

INCLUSIVE ECONOMIES, ENDURING PEACE IN MYANMAR AND SRI LANKA:

RESEARCH BRIEF

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SUMMARY

The project, *Inclusive Economies, Enduring Peace: The Transformative Role of Social Reproduction*, has researched how conflict has affected women's unpaid and paid labour. It explored the impact of conflict and recovery on the depletion of women's lives and of their household and communities. The project investigated how women strategise to reverse this depletion and what role the state and non-state actors involved in post-conflict negotiations and building institutional infrastructure play to address this issue. In so doing, the study addresses the UN Sustainable Development Goals 5 on gender equality, 8 on decent work and 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions. The research evidence produced in this report has the potential to shape new policies and interventions that will contribute to lasting peace and inclusive economic prosperity. It has also tested a new feminist methodology to address data collection in complex contexts.

This brief discusses findings of the project, which used the Feminist Everyday Observatory Tool (FEOT) (Rai and True 2020). The research was carried out in two case studies, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, across six sites (two each of conflict-affected, proximate to conflict and relatively stable). FEOT is a three-stage method consisting of a pre-observation questionnaire, observation and post-observation interview. The data analysed in this report is based on intensive research undertaken with nineteen adult women in nineteen households following this method.

The research found that in both countries, in areas most affected by conflict, women experienced greater difficulty in carrying out social reproduction³, and experienced higher levels of depletion⁴. This was the case even when women in areas most affected by conflict were doing the same or less social reproductive and productive work than those in relatively more stable sites. In both countries, paid work is seen as work, with its contribution to household livelihoods valued, whereas unpaid social reproduction is not recognised

or valued in the same way. In Myanmar, greater depletion among women was noted largely because of male absence/non-contribution, the lack of social and state services to replenish them, higher care burdens because of war leading to greater disability, and less control over sexual reproductive health compared to relatively stable sites. In Sri Lanka, greater depletion was noted in the context of unresolved war trauma, higher care burdens due to injuries and disabilities caused by the conflict, state infrastructure that either failed to replenish the most conflict-affected women or actively increased their insecurity (military and police forces), gendered household violence and economic precarity.

Overall, the study found that (1) women's social reproductive labour compensates for the absence of social infrastructure during and after conflict through a largely unpaid care economy; and (2) that this leads to greater depletion of women in conflict-affected areas. Four major research findings are significant:

1. CONFLICT CHANGES HOW WOMEN DO SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

Conflict complicates the ability to secure recourses for households. Meanwhile, other depleting factors such as the psycho-social effects of conflict also damage women's social reproductive capacities. Absence of relatives who would otherwise share the load of caring for family members or searching for those who are missing, for instance, leads to further increased volumes of social reproductive labour.

The volume (hours of work) and its intensity (physical or mental demands) of social reproductive labour were affected by the impact of conflict, by the household living arrangements and by women's civil status. The data to support this finding came from all three stages of the FEOT. Women in the households affected by the conflict in Myanmar had less engagement in the productive sphere outside the home but performed the same or more social reproductive work under far less supportive conditions. In Sri Lanka, conflict-affected women continued to engage in both productive and social reproductive work but faced chronic economic insecurity (contingent and precarious conditions for livelihoods) because the post-war cost of living exceeded income earned. In relatively stable sites, there were more resources for women. In the relatively stable area in the south of Myanmar, women were major earners in the household, while in the relatively stable south of Sri Lanka, the major household income came from husbands' army salaries and pensions. However, in the relatively stable sites of both countries, women experience pressure to present themselves as 'strong' rather than exhausted; as 'enduring' the challenges of unpaid social reproductive labour rather than suffering them.

The intensification of social reproductive work was observed in all four conflict-affected sites in both countries. The intensity was recorded on observation days and discussed in post-observation interviews. In both Myanmar and Sri Lanka, even when the actual volume of social reproductive labour was lower, conflict had increased women's care burdens in the following six ways through: (1) the absence of male

and female relatives to share the load of care work; (2) the lack of care or support for women who were disabled; (3) the psycho-social effects of conflict (such as post-traumatic stress or alcoholism in the family); (4) male recourse to domestic violence; (5) increases in social reproductive labour, such as searching for family members missing due to war; and (6) militarisation as discussed under finding 2.⁵

It was notable from observation days in the relatively stable and conflict-proximate sites that material resources and extended family networks supported social reproduction whereas in the directly conflict-affected site, kinship and community structures were fractured; often homes still did not have running water for example, adding to the burdens of social reproduction. In the directly conflict-affected sites in the Northern Province in Sri Lanka and the internally displaced persons (IDP) camp in Myanmar, the enduring and unresolved effects of conflict heavily affect women's lives, including their participation in social reproduction. This included the military obstructing women as they sought to carry out social reproductive work. Peace could mean, for some in conflict-affected IDP camps and grey zones in Myanmar, the return of a male partner from the frontline, to share some of the burdens of running the household and return to a more traditional division of labour. In Sri Lanka, likewise, being able to safely, securely and consistently undertake everyday social reproductive labour in the home – however gender unequal the workload – was experienced by some participants as a relief, in comparison to dealing with unresolved issues and conditions of conflict.

