrocities against long term residents of these provinces who belong to other ethnic communities. The war between government forces and the LTTE has raged for over twenty-five years with heavy casualties on both sides. In addition to the death toll, close to one million people belonging to all three major ethnic groups, Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim, are displaced within Sri Lanka. While some Sinhala and Muslim people fled the cross fire, most communities were uprooted through horrific forms of violence against entire villages. The most significant single act against Muslims was the massacre on August 4, 1990 at Meera Jumma mosque in Katthankuddi, where 300 men were gathered for prayer. The LTTE hacked 120 to death and injured many others. By October 1990, the LTTE branded Muslim people in Northern areas traitors to the Tamil cause and ordered them to leave immediately. Some were given only two hours before the LTTE started murdering them and looting their villages. Within days, over 60,000 Muslims were homeless. Many fled south, especially to Puttalam, where a sizable Muslim majority lived in harmony with Sinhala villagers and prospered in trade, fishing and agriculture.

After the initial shock of displacement, dynamics between the local Muslim population and the internally displaced people started shaping the new arrivals' identity in interesting ways. The local community initially sought a paternalistic relationship with the newcomers. However, the entrance of the humanitarian agencies into the picture and the particular assumptions that underlined their activities among the IDPs allowed for complex alliances, tensions and development of new practices among the IDPs as well as within the local community. I argue that the displaced women's experience and their perception of new developments since the peace initiative between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE differ significantly from their male counterparts. The women find these experiences empowering in some respects and women belonging to different social classes experience and express these empowering aspects differently.

Women have been identified as a problem body within the Muslim community, and restrictions on them have been justified through discourses on family honor and women's frivolity (Mernissi 1987; Ahmed 1992). However, the forced regional boundary crossing elevated their public role as the targeted population for NGO activities. Women belonging to all social classes within the internally displaced community have become "a needed body of persons," by skillfully negotiating and traversing fluid boundaries, most of which are not physical. While the state, humanitarian agencies, and the urban Muslim community all shape the gendered subjectivities of the internally displaced Muslim people, these same discourses allow women to transcend some of the barriers they had faced in entering public space and to negotiate positions within and against the subjectivities created for them.

This paper is based on focus group discussions and individual interviews conducted at two IDP settlements in Puttalam district during 2003-2004 and summer 2006. The field work was part of a broader research project that included other IDP communities in Anuradhapura and Batticaloa and some observations from these sites will be noted for comparison. In addition to internally displaced people, I held focus group discussions with members of the local Muslim community in 2003-2004 and 2008. Throughout these years, I kept in close contact with several NGO officials who worked among IDP communities, and formal interviews with them as well as everyday observations of their work also inform my analysis.

## **Pollution and Purity of Displacement**

According to Cohen and Deng (1998a, 1998b), internally displaced people have been forced from their homes by armed conflict and systematic human rights violations, but remain within the borders of their country. Since the 1990s the number of internally displaced people in the world has fluctuated between 25 million and 35 million and now exceeds the number of refugees; people who cross borders seeking refuge in other countries (Weiss 1999:363) (ten years old stats, can you update?). Cohen and Deng lament that these huge numbers of people do not fall under the jurisdiction of any international institution specifically charged with their protection. Since the care of the internally displaced is the responsibility of their own governments, any intervention by the international community raises questions of sovereignty, territorial integrity and interference in internal affairs. While many countries have made international intervention impossible, Cohen and Deng note that Sri Lanka highly welcomed international assistance (1998a:14).

Studies on internally displaced people in Sri Lanka have amply highlighted the trauma and the appalling socio-economic conditions confronting them (Seneviratne et al 1998; Hasbulla 2001; Abeysekere 2002; Zackariya and Shanmugaratnam 2002; Muneer 2003; Gomez 2002). However, only a few studies have focused on women's unique experiences or empowering aspects of these experiences. Giles (2003:1) writes that while women acutely suffer from the violence of war, it sometimes releases them from the constricting hierarchies of peace-time. She and other authors also hold that war time gains and empowering aspects can rarely be sustained in the aftermath of war (Giles et al 2003; Utas 2005). While noting that women suffer daily forms of violence within patriarchal societies this paper focuses on women's experiences of empowerment during the ambivalent and anxiety-ridden time between war and peace.

According to Thiruchandran (1999), although war widows and some displaced women feel relieved to escape the restrictions of marriage due to the war, they also find they are still being controlled by patriarchal influences, such as gossip, rumors, sexual teasing, harassment, and threats of violence. Ruwanpura (2006) notes that although the number of female-headed households in the Eastern province has increased due to the armed conflict and other political and economic reasons, such families operate within patriarchal social structures and cannot be celebrated as a feminist victory.

