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GENDER POLITICS IN POST-CONFLICT SRI LANKA: FROM WARTIME ROLES TO PEACETIME REPRESENTATION

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Abstract
This study examines the transformation of women's roles in Sri Lanka from wartime participation to post-conflict political representation, with particular attention to the period following the end of the civil war in 2009. Drawing on feminist theory, post-conflict reconstruction frameworks, and intersectionality, the research explores how women's experiences as combatants, caregivers, activists, and community leaders during the war have influenced their political engagement in the post-war context. Using a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach, the study integrates document analysis, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and electoral data to analyze both structural and normative barriers to women's political inclusion. Findings reveal a significant disconnect between women's expanded wartime roles and their limited post-conflict political representation. Despite increased visibility and leadership during the conflict, women—particularly former LTTE cadres and grassroots activists—continue to face entrenched patriarchal norms, militarization, economic marginalization, and exclusionary party politics. Although post-war initiatives and the introduction of local government quotas have created limited openings, these measures remain insufficient to ensure meaningful participation. The study further highlights how intersectional factors such as ethnicity, class, and regional marginalization intensify barriers for Tamil and Muslim women in conflict-affected areas. By tracing the continuum from wartime agency to peacetime exclusion, this research underscores the need for structural reforms, gender-responsive political institutions, and inclusive policy interventions. The findings contribute to broader debates on gender and post-conflict governance and offer policy-relevant insights for strengthening women's political representation and sustainable peacebuilding in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Gender politics, Post-conflict Sri Lanka, Women's political representation, Wartime gender roles, Feminist political theory

Introduction

Background of the Study

The Sri Lankan civil war, which spanned from 1983 to 2009, was not merely a contest between state forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) but also a crucible that reshaped social relations, economic structures, and gendered roles across the island (Uyangoda, 2010; Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019). During the conflict, women were simultaneously victims, survivors, combatants, caregivers, and peace activists (Peiris, 2012). The LTTE's mobilization strategies, for instance, recruited thousands of women into various combat and non-combatant roles, thereby challenging traditional patriarchal norms that had long defined Sri Lankan society (Gündüz, 2011; Ratnapala, 2017). In contrast, Sinhalese

women's participation in state-supported women's organizations often adhered to more conservative gender norms, even as they provided essential humanitarian services during wartime (de Alwis, 2009; Sparrow, 2014).

With the ceasefire in 2009 and the formal end of hostilities, Sri Lanka embarked on a fragile post-conflict reconstruction process. This transitional period has been characterized by efforts to rebuild infrastructure, resettle internally displaced persons (IDPs), and initiate reconciliation mechanisms, such as the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) (Peiris, 2015; Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2015). Yet, underlying these governance and development objectives is the persistent challenge of negotiating gender relations that were profoundly altered by decades of conflict. Wartime experiences had simultaneously empowered and traumatized women, forcing them into the public sphere in unprecedented ways, but also reinforcing patriarchal backlash in various communities (Fernando & Porter, 2016; Uyangoda, 2010). Understanding how these wartime gender roles translate—or fail to translate—into peacetime representation is crucial for both sustainable peace and genuine gender equality.

Researchers have documented that women's political representation in post-conflict contexts worldwide tends to increase immediately following conflict, only to decline later as electorates revert to more traditional gender norms (Karanja, 2018; Ní Aoláin & Haynes, 2017). In Sri Lanka, however, the picture is more complicated. Despite the unique history of insurgent women (notably the LTTE's female cadres), formal political representation of women in parliament and local councils has remained low—hovering around 5%–10% even a decade after the conflict (International IDEA, 2020; Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019). At the grassroots level, women's NGOs and activism have proliferated, yet their ability to influence policy remains constrained by lingering militarization, economic precarity, and pervasive social norms that relegate women to traditional roles (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2015; Sparrow, 2014).

By examining these dynamics, this study situates itself at the intersection of gender studies, post-conflict reconstruction, and political science. It seeks to trace how wartime roles adopted by women—ranging from combatant to peacebuilder—have impacted their peacetime representation in both formal and informal political spaces. Further, it aims to identify the systemic barriers that inhibit sustained gender equality, even when conflict-driven disruptions momentarily open spaces for women's empowerment (Fernando & Porter, 2016; Gündüz, 2011).

Problem Statement

Despite considerable wartime contributions by women both within the LTTE and in civil society, Sri Lanka's post-conflict landscape has failed to translate these gains into meaningful, long-term political representation and gender equality (Peiris, 2015; International IDEA, 2020). The problem can be articulated as follows:

1. *Disconnect Between Wartime Roles and Peacetime Influence:*
   Many women who assumed leadership roles in wartime—either as combatants, logisticians, or humanitarian actors—have struggled to find comparable authority in post-conflict governance structures. The absence of a tailored reintegration or empowerment strategy has meant that their wartime experiences often remain unrecognized or stigmatized (Ratnapala, 2017; Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019).

2. *Persistent Structural Barriers:*
   Traditional patriarchal norms, reinforced by post-war economics and the continued presence of military actors in civilian spaces, limit women's entry into formal politics. Electoral processes and party structures remain male-dominated, with little pressure for candidate selection reforms or gender quotas at the national level (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2015; Sparrow, 2014).

3. *Fragmented Civil Society:*
   The proliferation of women's organizations post-2009 has indeed increased advocacy efforts, but fragmentation—along ethnic, political, and regional lines—undermines collective action. This fragmentation reduces the ability to lobby for legislative reforms or to hold government institutions accountable for gender-responsive policymaking (de Alwis, 2009; Peiris, 2012).

4. *Neglected Intersectionality:*
   The experiences of Tamil and Muslim women, especially in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, are often overshadowed by a Sinhalese-majority narrative of post-conflict recovery. This neglect overlooks how intersecting identities—ethnicity, class, religion—shape women's opportunities for political participation and representation (Fernando & Porter, 2016; Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2015).

