

**Manipulating Vulnerability or
Building on the Strength of
Refugees?
*Experiences from Sri Lanka*¹**

In humanitarian circles the dominant image of refugees and internal refugees (the so-called ‘Internally Displaced People’ or ‘IDPs’) is that of poverty-stricken, dependent and vulnerable victims. But certain categories of refugees are considered to be particularly vulnerable, and ‘vulnerability’ has become one of the main criteria of selecting refugees for special assistance and aid. Categories that are mentioned as deserving specific attention are women, children, the old and the disabled. Recently, one of my PhD students, who is carrying out research among Somalian refugees in North-East Kenya, described how refugees strategically manipulated and stressed their supposed vulnerability in order to gain access to aid and resettlement programmes. Husbands now pushed their womenfolk forwards as female heads of their families, women presented themselves as widows, and children as orphans, in order to be labelled as ‘vulnerable’ so that they could fit into the programme of special aid for the vulnerable. The stress on vulnerability has also increased corruption practices.

In this paper I would like to focus on the issue of vulnerability and the support needed by (internal) refugees. Building on my experiences with internal refugees in Sri Lanka, I will describe the gender task division in the camps, and question the presupposed vulnerability of women in particular. I conclude that women refugees can be both impressively strong and vulnerable, depending on the situation and the issues at stake. Women’s vulnerabilities in the refugee camps are very different from those of the men. Aid policies should be directed at finding and using the different strengths of men, women and children to support them in overcoming their different vulnerabilities.

Between 1993 and 1998 I was engaged in a research project, funded by the University of Amsterdam, on internal

refugees in Sri Lanka. Being a social anthropologist by training, I opted for in-depth qualitative research, and for that reason I tried to spend sufficient time in refugee camps talking with the people. I did not work with a questionnaire, but left maximum room for the refugees themselves to come up with their own subjects and points of view, their own needs and analyses of the situation they found themselves in after their flight. Helped by research assistants, I visited about 15 camps in the capital of Colombo, near Puttalam on the west coast, around Vavuniya in the central north, and in Batticaloa District in the east. There were separate camps for the three main ethnic groups that, since 1983, had all suffered from the war between the government and the ‘Tamil Tigers’ (LTTE): Tamils, Muslims (considered a separate ethnic group in Sri Lanka), and Sinhalese. The following observations apply to all three ethnic groups. Where relevant, I will specify the ethnic group involved.

The camps were organised in community halls, on school- and temple premises, or - outside the cities where there was more space - in cadjan structures and huts in the open fields. In the halls families had organised their own fixed spaces according to their socio-economic and caste background. Informal pre-schools were held, religious rituals celebrated, and parties organised for those girls who attained age. Gender was one of the primary organising principles, and it was interesting to notice how people had reconstructed the gendered divisions of labour. Domestic work in the camps, for instance, such as cleaning and cooking, was mostly carried out by women, but men were responsible for carrying heavy cooking pots and cleaning their own toilets. Where possible, there were separate lavatories and toilets for men and women. Women changed clothes in the toilets – but this was not possible everywhere. Whereas most Tamil and Sinhalese families came from the lower socio-economic strata, the Muslim camps were more mixed, containing both poor fishermen from Mannar and once fairly prosperous Jaffna Muslims.

‘Talking politics’ was mostly men’s business: male refugees tended to identify with the politics of external relations, using the language of communality to express their identity and differentiate themselves from others. Men were associated with ‘the outside world’ as before, and they were

expected to have ‘courage’ (*thunivu* in Tamil) and to protect their families. But male refugees had lost about all material and non-material assets to actually protect and provide for their families: they had lost their work, their property, their status, and their network of relations. Whenever possible they would go out for work, mostly in the informal sector, engaging in activities like small trade or construction work. Women, although they had lost their homes and relations as well, had at least kept their main task in looking after the day-to-day survival of their families. Their major concerns were daily care and survival, not politics. According to some women in the camps with whom I discussed this, they could deal much better than the men with their overall loss in status: “We were used already to being nobody, so we can cope with this”, they said. Women refugees were fully occupied with domestic chores and child care, and they mainly talked about their daily needs: food, water, health and sanitation, the children and children’s education, their relations with other families. Unlike the men, the women had kept the core of their gender identity; they could still act as mothers and ‘house’ keepers in the domestic sphere, albeit in very primitive circumstances. Only when asked did they relate the experiences of their flight. Their stories expressed fear, suffering, and chaos: husbands and sons who were killed before their eyes or had ‘disappeared’; weeks and months of hiding in the jungle without sufficient food while the shelling and artillery were going on; violence and attacks from all sides; neighbours who had turned into enemies overnight.