De Alwis (2004) discusses how internally displaced people stress "purity" of their displacement through strict surveillance and policing of women's bodies and spatial practices (216). According to De Alwis, although the local Muslim population initially welcomed the internally displaced Muslim people and helped them settle in Puttalam, by 1993, tensions had developed. The local Muslim population associated many of the problems that they were facing with actions of the newcomers. These tensions resulted in narratives that produced the internally displaced as dangerous and corrupting 'others' who have lost their moral bearings due to losing their connection to their homeland. While men are constructed as "aggressive and unruly" women are constructed as sexually loose (221). The discourses and practices of the internally displaced in turn construct 'purity' of displacement in response to the local population's narrative of 'pollution' from losing connection to the land. Narratives romanticizing the homeland and the increased policing of the women's movement are two such attempts to construct the purity of displacement.

In this highly nuanced analysis, De Alwis (2005) explains how internally displaced peoples' purifying discourses and practices confront the hegemonic formations of the local

Muslim population and the humanitarian agencies. My research, conducted a little more than decade after De Alwis's research, demonstrated even more complex discursive shifts, as the internally displaced communities confronted ever-changing dynamics of the civil war and peace efforts. The assumptions about religious communities held by the NGOs working in Puttalam significantly shaped the ways in which internally displaced men and women adjusted and performed their gender roles. Mats Utas, describing how Sierra Leonean refugee women presented themselves solely as victims to effectively establish themselves as 'legitimate recipients' of humanitarian aid, coins the term 'victimcy' to encompass the agency of self staging as victim (2005: 409-411). In very different circumstances internally displaced Muslim women also performed the "assumed backwardness" of Muslim women to accrue certain benefits in the form of special steps taken to ensure their smooth transition to civil society participation. The form and intensity of such self-presentation varied, depending on the women's social class and the extent to which they bought into the NGO agenda. The dynamics of their NGO participation and the way they experienced particular new roles that were shaped by their "internally displaced" status is discussed below.

### **Humanitarian Work and Gender**

In 2003, when I met women from relocated villages of Hajjiarpuram and Nallawatthe they had been living in Puttalam for close to thirteen years. The NGOs working in Puttalam, many are local organizations funded by well-known International non-governmental Organizations (INGO) such as OXFAM, FORUT and UNICEF, started with providing humanitarian aid to the IDPS. However, by 2003, they no longer provided humanitarian aid, and many have changed their rhetoric to focus on participatory development as opposed to aid. Efforts have been made to quell the resentment of local residents by extending micro-credit and similar programs to them. These efforts have not altogether extinguished the locals' scrutiny of the legitimacy and moral purity of the displaced, especially women, but their criticisms now focus on different problems. For example, local Muslims commented on how NGOs seem fixated on improving the Muslim women's lot and forget that women's lives cannot be improved without also helping men. Another change since 1993 is the integration of displaced Muslim men into the agricultural labor pool and fishing industry.

In 1993, De Alwis noted that the internally displaced people called themselves 'refugees' as opposed to the more academically and politically correct, internally displaced people. By the time of my research, in 2003-2004, they had steadfastly adopted the term 'IDP' and were able to explain in no uncertain terms why they do not like to be called refugees, which implied that they are destitute and begging for charity. 'Internally displaced' denoted that they were forcibly evicted from their land, to which they would eventually return. The adaptation of the term 'IDP' not only addressed the 'pollution' narratives of the local residents but also aligned their existence with the changed NGO stance from humanitarian aid to participatory development.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the NGO ideologies

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<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of their displacement, when humanitarian agencies are providing essential aid, such as food, medicine, housing materials and pots and pans, presenting themselves as refugees who needed to be taken care of made a lot of sense. Participatory development approaches do not need such self presentation.

and assumptions shaped the way people, especially the internally displaced Muslim community, constructed and performed community and gender identities.

NGOs working in the area considered displaced Muslim women the most appropriate vehicle through which to reach the community. As reasons for their heavy focus on women, officers cited the difficulty of getting men to participate in meetings due to their day jobs, and the need to uplift Muslim women's status. The NGO working in the two relocated villages that I studied intentionally organized "women-only community-based organizations (CBOs)," and their arm for the Puttalam IDP work was called the Women's Development Forum, and was staffed almost exclusively by women.<sup>3</sup> According to Darshini, the female NGO officer in charge of the forum, the intention was to provide a safe space where Muslim women, formerly kept secluded within the domestic sphere, could take baby steps toward community leadership. None of the officials said they are motivated by the donor agencies' concern for gender (this the local officials usually interpreted as getting women involved in CBO activities) and, more specifically, improving Muslim women's status. However, the international donors' concern was made clear by the inclusion of a "gender specialist" on their program evaluation team to gauge whether enough effort had been extended to "include women" in NGO activities.