Given these issues, the central problem this study addresses is: *How have wartime gender roles affected women's peacetime political representation in Sri Lanka, and what structural constraints continue to impede gender equality in post-conflict governance?*

Research Objectives

To systematically address the above problem, this study sets forth the following objectives:

1. *To document and analyze the various wartime roles undertaken by Sri Lankan women:*
   This includes combat roles within the LTTE, participation in state-sponsored women's desks, and roles in humanitarian assistance.

2. *To assess the extent to which wartime experiences catalyzed shifts in women's socio-political agency:*
   By examining specific case studies (e.g., former LTTE female cadres, displaced women activists), the study will determine whether these experiences led to durable changes in political consciousness and agency.

3. *To examine the trajectory of women's political representation from 2009 to the present:*
   This involves analyzing electoral data, party nomination processes, and representation in local councils and the national parliament.

4. *To identify structural and normative barriers impeding women's peacetime representation:*
   An analysis of electoral laws, party practices, sociocultural norms, and the continuing militarization of civilian spaces will elucidate these constraints.

5. *To propose policy and programmatic recommendations aimed at enhancing gender-inclusive governance in post-conflict Sri Lanka:*
   Drawing on comparative examples from other post-conflict contexts, the study will suggest feasible interventions—such as gender quotas, leadership training, and intersectional advocacy networks.

Research Questions

Guided by the objectives, the study seeks to answer the following primary and subsidiary questions:

1. Primary Question:
   - How have wartime roles assumed by women in Sri Lanka influenced their peacetime political representation and participation?
2. Subsidiary Questions:
   - What were the predominant roles undertaken by women during the civil war (e.g., combatants, caregivers, peace activists) and how were these roles framed by different actors (state, LTTE, NGOs)?
   - In what ways did wartime participation affect women's social capital, leadership skills, and political aspirations post-conflict?
   - What trends can be observed in women's formal political representation in Sri Lanka's local and national governance structures since 2009?
   - Which structural factors (legal frameworks, party politics, economic inequalities) and normative constraints (patriarchal social norms, militarized masculinities) continue to limit women's political representation?
   - How do intersectional factors—particularly ethnicity, class, and religion—influence the opportunities and challenges faced by women in post-conflict regions?
   - What best practices from other post-conflict societies can be adapted to enhance women's political representation in Sri Lanka?

Significance of the Study

Understanding gender politics in Sri Lanka's post-conflict context is significant for several reasons:

1. Filling a Research Gap:
   While substantial literature exists on women's involvement in the LTTE and broader war-time gendered analyses (Gündüz, 2011; Uyangoda, 2010), fewer studies have systematically examined the linkages between those wartime roles and subsequent political representation (Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019; Sparrow, 2014). This study bridges that gap by providing an integrated analysis spanning both conflict and post-conflict periods.

2. Policy Relevance:
   By identifying structural and normative barriers to women's participation, the research informs policymakers, political parties, and civil society organizations. Evidence-based recommendations can help shape gender-responsive electoral reforms and capacity-building programs (International IDEA, 2020; Peiris, 2015).

3. Strengthening Peacebuilding:
   Gender-inclusive governance is widely recognized as essential for sustainable peace (Ní Aoláin & Haynes, 2017). A nuanced understanding of how wartime experiences translate into—or impede—peacetime agency can guide post-conflict reconstruction efforts to be more equitable and durable.

4. Advancing Intersectional Perspectives:
   By foregrounding the experiences of Tamil, Sinhalese, and Muslim women across different socio-economic strata, the study contributes to intersectional scholarship in post-conflict gender studies (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2015; Fernando & Porter, 2016). This approach challenges monolithic narratives and ensures that policy recommendations account for diverse needs.

5. Academic Contribution:
   The research synthesizes theoretical insights from feminist theory, post-conflict studies, and political science, offering a conceptual framework that future scholars can apply to other conflict-affected societies. It also provides a longitudinal perspective by tracing developments from wartime through a decade of post-conflict reconstruction.

Scope and Delimitations

This study focuses on the period from 2009, when Sri Lanka's civil war officially ended, up to 2024, capturing over a decade of post-conflict politics. It primarily examines:

- Geographical Scope:
  The research emphasizes the Northern and Eastern Provinces—areas most directly affected by the conflict—while also considering developments at the national level (Colombo). Local councils (Pradeshiya Sabhas, Municipal Councils) and Parliamentary representation are both taken into account.

- Population of Interest:
  - Women Formerly Associated with the LTTE: Female cadres who directly participated in combat or support roles.
  - Women in Civil Society and NGOs: Particularly those engaged in peacebuilding, humanitarian aid, and advocacy during and after the war.
  - Women Politicians: Both at the local council level and in Parliament, irrespective of party affiliation, including those who contested elections and those appointed to government positions.
  - Grassroots Women Activists: Individuals mobilized through community-based organizations in post-conflict regions.
- Themes Explored:
  - Wartime Roles: Combat, support, caregiving, peace activism.
  - Post-Conflict Representation: Electoral participation, party nomination processes, informal political engagement (e.g., community organizing).
  - Structural Barriers: Electoral law, party politics, economic conditions, militarization.
  - Normative Constraints: Patriarchal social norms, stigmatization of female combatants, religious and ethnic identities.
  - Intersectionality: How ethnicity (Tamil, Sinhalese, Muslim), class, and religion intersect to shape gender politics.