Many women who had previously depended financially on their husbands took on paid work outside the camps, as domestic workers and in the informal sector. Two women from a Muslim camp, for instance, went out every day to cook for Muslim families in the neighbourhood, earning Rs 25 per day as well as receiving a meal and old clothes. Before the war, gender prescriptions for all Muslim families would have restricted these women to a respectable but home-bound existence. Now gender prescriptions were stretched, and as co-providers for the family they gained some economic autonomy and control of their lives, which according to their own evaluation strengthened their position *vis-à-vis* their husbands and increased their self-confidence. Even middle-class and high caste Tamil women who, according to traditional Hindu discourse, should stay secluded in their

homes under strict male control, developed completely new strengths, taking up income earning activities and even leading roles in their families. Most strikingly, both in and outside the camps, Hindu war widows collectively started defying the traditional Hindu values by refusing a life as social outcasts.

Men, by contrast, having lost everything, were confronted with a complete rupture with the past. Taking to drink – which in line with earlier gender prescriptions remained a ‘privilege’ only for men – was some sort of escape. This increased the overall violence in the camps and particularly the men’s use of physical violence to control their women. I found instances where women in the camps openly protested against male violence in the so-called private sphere, sometimes standing up for each other against abuse by their husbands. When it came to refugees’ (self-) organisations, however, the picture was more conservative: nowhere in camps did I come across substantial women’s participation in camp committees or (self-)organisations, and neither did I find refugee women’s organisations. None of the government agencies or NGO’s dealing with the refugees had women’s leadership and organisational skills on their agenda.

Social relations in the camps reminded me most of other situations of extreme poverty I was familiar with, but then severely aggravated by the context of war and flight. It was poverty combined with a lack of freedom of movement -the refugee camps in Vavuniya were severely restricting people’s movements; they functioned more like (semi-)detention centres- humiliating state control, a traumatised past and a bleak future. In spite of all this, most of the refugees managed to regain their identity as human beings. In this process, women were remarkably strong, creating new spaces, renegotiating gender power relations and increasing their autonomy and self-esteem. They took on whatever work they could get, considering this as an opportunity to gain more autonomy over their own lives and to survive at least somewhat more in human dignity.

What are the practical implications of these changes in gender relations, how could humanitarian aid support (internal) refugees? First of all, my gender perspective has given some insight into the different realities of men and women staying in the camps. The vulnerability of the men is

closely related to having lost the core of their male identity. Having lost their social status and place in society has increased their feeling of uselessness, which has led many men to turn to drink and violence. What male refugees need most of all is access to work, in order to regain their self-respect as providers and protectors of their families. Prolonged dependence on aid, and restriction in refugee camps, will only increase their feelings of resentment, aggression and (potential) violence, and in the long run contribute to civil war. Women have other vulnerabilities, different from those of men: young women may be pregnant or breast feeding, and/or having to look after infants. They primarily need support geared to reproductive health matters in the widest sense. They also need support against male (sexual) violence and its effects. On the other hand, women (and not only those who are past child-bearing age) have developed all sorts of new strengths, both in leading their families and in earning an income. They could be supported in further developing these qualities. They would benefit from support to earn more in the informal sector, or to enter the official labour market. But also, women - and society at large - would benefit from developing new leadership qualities and organisational skills, and to apply this in their day-to-day life in the camps.

The needs and realities of men and women are different, and so are their vulnerabilities and strengths. Each particular situation can evoke either strengths or vulnerabilities in the same people. A refugee man, earlier known to be a strong, reliable person, after his flight may turn into an alcoholic ill-treating his wife and children. A refugee woman, on the other hand, who during her life as a respectable middle-class housewife never saw anything of the outside world, in a refugee camp may turn out to be the breadwinner for her family by working in small business or as a servant outside the camp. In my view, it is not in the interest of (internal) refugees if humanitarian aid programmes predefine certain categories, such as women, as vulnerable and in need of help. This will only feed stereotypes, dependency, manipulation, corruption and other questionable strategies, and it will create competition among the refugees to present themselves to the world of aid as the most vulnerable and pitiful categories. This would not really contribute to regaining their human dignity. Their sense of identity and human dignity would be

strengthened if they could (further) develop their different strengths as well as the skills they need in order to survive as human beings. In order to do so, the providers of aid would need a deeper insight into the real experiences, needs and views of the refugees - men, women and children - themselves. In this process, qualitative, action-oriented research could be helpful to bring out the voices and analyses of the refugees and to devise aid programmes accordingly. Refugees themselves could take part in this as (assistant) researchers.

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Note & Reference:

¹ More extensive information about the situation of internal refugees in Sri Lanka can be found in:

Joke Schrijvers, 1997, 'Internal refugees in Sri Lanka: the interplay of ethnicity and gender', *European Journal of Development Research* Vol. 9 No 2: 62-81.

-- 1998, 'Tamil-Muslim violence, gender and ethnic relations in eastern Sri Lanka', *Nethra (Journal of the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo)*, Vol. 2 No 3: 10-39.

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1999, 'Constructing 'womanhood', 'Tamilness' and 'the refugee': internal refugees in Sri Lanka', in Thiruchandran, Selvy (ed.), *Women, Narration and Nation: Collective Images and Multiple Identities*, New Delhi: Vikas, pp. 169-201.