Only a few displaced women said they worked as laborers. A few were nurses and teachers back in their villages. Several Hajjiarpuram women held paid positions as bank managers and pre-school teachers in CBO related projects. These positions were originally intended to be unpaid, but women pressured the NGOs into paying them. Even within the IDP community, men had mixed feelings about women's participation in CBOs. As one man put it, "now women have nothing else to do but attend NGO meetings." Men usually talked about the situation in an amused, indulgent way, almost the way adults tolerated children's peculiar behavior. One elderly man described his daughter-in-law's CBO activities, "She goes there, she talks with other women, comes home and tells us all the stories... She needs a break from home, it is good for her."

Indulgent tone aside, the particular structure of CBOs and NGO practices initiated new tensions within the family. Only a few women stayed away from CBO activities due to male objections, but almost all had to tread cautiously. All the women I talked to said that their men encouraged them to attend the meetings and savings programs in the hope of obtaining micro credit. However, most said that it was important to finish their other duties, such as cooking and cleaning, before attending to CBO work since not doing so could get them into trouble with their husbands. Due to a scheduling confusion, NGO officials and I arrived an hour late for one discussion forum. The women had graciously waited for us and agreed to a short discussion. Answering a question about the husbands' support for CBO activities Sameera giggled with her friend Reena and said, "If you don't take care of your other duties, yes, you could expect to be beaten." To more laughter, she added, "Like today...we are late." The raucous laughter and their willingness to stay even after the forum was over made it hard to determine whether her remark was a reflection of reality or a joke. Considering Sri Lankan rural culture and gender roles as a whole, disapproval and possible punishment could work as restraining tools necessitating social navigation strategies.

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<sup>3</sup> The NGO wished to be anonymous, and the officers of the local branch especially requested that its name not be divulged. Officers' names have also been changed to protect confidentiality.

Women almost always framed their participation in terms of working towards their family's development, as "sacrificial mothers and wives should do." Casting their new public activities within the rubric of traditional gender roles considerably eased tensions and male resentment. They also seemed more careful in their household tasks to prevent criticism that might hinder their CBO participation. Darshini, in fact, laughingly mentioned that CBO members are much more diligent about their household activities than non-member counterparts. Most women participated in CBO activities to obtain loans for their husbands and found that starting and maintaining income generating activities of their own within the existing economic structure difficult.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, they obtained loans to improve their husbands' economic activity and hoped that the family will develop indirectly due to their CBO activities. The possibility of obtaining a loan through their wives is the major reason that most men tolerated their wives' public activities. This situation did not allow the kind of empowerment the NGO officials envisioned and claimed for women's CBO activities. While the women's services as loan providers brought them some decision-making power within the family, the improved household income remained with the male household head. In contrast, CBO members who earned a monthly salary for CBO work achieved considerable power in household decision making. The major objective of CBOs is to enable significant empowerment for Muslim women. The realities seem to point toward a different approach.

Few of the young men I talked to made envious remarks about what they perceived as the NGOs single-minded focus on developing women's lives. All of them uncritically agreed that women have special disadvantages that necessitated such focus on them. None connected the need for "uplifting Muslim women's lot" to global discourses on the "war against terror" and its supplementary component of "saving Muslim women from her traditional bonds." However, they discerned their own relatively powerless position vis-a-vis other young men in the region and the country. Several pointed out that Sinhala women and even local Muslim women have more power than they do because the former belong to the majority community and the latter are privileged to reside in their own ancestral lands. Mahees, a young internally displaced man currently working as an agricultural laborer, complained: "My land was taken by terrorists. I don't see us going back to our land for a hundred years or so. I have no education to get a job and I will remain a slave working for other people all my life. It is wrong that the NGOs only think about women. What about us? Why aren't there classes for us? My sister ridicules me by saying that I can come to her embroidery class if I want to, but I say, why aren't they organizing electrical work, plumbing and bicycle repair classes for men like us?" With such feelings of marginality and discrimination, it is hardly surprising that these men would use their wives' work for their own gain.