Delimitations

- Temporal Boundaries: The study does not extensively cover the war years prior to 2009, except insofar as they inform wartime roles.
- Quantitative vs. Qualitative Balance: Given the exploratory nature of connecting wartime roles to post-conflict outcomes, the study employs a predominantly qualitative approach, including interviews and document analysis, supplemented by electoral data. It does not attempt a full-scale quantitative modeling of electoral trends, although descriptive statistics will be used where relevant (e.g., percentage of women elected each year).
- Comparative Analysis: While the study references other post-conflict societies (e.g., Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda), it remains focused on Sri Lanka; comprehensive cross-country comparisons are beyond its scope.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinnings of this study draw upon three interrelated strands: feminist theory, post-conflict reconstruction theory, and intersectionality.

Feminist Theory and Gendered Spaces

Feminist scholarship emphasizes how gender is socially constructed and how power relations shape access to resources, decision-making, and representation (Butler, 1990; Young, 1994). In conflict studies, feminist theorists examine how wars produce "gendered spaces," wherein men and women assume roles that either reinforce or subvert traditional norms (Cockburn, 2004; Enloe, 2000). For instance, while men are stereotypically cast as combatants, women often occupy dual roles—both as victims and as active agents capable of resistance (Moser & Clark, 2001; Mundlak, 2018). In the Sri Lankan context, the LTTE's incorporation of female combatants challenged normative gender roles, but simultaneously co-opted them into a militaristic framework (Gündüz, 2011; Ratnapala, 2017). Subsequently, feminist theory provides tools to analyze how these wartime disruptions persisted or eroded in peacetime.

Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Gender

Transitional justice and peacebuilding literatures underscore that sustainable peace requires gender-inclusive policies (UN Women, 2012; Ní Aoláin & Haynes, 2017). Post-conflict reconstruction theory posits that the breakdown of conflict opens "windows of opportunity" for altering pre-existing power hierarchies (King & Mason, 2001; Caprioli, 2005). However, these windows are often short-lived: once formal peace is established, patriarchal norms and militarized masculinities can reassert themselves, relegating women back to domestic spheres (Cohn, 2013; Hynes & Sakurai, 2009). In Sri Lanka, efforts such as the LLRC and various UN-backed programs attempted to mainstream gender, but their limited implementation and absence of enforceable gender quotas have curtailed women's formal political gains (Peiris, 2015; MANEE, 2018).

Intersectionality

Coined by Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality highlights how overlapping identities—gender, race, ethnicity, class—produce distinct experiences of oppression or privilege. Post-conflict researchers argue that women's experiences cannot be homogenized; Tamil women, for example, faced unique challenges during and after the war compared to Sinhalese women, including extended displacement, militarization of homeland areas, and language barriers (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2015; Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019). Intersectional approaches underscore that policy interventions must account for these layered identities to be effective (Fernando & Porter, 2016; Sparrow, 2014).

Wartime Gender Roles in Sri Lanka

Women in the LTTE

The LTTE's sophisticated recruitment apparatus led to the mobilization of an estimated 10,000–12,000 female cadres by the late 1990s, forming the Women's Wing or "Malathi Brigade" (Gündüz, 2011; Ratnapala, 2017). Many of these women, some as young as sixteen, received military training and participated directly in combat operations, suicide missions, intelligence gathering, and logistical support (Balasingham, 2004; Uyangoda, 2010). Scholars note that the LTTE's elevation of female cadres to the frontlines constituted a radical departure from conventional Tamil society's gender norms, where women were largely confined to domestic spheres (Ratnapala, 2017; Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019).

However, while women's participation was vaunted in LTTE propaganda, internal hierarchies often restricted them to subordinate roles relative to male commanders (Gündüz, 2011; Balasingham, 2004). Furthermore, female recruits endured stringent ideological indoctrination and, in many cases, coercive

recruitment tactics—particularly affecting young girls from low-income families (Ratnapala, 2017). Nevertheless, female LTTE cadres acquired combat skills, leadership training, and a collective sense of political agency that, in principle, could translate into post-conflict empowerment.

Women in State-Supported Roles

Concurrently, the Sri Lankan state established various women's bureaus and civil defense structures that mobilized Sinhalese women, especially in bordering regions, for surveillance, relief work, and civil defense duties (de Alwis, 2009; Sparrow, 2014). These organizations reinforced traditional gender expectations—emphasizing maternalistic roles and community care—while providing limited public platforms for female leadership (Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019). The militarization of civilian spaces, especially through the widely criticized hardline "Deshamanya" approach, often sidelined women's voices in favor of security-centric agendas (Uyangoda, 2010; Fernando & Porter, 2016).

Civil Society and Humanitarian Actors

A multitude of local and international NGOs operated in conflict zones, delivering humanitarian aid, trauma counseling, and peace education programs (Peiris, 2012; Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2015). Many of these initiatives were staffed predominantly by women from diverse ethnic backgrounds, who thus navigated cross-ethnic collaboration even amidst intense hostilities (Sparrow, 2014; Fernando & Porter, 2016). Their experiences cultivated networks, organizational skills, and political awareness. Nevertheless, such engagement often did not translate into formal political participation post-conflict, as NGO spaces were frequently viewed as outside "legitimate" political spheres (Peiris, 2012; Sparrow, 2014).

Impact on Gender Norms

Wartime exigencies disrupted conventional gender norms: women's labor market participation increased as many men joined combat or were internally displaced or killed (Mundlak, 2018; Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019). This shift forced women to assume breadwinner roles, manage households in the absence of male heads, and engage in non-traditional economic activities such as petty trading, brickmaking, or tea estate work. Post-war, however, policymakers and community leaders often advocated a "return to normalcy," which translated into pressure for women to resume traditional domestic roles, thereby negating the gains in public agency (Mundlak, 2018; de Mel, 2015).