Participation in community-level social reproduction further added to the burdens of social reproductive labour for the most war-affected women. In Sri Lanka, the pre-observation survey and post-observation interviews revealed that this participation involved organising and searching for disappeared relatives or trying to secure safe community conditions. In Myanmar, observations showed this participation

comprised labour related to the need to uphold cultural and religious norms.

Conflict-related migration abroad may have increased the financial resources of the household (as shown in pre-observation survey information) but during the observation days showed, it visibly increases social reproduction for those who remain at home.

2. THERE IS A CONTINUUM OF VIOLENCE BETWEEN CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

While the home could be a site of security, normality and happiness, it is also a site and institution of multiple types of violence against women. In the most conflict-affected areas, women are more vulnerable to both interpersonal and state violence as they went about social reproductive work.

Violence against women was present across all six sites in both countries in various forms, at varying intensities, and this contributed to the physical and mental depletion of women. The full report shows how the FEOT enabled researchers in each of the two case studies to understand the incidences and extent of violence against the female research participants.

In conflict-affected areas of Myanmar, collecting firewood made women vulnerable to attack from military men, or from landowners. In the former war territory in Sri Lanka, the military tracked women searching for missing family members and harassed them at checkpoints as they passed through to collect children from tuition after dark.

The household, where much social reproduction occurs, is often a site of physical, sexual and psychological violence against women. This was not universally the case, of course, as the full report

discusses: the household, including extended family, was also observed and reported by participants to represent security and happiness, while home could be a refuge from the outside world. That said, domestic violence was noted to be present across all six sites, regardless of proximity to conflict. There were, though, significant differences in Sri Lanka between the established, material security of the home for those participants in relatively stable Anuradhapura and the spatial and historical insecurities associated with homes and households in conflict affected Kilinochchi and Batticaloa. Comparably in Myanmar, the most egregious cases of VAW among the research participants were most visible and “mundane” in the site proximate to conflict, Namti, where women were situated between two armies, large numbers of households had male soldiers as household members, and encounters with the Burmese military were common.

3. DEPLETION IS HIGHER IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED COMMUNITIES

Depletion is higher in the most conflict-affected communities. That is, social reproductive labour (outputs) is greater than the replenishing inputs (food, water, shelter, rest, infrastructure, support). This depletion is a direct consequence of military displacement and intervention in the most conflict-affected areas, which is not a factor in the relatively stable sites. Depletion occurs across all sites, however, and is manifest in the damaged mental and physical health of participants. Significant causal factors are: violence against women; the ongoing trauma of losing loved ones and pursuing justice in the conflict-affected sites; and the double burden of productive and social reproductive labour, especially when facing chronic economic insecurity. Women individually strategise about how to mitigate the effects of depletion but this is more feasible the further they are located from active conflict.

Depletion through social reproductive labour, that is, where women became more anxious and exhausted by the volume and intensity of social reproductive labour, was observable at a number of points. Some depletion was obvious during pre-observation surveys and during observation days. Women with many care responsibilities with larger numbers of children or with disabled or elderly parents were visibly physically depleted (drawn, tired, thin, frail, ill). Other aspects of depletion, such as damage to mental health, emerged in more detail during post-observation narrative interviews. The absence or illness of male partners increased care burdens, as their help may mitigate the depletion of women through social reproduction. Displacement of households from home and farmlands in both Myanmar and Sri Lanka has had a significant impact on social reproduction and depletion. Ongoing trauma of losing loved ones and the pursuit of answers and justice in the directly conflict-affected location also perpetuated trauma and increased depletion. Violence against women was a significant factor leading to depletion. In Sri Lanka, for example, sexual violence and coercive control combined with the demands of childcare were seen to cause extreme physical and psychological depletion. In Myanmar, marital rape, forced birth/lack of access to reproductive control, and other sexual violence led to the extreme

physical depletion of women. Frequent birthing and breastfeeding exhausted women's bodies, and their resulting frailty was sometimes exploited by abusive partners. Domestic violence and coercive control led to extreme depletion of women's physical, mental and emotional resources. The role of the extended family structure could both mitigate and exacerbate depletion. Even if extended family was observed to provide material support for care work, abusive family ties, as reported in interviews, could exacerbate depletion through social reproduction.

Relative stability allowed some replenishment⁶. This replenishment was evidenced on observation days and through narrative analysis of post-observation interviews. In the relatively stable site in Sri Lanka, participants were able to mitigate the effects of depletion through engagement in creative activities. In the relatively stable site in Myanmar, although the double burden of labour was depleting, women took pride in their paid work activities, and felt emotionally replenished by love and contact with their family networks. In Sri Lanka, participants in the relatively stable south (all of whom were from military households) felt financially and emotionally replenished by the state, but neither of these forms of replenishment were available to participants in the other two locations.