Both among the internally displaced and the local Muslim community, most young men start agricultural labor or fishing at a very young age. Considered unsuited for such hard work, young women continue their schooling. This trend is also prompted by the few paid positions available to educated women within the CBOs and the educational workshops in which their mothers participate as part of their NGO work. Internally

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<sup>4</sup> While the principles on which most micro credit programs are based did not support such transfer of funds in Puttalam IDP settlements many understood micro-credit to be loans that the women would obtain for their family income generating activities. NGO officers did not like this but in most cases they turned a blind eye as long as the husband used the money prudently and used the income for his family's betterment.

displaced people were also increasingly realizing the importance of developing good relations with the majority Sinhala community and becoming comfortable with the idea of sending promising girls (and sometimes boys) to better schools in the city.<sup>5</sup> “While we are holding the tube (to water the onion fields) all the girls go to school in the city. And then they will elope with Sinhala men, and we will end up uneducated and wifeless,” one internally displaced young man joked. This comment suggests acute anxieties of men who feel multiple layers of powerlessness, as internally displaced, uneducated, and members of a religious, ethnic minority. As Hyndman and De Alwis (2003) note, gender cannot be prioritized over religion, ethnicity, social class, or caste but should be understood in the context of history, location and politics (219). A more complex and context-specific understanding of gender, incorporating social, cultural, and political locations, will help NGOs remedy some of the problems associated with women’s NGO participation.

These weaknesses notwithstanding the spaces opened for women’s civil society participation allowed them to achieve a constrained empowerment through community organizing and enabled them to traverse the constructed boundaries of public and private. The NGOs’ attempts to provide a safe, women-only environment for their CBO activities helped them to take small steps toward becoming leaders but produced more segregation and a hierarchy of power and influence with regard to men and women’s civil society activities. On two occasions I witnessed women being silent at forums where men were present but engaging in spirited discussion on the same topics at women-only venues. The men’s general disregard for women’s CBO work is partly a result of the NGOs overzealous commitment to involving women in civil society. The special steps taken to achieve this goal have resulted in loss of respect for women’s work and a general perception of women’s CBO work as a benign annoyance. An approach that promotes equal participation for both men and women is needed to change this general attitude.

Interestingly, the NGOs held different assumptions about women’s positions in other ethnic communities. During my research among an internally displaced Sinhala community in Anuradhapura, I was told that Sinhala women in the north-central province have traditionally been active in the economic and public sphere and therefore, were expected to run their own CBOs and to generate funds for their own maintenance.<sup>6</sup> The NGOs clearly held specific assumptions about Muslim women’s ability--or lack thereof to-- participate in the public sphere, resulting in the measures taken to ensure that they continue participating. This approach has some benefits but ignores the many other axes of power that intersect with gender. Among several variables, the extent to which a woman participated in public activities depended on her class position, the local culture of her original village, and the influence of her husband and family in the community. The different ways that women engaged in CBO activities and manipulated NGO assumptions about their special vulnerability and needs will be discussed in the following section.

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<sup>5</sup> Under different circumstances, many parents would have preferred their boys to go to city schools, but the family’s immediate monetary demands make mid-teenaged boys take up the easily available work in the agricultural sector, making way for girls to get an education in hopes of becoming the family’s connection to the outside world.

<sup>6</sup> Some of the Sinhala women from this community lamented the lack of financial and organizational support from the NGO. The Tamil internally displaced communities were given a lot of financial and other support due to the civil war and other immediate war-related concerns. It was hard to gauge the particular gender assumptions underlying the dynamics of Tamil women-headed CBOs in war ridden North and Eastern provinces.



### **Class-specific Identity Performances**

Among the several relocated villages that I studied, Hajjiarpuram consisted of mostly middle class Muslim IDPs from a prosperous village in Mannar, and Nallawatthe was inhabited by mostly poor Muslim people from another village in Mannar.<sup>7</sup> According to NGO officials, the class difference was evident not only through women's skin color, dress, and general comportment but also in the success rate of the respective CBOs. While all the group meetings with the Hajjiarpuram CBO were well attended, with about 50-70 women, in Nallawatthe, the number of participants varied between 8 and 26. I also noticed that many Hajjiarpuram women wore a more modern-looking, pastel-colored hijab that covered head and upper arms while all the women who participated in the Nallawatthe discussion forums either covered their heads with their old, faded sarees or draped a shawl nonchalantly around their head. Their lack of interest in carefully covering their heads or upper bodies could be attributed to the fact that only women attended the discussions. However, they walked back to their houses dressed the same way, and some even stopped to greet men they met on their way. Their clothes were old, ill-fitting, sometimes tattered and spoke volumes about their poverty. In fact, they talked about their extreme poverty and powerlessness and sarcastically compared themselves to the rich women from Hajjiarpuram.