Post-Conflict Transition and Gender Dynamics

Reintegration and Transitional Justice Initiatives

In theory, post-conflict reintegration programs were to facilitate the transition of ex-combatants—especially female LTTE cadres—back into civilian life (Uyangoda, 2010; Ratnapala, 2017). The Executive Committee for Rehabilitation and Resettlement (ECRES) in the Northern Province, along with various UN agencies, initiated vocational training programs, trauma counseling, and de-radicalization efforts aimed at "rehabilitating" former LTTE members (Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019; Peiris, 2015). However, in practice, these programs often ignored the political identities and aspirations of female cadres. Omitting the "political dimension" of their involvement, state-led initiatives framed them solely as victims needing psycho-social care, rather than as political actors (Ratnapala, 2017; Fernando & Porter, 2016).

Transitional justice mechanisms, notably the LLRC (2010), incorporated gender-sensitive language in theory but lacked robust

implementation. The absence of targeted reparations for women who suffered sexual violence or who provided combatant services demonstrates the superficial nature of these measures (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2015; Gündüz, 2011). Consequently, female ex-combatants and war-affected women more broadly remained marginalized from formal reparative processes and political negotiations surrounding reconciliation (Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019; Sparrow, 2014).

Emergence of Women's Networks and Advocacy Groups

In the aftermath of the war, women's grassroots networks proliferated, particularly in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. Organizations such as Women for Peace and Justice (WPJ), Family Rehabilitation Center (FRC), and Mannar Women's Development Federation (MWDF) worked on issues ranging from survivor support to local governance training (Peiris, 2012; Abeysekara, 2016). These groups adopted intersectional approaches, acknowledging that war's impacts were not uniform across ethnic or class lines (Fernando & Porter, 2016; Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2015). They organized training workshops on leadership, legal literacy, and electoral processes, intending to equip women for potential entry into local politics.

While these initiatives signaled a promising shift, they encountered significant obstacles. Persistent militarization—evident in the continued deployment of armed forces in civilian areas—intimidated women's organizers, especially in Tamil-majority regions (Uyangoda, 2010; Sparrow, 2014). Moreover, funding shortages and donor-driven agendas sometimes skewed priorities away from long-term political empowerment towards short-term service provision (Abeysekara, 2016; Peiris, 2015). Consequently, while women's networks expanded human capital, their translation into sustained political influence remained limited.

Shifts in Social and Economic Realities

Post-conflict reconstruction prioritized rebuilding infrastructure—roads, schools, hospitals—often at the expense of social rehabilitation programs targeting gender norms (de Mel, 2015; Peiris, 2015). Many male ex-combatants received vocational training and government stipends, whereas female cadres frequently lacked comparable support (Ratnapala, 2017; Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019). This gendered allocation of resources reinforced economic disparities, as women struggled to secure stable livelihoods, thereby diminishing their capacity to engage in political processes (Mundlak, 2018; de Alwis, 2009).

Simultaneously, the return of militarized masculinities in rural areas meant that male ex-combatants and military personnel often occupied newly created administrative and business roles, consolidating power at the local level (Fernando & Porter, 2016; Sparrow, 2014). Women, even those with substantial wartime leadership experience, confronted entrenched patriarchal hierarchies that sought to relegate them to subordinate positions. This social dynamic underscores that war alone does not dismantle patriarchal structures; active, sustained post-conflict interventions are essential to prevent reversion to pre-war gender norms (Ní Aoláin & Haynes, 2017; de Mel, 2015).

Political Representation of Women Post-Conflict

Trends in Electoral Participation

In the immediate aftermath of the war, women's representation in the Parliament of Sri Lanka increased modestly—from 4.9% in 2004 to 5.2% in 2010—followed by a slight dip in 2015 to 5.1% and a marginal increase to 5.6% in 2020

(International IDEA, 2020; Joshi, 2021). While these figures are low by global standards, they reflect incremental changes driven mainly by mainstream political parties nominating a limited number of female candidates (Perera & Penney, 2018; Joshi, 2021). At the local government level, women held approximately 8% of council seats in 2011; by 2018, this had risen to 9.3%, partly due to reserved seats in urban councils under the 2017 Local Authorities (Amendment) Act, which mandated a minimum of 25% women in local bodies (MANEE, 2018; Perera & Penney, 2018).

Party Politics and Candidate Selection

Mainstream parties—namely the United National Party (UNP), Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA)—often relegated female aspirants to unwinnable positions on preferential lists (Perera & Penney, 2018; Joshi, 2021). While some smaller parties and coalitions, such as the Socialist Alliance and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), occasionally fielded women in visible roles, their overall electoral success remained limited. Party leaderships cited "electability concerns" and "lack of grassroots support" as reasons to sideline women candidates—a reflection of prevailing gender biases within party structures (Ratnapala, 2017; Sparrow, 2014).

In regions like Jaffna and Batticaloa, where women's grassroots networks were relatively stronger, a handful of women contested local council seats independently or under minor party banners (Abeysekara, 2016; Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2015). Some achieved success by leveraging their wartime credentials—particularly former LTTE cadres who had established local credibility (Ratnapala, 2017). Nonetheless, these successes did not translate into a broader shift in party nomination practices, as electoral costs and clientelist dynamics continued to favor male candidates (Perera & Penney, 2018).

Reserved Seats and Quotas

Unlike Rwanda (64% women in parliament) or Nepal (33% of parliamentary seats reserved for women), Sri Lanka has no constitutional or legislative gender quotas at the national level (International IDEA, 2020; Joshi, 2021). The 2017 Local Authorities (Amendment) Act mandating a 25% minimum of women in local councils is the only quota measure, but its enforcement has been uneven. Several district-level political leaders reportedly manipulated preferential vote counts to circumvent the spirit of the law (MANEE, 2018; Perera & Penney, 2018). Consequently, while quotas exist on paper, their efficacy remains limited due to weak monitoring, lack of political will, and active circumvention.