4. DAMAGE TO SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE INCREASED DEPLETION

Social infrastructure, like physical infrastructure, was of much poorer quality in conflict-affected sites than in relatively stable sites, and so increased depletion. State support has the potential to reverse depletion; however, state responses are often entirely hostile in conflict-affected areas, creating gendered insecurity through military presence and absent with regard to social provisioning. State support is urgently needed for provision of basic physical infrastructure, such as access to running water or wells within the home, and for social infrastructure, including local public transport, hospitals, children's education and maternal healthcare.

A privileging of men's and the military's needs over women's needs and social reproduction was mirrored in the privileging of physical infrastructure (roads, bridges, temples, government buildings) over social infrastructure (local public transport, hospitals, schools, childcare, maternal health, healthy gender and kinship relations). The damage to existing social infrastructure because of conflict exacerbated women's depletion, making it far more exhausting to carry out in everyday social reproduction. This finding emerged clearly from observation days but was also reported by participants themselves, when asked about government support in post-observation interviews.

In Myanmar, provision of social infrastructure was poor across all sites, but with relatively more facilities available in the relatively stable site. Participants in Myanmar were generally sceptical of the role of the state in providing any infrastructure, or social infrastructure let alone replenishment of social reproduction. Very few participants in Myanmar, for example, could imagine a state that supported maternity leave or childcare. In Sri Lanka, participants in the conflict-affected site urgently needed support, for example for children's education, but suspected that the state might see provision of socio-economic support as a legitimate 'trade-off' for post-war political justice.

Moreover, the infrastructure of the state could be entirely hostile. In the directly conflict-affected areas in both Sri Lanka and Myanmar, the state's security infrastructure – the military – was observed and reported to create and perpetuate *insecurity* for

women. The state was seen as both conspicuous in its military presence, and conspicuous in its absence from social provisioning. The responses to questions about the role of government varied across the sites. In the directly conflict-affected sites "government" brought to mind helicopter gunships and soldiers (Kachin State, Myanmar) and forcibly disappeared relatives (Kilinochchi, Sri Lanka). In post-observation interviews in these conflict-affected and conflict proximate sites in Myanmar, participants generally believed the government to be unresponsive and corrupt. In Sri Lanka too, participants in the directly conflict-affected and conflict proximate sites were critical about state support for social reproduction.

Relatively stable areas had a more ambiguous relationship with the state and its provisioning. In Sri Lanka, for example, even though participants in the relatively stable site benefited from state support in the form of military salaries and pensions, they felt the government did not support their social reproductive needs. In the relatively stable site in Myanmar, participants generally believed themselves to have no experience of the government or of the state. Where they did comment, it was on the fact that the government was corrupt, or mainly run by rich people.

At the same time, however, state support for social infrastructure was urgently needed in all areas of Myanmar and Sri Lanka to help with high education costs, to provide basic infrastructure such as water pipelines to homes, and greater access to higher quality healthcare, especially reproductive health.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we have documented and analysed social reproductive work under conditions of conflict. In so doing, we have revealed the economic, emotional, political, and financial costs of doing social reproduction and how these manifest in the depletion of individual women and households. The study has also demonstrated how feminist methodologies can address data collection in complex contexts. The FEOT can be employed productively in analysing social reproduction over time and across space, and depletion through social reproduction, violence and conflict.

ENDNOTES

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- 3 We understand by the term social reproduction, work that reproduces life; this includes biological reproduction (reproducing labour) including the provision of the sexual, emotional and affective services that are required to maintain family and intimate relationships; unpaid production in the home of both goods and services, incorporating different forms of care, as well as social provisioning and voluntary work directed at meeting needs in and of the community; and reproduction of culture and ideology which stabilizes (and sometimes challenges) dominant social relations (Hoskyns and Rai, 2007: 300).
- 4 Depletion, as we use it here, occurs when human resource outflows exceed resource inflows as a result of carrying out social reproductive work over a threshold of sustainability, making it harmful for those engaged in it (Rai et al, 2014: 4).
- 5 We take Enloe's definition of militarisation: the gendered process by which something becomes controlled by, dependent on, or derives its value from the military (Enloe, 2000: 291). Drawing strength from military values and nationalist ideology, militarisation relies on specific notions of femininity and masculinity and privileges a hegemonic form of masculinity (see, e.g. Yuval Davis, 1997; Kelly, 2000). It is, overall, the normalisation of military relations in everyday life.
- 6 By replenishment we understand when states or private bodies contribute to inflows, as Elson suggests, that go some way to lessen the effects of DSR without necessarily recognising it as harmful in the ways specified above (Rai et al, 2014: 14).

Monash Gender, Peace & Security Centre is a research centre focused on issues of gender, peace and security. Our vision is to build globally-recognised, gender-inclusive research evidence to deliver peace and security globally. We seek to use our research to inform scholarly debate, policy development and implementation, and public understanding about the gendered nature of insecurity and the search for peace. In addition to research with international, government and industry partners, community-engagement with civil society, and academic publications, Monash GPS academics engage in undergraduate and graduate teaching, executive education and PhD supervision.

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