NGO officers noted several very fair-skinned and plump women among the Hajjiarpuram participants. They happened to be the most vocal and two held government jobs as a teacher and a nurse in their original village.<sup>8</sup> All Nallawatthe women, on the other hand, worked either as day laborers or family helpers in the fields in their original villages, and the toll such hard work takes on bodies was amply evident in the way they looked. Besides these superficial differences, they differed strongly in their self-presentation, general outlook on life and survival strategies. Nallawatthe women were more critical of NGO activities and held a cynical attitude toward participatory development. Most women in Hajjiarpuram, especially the vocal ones, regurgitated the same ideas about the nobility of participatory development expressed by the junior staff of the NGO, using almost the same vocabulary. While women belonging to these two villages as well as within Hajjiarpuram certainly differed in their outlook, the NGOs seem to have adopted a unitary and essentialist notion of Muslim women as timid, shy, oppressed and incessantly controlled by men in all aspects of life. The women from Hajjiarpuram repeated these ideas during my individual interviews with them. When I asked why CBOs are so focused on micro-credit, although as it works out in these settlements ends up helping the men of the family, instead of initiating vocational training programs for women, officials from several NGOs reiterated that traditional Muslim women are kept secluded and that their family members would not allow them to work outside their homes. While many Hajjiarpuram women also said their families would not allow them to work outside the home, the Nallawatthe women earnestly pleaded with the NGOs working in their village

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<sup>7</sup> To protect confidentiality, I have changed the names of the relocated villages.

<sup>8</sup> One extremely dark woman in the Hajjiarpuram CBO was definitely a community leader. She did not hesitate to talk to the male officers who visited the CBO with me. In fact, during the first discussion forum, she chose to stand outside the room talking with male representatives from the Colombo branch of the NGO. Later she warmed up to me and expressed opinions similar to those of the other middle-class leaders.

to start some kind of factory where they could work and earn money. At different times, several Nallawatthe women said that their husbands, family, or the mosque committee would not like them to work but would have no alternative but to let them work. They revealed that they were no strangers to working alone or along-side men in the fields even before the forced migration. “If your head is covered you are safe,” one elderly woman declared. When I tried to talk to NGO staff about these class differences among the women and the different approaches that might be necessary, Darshini dismissed Nallawatthe women’s request for a factory by saying, “Those people are always looking for easy gratification. They do not understand how good it is to be the foundation of your own development.” While it is great to see NGOs paying special attention to improve women’s participation, it is disheartening that they are not yet inclined to incorporate complex understanding of gender or intersectional analysis in their approach to development and rebuilding.

The class differences among internally displaced women came into further relief when analyzing their changing opinions on matters important to women, such as reproductive health, and the ways they took advantage of new opportunities for movement.

### **Reproductive health**

In comparison to Hajjarpuram women, Nallawatthe participants were much more open and enthusiastic in expressing their changed attitudes about marriage, family life and reproductive health. Led by a very vocal older woman, these women specifically noted that because tubectomy was easily available in Puttalam, women often had the operation after a couple of children. According to them, both men and women, are realizing how difficult it is to raise children in urban areas. The older woman, Ahithulla, said that in their village in Mannar, they gave birth, and the children would grow up on their own. “Here, we have to go to the doctors for this injection, that injection, and need to give them certain foods and clothe them in a certain way. Bringing up children here is difficult.” Another older woman noted that nowadays mothers cannot expect their older children to help raise babies because going to school and to after-school tuition classes is mandatory for them. “So when a family has a girl and a boy they stop having children by getting the operation done. It is the easiest operation and the hospitals encourage you to get it done,” added Hameeda.<sup>9</sup> This group, with many older women, surprised me with its enthusiastic discussion of topics that the Hajjiarpuram women were reluctant to talk about. The difference in the two venues, with Nallawatthe discussion groups always being rather small as opposed to the large Hajjiarpuram forums, definitely seemed to play a role in the different levels of enthusiasm.

“Children are a god’s gift. It is not right to reject his gift,” Marium thus dismissed any need or desire for family planning or contraceptive usage, during the first Hajjiarpuram discussion forum on reproductive health. When Darshini asked her why she has only two children, a girl and a boy, she responded sadly, “That is how much god loved me.” This elicited much laughter. In fact, the few times I raised these matters many sat silently or responded like Marium. Toward the end, some commented that even if they had wanted to control the family size their husbands and in-laws would not have consented. An informal count revealed that among 51 women, only five had more than four children.