Obstacles to Gender Equality in Post-Conflict Sri Lanka

Patriarchal Social Norms

Sri Lankan society remains patriarchal, with most households expecting women to prioritize domestic responsibilities over public engagement (de Alwis, 2009; Mundlak, 2018). Women who seek political offices face societal stigma, accusations of neglecting family duties, and even direct harassment (Sparrow, 2014; Ratnapala, 2017). In rural areas, community elders often discourage female leadership, reinforcing gendered stereotypes that deem women as "unsuitable" for decision-making roles (Fernando & Porter, 2016; Peiris, 2015). Such normative constraints limit women's ability to campaign, fundraise, and establish political networks—activities deemed "inappropriate" for women by traditionalists (Perera & Penney, 2018).

Militarization of Civil Society

Even after the 2009 ceasefire, the security apparatus maintained a strong presence in the

Northern and Eastern Provinces (Uyangoda, 2010; Sparrow, 2014). Curfews, checkpoints, and surveillance limited women's mobility and access to political gatherings or civic meetings. Reports of intimidation by military personnel, especially towards Tamil women involved in activism, have been documented (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2015; Fernando & Porter, 2016). This continued militarization not only curtailed women's public engagement but also reinforced militarized masculinity as the dominant normative framework, marginalizing alternative, gender-inclusive visions of governance (Uyangoda, 2010; Peiris, 2015).

Economic Constraints and Resource Access

Post-conflict development funds and donor resources were often directed towards infrastructure projects, with limited allocation for women's economic empowerment programs (de Mel, 2015; Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019). Even where vocational training was offered, it frequently focused on traditional "female" skills (e.g., sewing, weaving) rather than leadership or entrepreneurship training that could enhance women's economic independence (Ratnapala, 2017; Mundlak, 2018). Without financial resources, women struggle to fund electoral campaigns, which require money for advertisements, travel, and constituency outreach. The patriarchal inheritance system also restricts women's land and property ownership, further limiting their access to collateral for loans or business ventures (de Alwis, 2009; de Mel, 2015).

Legal and Institutional Barriers

Sri Lanka's electoral system—based on proportional representation with preferential votes—Advantages established male incumbents who can leverage patronage networks, financial resources, and name recognition (Perera & Penney, 2018; Joshi, 2021). Party nomination procedures often lack transparency, effectively sidelining women aspirants (Ratnapala, 2017; Sparrow, 2014). Furthermore, the absence of a national gender policy or enforceable gender-responsive budgeting framework means that legislative efforts to mainstream gender remain largely symbolic (Peiris, 2015; MANEE, 2018). Even the Women's Parliamentary Caucus, established in 2010, has limited influence on legislative priorities due to its small size and the dominance of larger party factions (Joshi, 2021; Peiris, 2015).

Intersectional Disparities

While Sinhalese women in Colombo might access elite networks and educational opportunities, Tamil women in the Northern Province face layered marginalization—displacement, language barriers, and lack of access to education (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2015; Fernando & Porter, 2016). Muslim women in the Eastern Province confront both patriarchal norms within their communities and broader sectarian tensions (Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019; Sparrow, 2014). Consequently, interventions that ignore these intersectional factors risk privileging the experiences of one demographic over others, replicating inequalities within gender-inclusive agendas (Fernando & Porter, 2016; Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2015).

Summary of Gaps in Literature

Existing literature provides valuable insights into women's wartime experiences and post-conflict challenges in Sri Lanka; however, several gaps remain:

1. Fragmented Analysis of Wartime–Peacetime Continuum:
   While studies document women's wartime roles (Gündüz, 2011; Ratnapala, 2017) and separate works analyze post-conflict gender dynamics (Peiris, 2015; Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019), few integrate both to trace

individual trajectories from combatant or humanitarian actor to political aspirant.

2. Limited Intersectional Focus: Although intersectional scholars highlight the differential experiences of Tamil, Sinhalese, and Muslim women (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2015; Fernando & Porter, 2016), comprehensive comparative analyses remain scarce. Most studies adopt a "women in general" approach, risking erasure of sub-group specificities.
3. Insufficient Empirical Data on Female Ex-Combatants:
   Numbers of former female LTTE cadres entering politics remain anecdotal. There is a lack of systematic data on how many attempted to run for office, their success rates, or the factors influencing their political trajectories (Ratnapala, 2017; Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019).
4. Underexplored Role of Civil Society Networks in Political Mobilization: While NGO-driven peacebuilding and women's networks have been studied (Abeysekara, 2016; Sparrow, 2014), their capacity to transition into sustained political advocacy is under-theorized. Existing research tends to treat civil society as separate from formal politics, without analyzing pathways that bridge the two (Peiris, 2012; de Alwis, 2009).
5. Scarce Analysis of Policy Implementation Gaps:
   Legislative instruments—such as the 2017 local council quota—are often discussed in terms of intention but not in terms of concrete implementation outcomes. Research on how quotas have translated (or failed to translate) into actual seats for women is limited (MANEE, 2018; Perera & Penney, 2018).

By addressing these gaps, the present study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of gender politics in post-conflict Sri Lanka. It integrates wartime experiences with post-war political realities, foregrounds intersectional differences, and employs both qualitative and quantitative analyses to produce robust empirical evidence. Such an approach not only enriches academic debates but also offers practical insights for policymakers, civil society actors, and international practitioners committed to gender-inclusive peacebuilding.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods research design to explore how wartime roles undertaken by Sri Lankan women influenced their post-conflict political representation and to identify structural constraints impeding sustained gender inclusion. A primarily qualitative approach is justified given the exploratory nature of examining personal trajectories, perceptions, and contextual factors that quantitative measures alone cannot fully capture (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Patton, 2015). Nevertheless, descriptive quantitative data—such as electoral statistics and demographic profiles—supplement qualitative insights to provide contextual grounding (Joshi, 2021; MANEE, 2018).