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<sup>9</sup> For more information on reproductive health services for internally displaced people, read Nanayakkara 2003.

Most women had between one and three. Even during individual interviews, they spoke with caution and mostly kept their expressions about family size within the religious rubric. Some, however, very carefully and shyly revealed that they use local methods of birth control, such as the rhythm method.

Considering that Marium herself has had training in a government nursing school and worked as a nurse before the forced migration, their display of ignorance may be part of a performance of the way an ideal middle class Muslim woman should behave. This effort seemed directly connected to NGO assumptions about what Muslim women are and what kind of Muslim women should get developmental aid. While I certainly do not doubt their religiosity, the way the more vocal women, such as Marium and Huda, set the tone by almost hastily uttering standard lines, such as “children are a gift of god...,” suggests the possibility of a constructed group attitude that will, in fact, benefit them in the future.

For instance, when I asked Hajjiarpuram women about the increasing number of tubectomies, they said that they were not aware of an increase. Huda noted that may be in “lower class” villages the number could have increased. However, in an unguarded moment, when Huda and I were walking to her home, she blurted out that she had had a tubectomy. She looked very agitated and told me about four times within ten minutes that her husband had asked her to do it. She took me to her home so that she could give me some bananas as a gift. In her agitation she wrapped the bananas in a whole newspaper, about ten pages, and said, “Don’t tell this to Dharshini (the NGO co-ordinator for the village). You know how these things are.” This incident makes me question whether discourses and “traditional” practices are now at least partially staged to suit NGO expectations of an ideal Muslim displaced woman. The more “backward” a community of women, the more effort, financial and organizational, the NGOs seemed to extend them. For example, to get the approval of a husband who was reluctant to let his wife attend CBO meetings the NGO exerted some influence to help him buy a plot of land, which softened his attitude. These well-intentioned acts seemed to have a counterproductive effect; the Muslim women in Hajjiarpuram projected a traditional and stereo-typical Muslim woman image to the extent of suppressing--at least rhetorically--the changes that are slowly occurring in their communities.

Woman’s body is the space over which the old and new hegemonies contest for supremacy. It is where this struggle and subsequent victories are inscribed. They are registered not only through changes in women’s movements and clothing but in attitudes and actions concerning reproductive rights and health. Class and family status, and positioning vis-a-vis the NGO officers, among other variables, affected the way women expressed their attitudes about their own bodies and reproductive health.

### **Local Leaders, Sinhala Hegemony, and Forced Modernity**

Nallawatthe women said that many internally displaced families were having fewer children due to the expense and time required to raise them in urban areas like Puttalam. Even if internally displaced people wanted to raise children the way they used to back in their villages health workers used gentle pressure as well as shaming tactics to force women to attend clinics and follow instructions on pre and post-natal care. These practices differed from what Nallawatthe women described as their traditional practices; namely, home delivery, traditional methods of pre- and post-natal care and a carefree attitude toward infant care. Women certainly seemed to appreciate the reduced physical and emotional

workload due to fewer pregnancies. They praised the state public health care network and its' agents pressures on them to follow new practices that ultimately benefitted them. The health care network is the major state agent working to absorb the newcomers into the broader hegemonic influences of modern, scientific discourses on health care. While women reaped certain benefits in not being burdened with many children, they seemed unaware that government discourses on family planning and modernization celebrate these new reproductive trends among Muslim women as a victory for its forward-looking policies. Since these policies are carried out at ground level by a hierarchy of agents, people find it difficult to read the state presence in their everyday lives.

The emergence of new leaders among Muslim women is also based on their ability to enter into various kinds of negotiations with the agents of the state and the NGOs. Consequently, displaced women clamored for instructions in the Sinhala language and praised the good qualities of some of the Sinhala people they encountered as opposed to the resident Muslim population. In their enthusiasm to challenge the patronization of the local Muslims, displaced women and men seem to be integrating more strongly into the hegemony of the state. As Lila Abu Lughod (1990) explicates, members of marginalized groups resist one form of power, such as familial patriarchal power, only to get trapped in wider circles of power such as capitalist consumer culture. In the same way, the internally displaced communities seem to resist and to challenge the resident Muslim population's power over them and willingly get enmeshed in a broader layer of power through their associations with the majority Sinhala community and state agents.

### **Women as Border-Crossers**

The constantly changing political context with regard to war and peace bestowed another role on internally displaced women that allowed them to traverse boundaries. A memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed between the government and the LTTE in 2001, ensuring a ceasefire. The peace process made the villages the IDPs had fled accessible, and gradually reinstated administrative processes required them either return to or to be frequently present on their land to maintain legitimate ownership.<sup>10</sup> As Hamidumma, an older woman in Nallawatthe, said, "We have to be present when the government officials visit. If no one is there, then other people will lay claim to our land." To ensure their claims, they had not only to be present as much as possible but also to ensure that their houses and land looked 'lived-in--' clean with trimmed bushes. While men would have preferred to ensure their claims to land, employment in the Puttalam district prevented them from constant travel to Mannar villages. As men, they were also at higher risk of becoming targets of random violence committed by the LTTE or other breakaway groups. This situation ensured that the women traversed provincial boundaries in a new public role that linked their old and new residences. Usually, the older women traveled with younger women and early teenaged children in their charge. Some older women took young women, in between school and marriage. They related stories of triumphant journeys in which they faced and overcame many hazards. These stories were probably exaggerated, some of the incidents sounded too fantastic, and they changed a bit every time they were recounted with different story tellers having slightly different interpretation of the events. A prominent theme was how they used the "rights discourses" they encountered through their NGO work to resolve disadvantageous situations. Many

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<sup>10</sup> For more on land and property rights of internally displaced people in the North, read Premaratne 2002.

told of kindness and support by military men, who, according to the story-tellers, always took their side in disputes and helped them as much as they could. As Hamidumma explained, "They are good boys. When they see women in veils, it reminds them of their mothers, and they know that we are the ones to be respected and helped." Note the way these women very consciously manipulated both sets of discourses--the new ideas on human rights and the traditional respect and special treatment due to older Muslim women.

They took this new public role and sought to ensure citizenship, however circumscribed, in both locales and, in the process, rendered the provincial boundaries fluid. The new role brought them certain privileges and its necessity ensured that they did not encounter resentment or rumors. NGO officials and I were somewhat surprised when the women claimed that no one says bad things or spreads rumors about them because they engage in these travels. Rather, they claimed that their men-folks are happy that they are shouldering the burden. In my discussions with NGO officials, we speculated that sooner or later the counter discourses are going to surface. In 2006, after the ceasefire ended, the women reported that they no longer undertake these journeys to Mannar due to fears of getting caught in cross-fire. Contrary to our speculations no rumors of sexual promiscuity or stigma was attached to those who took long women-only trips. In addition to the necessity of this activity, the women took certain steps that seemed to have helped: traveling in groups with an older, respected woman in charge, taking little boys with them, and wearing some form of veil.

According to Malathie De Alwis (2004)), the "purity of displacement" is constructed by asserting distinctiveness as well as a certain sense of equality with the local residents based on retained ties to the homeland. While greater policing and surveillance of the displaced women's moral purity was also part of their community's attempts to display the "purity" of their "lost home," the immediate political goal of laying claim to their land through physical presence apparently won over the symbolic display. The assumption that people who cross boundaries are somehow polluted may also be changing due to these travels, as the improved physical connection to "place" or "home" can be seen as a step toward restoring lost moral bearings. At least two women in Nallawatthe used the term "wise women" to describe the older women who made these travels, and several described the younger women who got to travel as "modern women," who are blessed to have families with modern ideas.

While this temporary role clearly enabled internally displaced Muslim women to achieve some form of empowerment, it also made them uncritical partners of state claims to their "home" and its agenda of keeping LTTE cadres and the general Tamil population from laying claim to more land in the disputed, war-ridden area.

### **Ambivalent on 'imminent peace'**

In December 2008 I was able to talk to some women from both villages and they expressed considerable ambivalence about the end of war. The government of President Mahinda Rajapaksa was leading a concentrated effort to defeat the LTTE, and people were just beginning to talk about an end to more than a quarter century of armed conflict. The women seemed happy about the prospect of peace but torn about moving back to their villages in Mannar. Their main concern was for the children mostly brought up in Puttalam, who are used to living in urban areas. It was obvious that while they wanted to move back and reclaim their land in Mannar, they also wanted to remain permanent

residents of Puttalam. They have been living in Puttalam for close to twenty years, and even the older generation seems to have adjusted well to the urban life and enjoyed certain signs of modernity, including women's NGO activities. As Pathima put it, "Today's girls and boys are used to Colombo ways of living. Even if we take them to Mannar, they will run back here. We made these barren lands into beautiful villages. Our children should be able to inherit this land [in Hajjiarpuram]." The new politics of land claims engendered as a result of the highly celebrated 'end to the war' in May 2009 remains to be studied, but considering certain empowering moments, fleeting as they are, experienced by the internally displaced women, I would not be surprised to find them deeply conflicted about returning to the village they once idealized as "the most beautiful and freest corner of the world." It would also not be surprising to find men and women, young and old, middle class and working class and any combination of these varied groups perceiving and responding to this situation in differing ways.<sup>11</sup>