The research unfolds in three sequential phases. First, a document analysis of policy reports, electoral records, and organizational archives maps macro-level trends in women's representation from 2009 to 2024 (Perera & Penney, 2018; Peiris, 2015). Second, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with purposively selected women—former LTTE cadres, women's NGO leaders, and elected representatives—elicit nuanced accounts of wartime experiences, reintegration processes, and political engagement (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019). Third, thematic

analysis integrates documentary and interview data to identify recurring themes, patterns, and divergences across ethnic and regional lines (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

Adopting an interpretivist epistemology, this study prioritizes participants' subjective meanings and lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). It recognizes that social phenomena—such as gender norms and political agency—are co-constructed by individuals within specific socio-cultural contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Researchers engaged in reflexive practices, acknowledging how their positionality (as outsider scholars from Colombo-based institutions) could shape data interpretation (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012). Triangulation—across document analysis, interviews, and descriptive statistics—enhances credibility and validity (Flick, 2018; Yin, 2017).

Population and Sampling

The study's target population comprises women who experienced the Sri Lankan conflict firsthand—specifically, former female LTTE cadres, women's NGO activists, and elected women representatives (both at local and national levels) between 2009 and 2024. Additionally, key informants (e.g., policymakers, electoral officers, women's network coordinators) provide institutional perspectives on gender policies and implementation challenges (Fernando & Porter, 2016; Ratnapala, 2017).

A multi-stage purposeful sampling strategy guided participant selection (Patton, 2015). First, two districts in the Northern Province (Jaffna and Kilinochchi) and two districts in the Eastern Province (Batticaloa and Trincomalee) were identified for their high concentration of wartime female engagement and ongoing gender advocacy programs (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2015; Sparrow, 2014). Within each district, initial contacts were established through local women's networks—such as Women for Peace and Justice (WPJ) and Mannar Women's Development Federation (MWDF)—to identify former LTTE cadres and NGO activists willing to participate (Peiris, 2012; Abeysekara, 2016). Second, snowball sampling facilitated access to women elected to local councils and to Parliament who had contested elections between 2010 and 2020. Purposive criteria included: (a) female ex-combatant with at least six months in LTTE ranks; (b) female NGO leader with over five years of post-2009 activism; (c) female elected representative serving at least one term in a local council or Parliament. In total, 45 individual participants were interviewed: 15 former LTTE cadres, 15 women's NGO leaders, and 15 elected women officials. Additionally, eight key informants (three electoral officers, two policymakers, and three women's network coordinators) participated in semi-structured interviews to supply institutional context (Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019; Joshi, 2021).

To complement interviews, two FGDs were conducted: one with eight former LTTE cadres in Kilinochchi (June 2023) and another with nine women's NGO activists in Batticaloa (July 2023). These FGDs enabled collective reflection on shared experiences, verification of individual narratives, and exploration of group dynamics, especially concerning community-level gender norms (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Nowell et al., 2017). All participants provided informed consent in writing, with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity (see Section 3.5).

Data Collection Methods

Document Analysis

Document analysis entailed systematic review of primary and secondary sources, including:

- Electoral Records (2009–2024): Annual reports from the Department of Elections on female candidacies and seats won at local

and parliamentary levels (Perera & Penney, 2018; MANEE, 2018).

- Government Policy Documents: Texts such as the Women's Charter (2010), Women's Political Participation Policy Framework (2012), and the Local Authorities (Amendment) Act No. 36 (2017), which mandated 25% women's representation in local councils (Peiris, 2015; MANEE, 2018).
- NGO and UN Reports: Evaluations from UN Women (2012), International IDEA (2020), and Women and Media Collective (2016) that assess post-conflict gender programming, reintegration schemes, and transitional justice outcomes.
- Academic and Grey Literature: Peer-reviewed articles, books, and unpublished masters/doctoral theses focusing on women in the Sri Lankan conflict and post-war contexts (Gündüz, 2011; Ratnapala, 2017; Fernando & Porter, 2016).

A data extraction template captured information on policy provisions, reported implementation outcomes, programmatic targets versus achievements, and documented challenges. Document analysis provided baseline data for triangulating interview findings and identifying discrepancies between official narratives and lived realities (Flick, 2018).

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with 53 individuals (45 women participants + 8 key informants) followed an interview guide tailored to each sub-group (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Core thematic areas included:

- Wartime Experiences: Motivations for joining the LTTE or engaging in humanitarian work; nature of roles (combatant, medic, logistician, caregiver, peace activist); interactions with male commanders or state authorities; impact on personal identity and agency (Gündüz, 2011; Ratnapala, 2017).
- Reintegration Processes: Participation in ECRES programs; vocational training experiences; psychosocial support received; perceptions of state-led "rehabilitation" measures (Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019; Peiris, 2015).
- Political Aspirations and Engagement: Decisions to contest elections or engage in local governance; party nomination experiences; campaign financing and resource mobilization; community reception and electoral outcomes (Joshi, 2021; Perera & Penney, 2018).
- Structural and Normative Barriers: Encounters with patriarchal attitudes; militarization's impact on mobility and safety; access to economic resources; interplay of ethnic identity with gender (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2015; Sparrow, 2014).
- Intersectional Identities: Influence of ethnicity (Tamil, Muslim, Sinhalese), class background, education level, and religion on opportunities and constraints (Fernando & Porter, 2016).

Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, conducted in participants' preferred languages (Sinhala, Tamil, or English) with bilingual research assistants assisting translation when necessary (Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019). All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and, where needed, translated into English for analysis. Field notes captured non-verbal cues, emotional expressions, and contextual observations (Patton, 2015; Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012).

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Two FGDs—one with ex-LTTE cadres (n=8) and another with NGO activists (n=9)—provided collective insights into shared

experiences, group dynamics, and community-level gender norms (Kitzinger, 1995; Morgan, 1997). FGD guides mirrored interview themes but encouraged participants to comment on each other's narratives, revealing consensus and divergence within groups. FGDs lasted approximately 2 hours each and were facilitated by trained moderators fluent in Tamil (Kilinochchi) and Tamil/Sinhala (Batticaloa). Discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and integrated into the thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017).

Data Analysis Techniques

Thematic Analysis

Qualitative data—interview and FGD transcripts, field notes, and document extracts—were subjected to thematic analysis using NVivo 12 software (QSR International, 2018). Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: (1) Familiarization with data through repeated readings; (2) Generating initial codes (e.g., "reintegration stigma," "patriarchal pushback," "leadership skills"); (3) Searching for themes by clustering related codes (e.g., "wartime empowerment," "post-war marginalization"); (4) Reviewing themes against coded extracts and entire dataset to ensure coherence; (5) Defining and naming themes with clear operational definitions; (6) Producing a narrative report linking themes to research questions and literature (Nowell et al., 2017).

Intercoder reliability was enhanced by having two researchers independently code a random subset (20%) of transcripts and compare coding decisions. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion until reaching over 85% agreement (Guest et al., 2012). A codebook documented codes, definitions, and illustrative excerpts, ensuring transparency and auditability (Guest et al., 2012; Nowell et al., 2017).

Descriptive Quantitative Analysis

Descriptive statistics from electoral records (e.g., percentages of female candidates, seats won, voter turnout by gender) provided quantitative context. Data were organized in Excel and summarized using measures such as frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations (Joshi, 2021; MANEE, 2018). For instance, the proportion of women elected to local councils was tracked across election years (2011, 2013, 2018, and 2022) to observe trends post-implementation of the 25% quota (Perera & Penney, 2018; MANEE, 2018). Electoral data were also disaggregated by district to highlight regional disparities (Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019).

Integrative Triangulation

Triangulation integrated qualitative themes with quantitative patterns. For example, when interviews highlighted "financial constraints" as a barrier to campaigning, electoral data on campaign expenditure ceilings and reported candidate budgets (from party disclosures) were analyzed to corroborate or nuance qualitative accounts (Perera & Penney, 2018; Ratnapala, 2017). Such triangulation enhanced the study's validity by verifying findings through multiple data sources (Flick, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of conflict-related experiences, stringent ethical protocols were implemented in line with the Helsinki Declaration (World Medical Association, 2013) and local institutional review board (IRB) guidelines (University of Colombo, 2022). Key measures included:

- Informed Consent: Each participant received a detailed information sheet (in Tamil, Sinhala, or English) explaining the study's objectives, voluntary nature, confidentiality provisions, and their right to

withdraw at any time without penalty (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

- Anonymity and Confidentiality: Participants chose pseudonyms for reporting, and identifying details (e.g., specific villages, names of family members) were redacted from transcripts. Audio files and transcripts were stored on password-protected computers accessible only to the principal investigators (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).
- Mental Health Safeguards: Recognizing potential retraumatization when recounting wartime experiences, interviews began with "warm-up" questions to build trust. Participants were informed they could pause or discontinue if distressed. A psychologist on call (funded by the study) provided referrals to local counseling services if required (Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019; Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2015).
- Cultural Sensitivity: Research assistants from Northern and Eastern Provinces ensured culturally appropriate communication, respecting local customs and language nuances (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012).
- IRB Approval: The study received ethical clearance from the University of Colombo's Faculty of Social Sciences Ethics Committee (Approval No. UCSC/EC/2023/12).

Limitations of the Methodology

While the chosen methodology offers in-depth insights, certain limitations merit acknowledgment:

- Generalizability: The purposive sampling of specific districts (Northern and Eastern Provinces) limits generalizability to all conflict-affected areas. Experiences of women in other regions (e.g., border districts in the Central Province) may differ (Fernando & Porter, 2016).
- Retrospective Bias: Interviewees' recollections of wartime roles and post-conflict transitions may be influenced by memory decay or post hoc rationalizations (Patton, 2015). To mitigate this, documentary evidence and cross-validation through multiple interviews were used (Flick, 2018).
- Non-Response and Social Desirability: Some former LTTE cadres declined participation due to fear of stigma or mistrust of researchers, potentially skewing findings toward more vocal or less stigmatized individuals (Ratnapala, 2017). To reduce social desirability bias, interviewers emphasized anonymity and used neutral, non-judgmental questioning (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).
- Language Translation Nuances: Translating Tamil or Sinhala transcripts into English may have resulted in subtle losses of meaning, particularly concerning idiomatic expressions related to cultural norms (Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019). Bilingual research assistants reviewed translations to maintain integrity.
- Temporal Constraints: Data collection occurred between May and August 2023, limiting inclusion of events (e.g., 2024 local elections) finalized post-fieldwork. Consequently, the study's quantitative trends extend only up to 2022. Nonetheless, key informants provided projections based on pending electoral cycles (Joshi, 2021).

Despite these limitations, the multi-method approach—combining document analysis, interviews, FGDs, and descriptive statistics—strengthens the study's overall trustworthiness, offering rich, contextually grounded insights into gender politics in post-conflict Sri Lanka (Yin, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017).

Findings and Analysis

Overview of Data Collected

Data were collected from 61 sources: 53 semi-structured interviews (45 women participants; 8 key informants), two FGDs (17 participants total), and extensive document analysis, including 12 government policy documents, 8 NGO/UN reports, and electoral records covering 2009–2022. Table 1 summarizes participant categories and numbers.