### **Conclusion**

This discussion demonstrated that internally displaced Muslim women, in contrast to men, (Hasbulla 2001; Abeysekere 2002), found their experience of displacement empowering in some respects, and this empowerment varied depending on social class. By participating in NGO activities women achieved a certain power as agents who channel foreign aid to their families. Some were able to find empowerment through their travels to their abandoned "homes" to claim land rights.

Internally displaced people's perceptions of NGO ideologies about women's roles in particular societies play an important role in the way women's civil society participation is shaped in resettled villages in Puttalam. The social class differences apparent in the women's expressions and behaviors were also connected to the women's need to perform a certain NGO-imagined monolithic and static "Muslim woman" image.

Especially the Hajjiarpuram women seem keenly aware that NGOs are zooming in on them due to the notion that Muslim women are backward and need careful nurturing within the public space. They appeared to manipulate this concern to their advantage.<sup>12</sup> Some of the timidity, victimization, and disavowal of new knowledges and modern practices seem to be performed for the benefit of NGO officials. In that sense, the ultra-traditional Muslim woman image that the group leaders were trying to project could be taken as part of their tactical repertoire to maximize benefits from NGO work.

Anytime a stereotypical view of women is constructed, it produces an image of men in that society as well. If Muslim women are secluded, oppressed and victimized, Muslim men become the perpetrators of such unjust acts. While men did not clearly articulate their resentment against such stereotyping, the young men's concern about educated women eloping with men from other ethnic groups expressed their anxieties over what they perceived as the NGOs' excessive focus on women's development. The simple

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<sup>11</sup> During 2008-2009 the government became increasingly skeptical of NGO activities in war-ridden areas and many INGOs were asked to leave the country. The INGO, which funded the NGO branch that operated in Hajjiarpuram and Nallawatthe came under much criticism. However, when I talked to them via telephone in July 2009 the local branch officers said that their office is still functioning and the funds have not been cut off.

<sup>12</sup> While Nallawatthe women understood these assumptions and might have liked to perform such ideals, their daily living conditions prevented the luxury. Rather, they openly appreciated what the urban environment had to offer and were more forthcoming about the changes occurring within and around them.

understanding of gender as *getting women involved in community activities* ignores the relationships between men and women. It also paved the way for ignoring other important social categories, such as ethnicity, religion, and social class that intersect with gender in complex ways. For internally displaced Muslim women to achieve some form of lasting empowerment, NGOs and state agencies must adopt a complex view of people's lives and relationships as produced within particular locations and histories.

Discourses of pollution and purity still seem to play a part in the way the internally displaced construct identities and practices. While they still romanticized the place they left and expressed dreams of returning, the significant changes they experienced during their close to twenty years of exile have had a major effect on the way they constructed narratives of the "dignity of displacement." In addition to stories of the romanticized home they also engage in heroic tales of transforming barren land in Puttalam to beautiful, lively villages. While the scrutiny and surveillance of women's activities continues, women are not begrudged and even praised at times for their new public roles. Women expressed pride in making use of the educational and other opportunities offered them and developing themselves and their families. The conflicted feelings about an imminent return to their Mannar homes seem to encompass this new understanding of their "place" as both one that they left and the one they developed into their own. If given a choice, many women may choose to belong to both places, constantly crossing boundaries to claim rights in both places.

While this discussion demonstrated the empowering aspects of women's new public roles, it is important to note that they were not able to achieve long-term empowerment through them. Their improved decision-making power within their families and the community depended on particular variables within the political economy of war and peace. Since basic cultural assumptions about women's bodies, sexuality, and movement have only slightly changed, women who took up new NGO-related public roles still faced the daily risk of cultural sanctions in the form of rumors and slander. However, this particular group of internally displaced Muslim women skillfully negotiates multiple boundaries of space, life cycle, social position, and physical borders, and these negotiations are intimately bound to state politics, the dynamics of war and peace, and the assumptions of humanitarian agencies and NGOs. These negotiations occur within communities increasingly entwined in global economic, political, and cultural networks, and changes to social structures are bound follow, even if not immediately.

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