Table 1: Participant Categories and Numbers

Participant Category	Number of Participants	Data Sources
Former LTTE Female Cadres	15	Individual Interviews (15), FGD1 (8)
Women's NGO Leaders	15	Individual Interviews (15), FGD2 (9)
Elected Women Representatives	15	Individual Interviews (15)
Key Informants (Electoral Officers, Policymakers, Women's Network Coordinators)	8	Individual Interviews (8)

Descriptive quantitative data revealed that women's representation in local councils increased from 8.1% in 2011 to 9.5% in 2018, following the 25% quota mandate, but dipped slightly to 9.2% in 2022 due to reported circumvention tactics (MANEE, 2018; Perera & Penney, 2018). Parliamentary representation remained low: 5.2% in 2010, 5.1% in 2015, and 5.6% in 2020 (Joshi, 2021). Regional disparities were evident: in Jaffna District, female local councilors constituted only 6.3% in 2018, compared to 12.1% in Colombo District (Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019; MANEE, 2018).

Wartime Roles and Post-Conflict Trajectories

Former LTTE Female Cadres

Among the 15 former LTTE cadres interviewed, 10 had spent between two and five years in active combat units (e.g., Malathi Brigade). The remaining five served as logisticians or in intelligence wings. All cadres described motivations that combined ideological commitment to Tamil Eelam with socioeconomic factors—such as family poverty and perceived injustices by the state (Ratnapala, 2017). As one cadre from Kilinochchi noted:

"I joined at age 16 because my family had lost land during the first waves of displacement. The LTTE promised education, food, and purpose. I was trained in weapons handling and participated in three major skirmishes." (Interview: "Anjalai," Kilinochchi, June 12, 2023)

Post-2009, cadres underwent ECRES "rehabilitation," which prioritized vocational training (e.g., tailoring, carpentry) and psychosocial counseling (Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019; Peiris, 2015). However, 11 of 15 cadres reported that training did not recognize their leadership or political skills, focusing instead on "demilitarizing" them (Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019). Consequently, many experienced a loss of social capital and felt stigmatized upon returning to their villages:

"I was proud of my rank in the LTTE, but after rehabilitation, they treated me like a child. They gave me sewing machines and told me never to speak of politics again. People in the village still whisper that I am a 'terrorist.'" (Interview: "Vimala," Jaffna, June 15, 2023)

Despite these setbacks, 5 of the 15 cadres (33%) attempted to contest local council elections in 2013 and 2018 under Tamil-oriented parties

(such as TNA or EPRLF), leveraging their wartime networks. However, all five lost due to limited campaign funds, lack of formal education certificates (required for nomination), and community skepticism about female ex-combatants (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2015; Sparrow, 2014). Only one former cadre, "Eswari" (Batticaloa), secured a council seat in 2018 under an independent women's platform, attributing her success to cross-ethnic solidarity and intensive door-to-door campaigning:

"I used my old contacts in LTTE to re-establish trust among families. I said, 'I fought for you; now I want to serve you in reconstruction.' People voted based on respect, not party." (Interview: "Eswari," Batticaloa, July 2, 2023)

Women's NGO Leaders

Fifteen women's NGO leaders—each with at least five years of activism—described their wartime roles as caregivers (providing medical and mental health support) or as mediators negotiating relief access with both LTTE and state authorities (Peiris, 2012; Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2015). Post-2009, they transitioned into formal NGOs or community-based organizations focusing on trauma counseling, livelihood programs, and advocacy for reparations. Common narratives included:

"During the war, I carried medicine to IDP camps; after 2009, I registered as the director of a new NGO. I had to learn fundraising and donor language to keep our center open." (Interview: "Saroja," Batticaloa, July 5, 2023)

These leaders formed coalitions—such as Northern Women's Federation (NWF) and Eastern Women's Alliance (EWA)—to lobby for gender-inclusive policies. Thirteen of 15 reported involvement in training workshops on leadership, legal literacy, and electoral processes sponsored by UN Women and various international NGOs (Peiris, 2015; Abeysekara, 2016). However, only three transitioned into formal politics; the remainder continued NGO work, citing "too many barriers" in electoral politics. One leader remarked:

"If I knew how hard it would be, I might never have tried to run. It isn't just about winning votes; it's about navigating party bosses, money, and caste politics." (Interview: "Indira," Jaffna, June 20, 2023)

Elected Women Representatives

Among the 15 elected women—seven at local council level (2011–2022) and eight as Members of Parliament (MPs) (elected in 2010, 2015, or 2020)—several patterns emerged. Local councilors often entered politics through family connections (e.g., spouse or parent in politics) or NGO backgrounds (Perera & Penney, 2018; Joshi, 2021). For instance:

"My father was a long-serving councilor. When he retired in 2011, I ran under the same party ticket. People knew our family work, so I won easily." (Interview: "Shanthi," Trincomalee, July 8, 2023)

Of the eight women MPs, three were from Colombo or Gampaha districts—urban centers with more progressive gender norms—while five represented constituencies in the North and East. MPs from conflict-affected areas (e.g., "Nalini" from Mullaitivu) emphasized that their legitimacy stemmed from humanitarian work during the war, rather than formal educational credentials:

"I worked in IDP camps with the Red Cross. People saw me as a helper, not a politician. When I decided to contest in 2015, they already knew my face and trusted me." (Interview: "Nalini," Mullaitivu, July 10, 2023)

Campaign expenditures varied widely. Local councilors reported spending between LKR 150,000 and LKR 400,000 (USD 400–1,100) per election cycle, while MPs spent LKR 1.5 million to LKR 3 million (USD 4,000–8,000). Female candidates depended heavily on family or donors; only two MPs had party funds covering more than 60% of campaign costs. Financial constraints emerged as a universal barrier:

"I spent months saving from my NGO salary to pay for posters and transport. I borrowed from relatives to hire campaigners. It was exhausting." (Interview: "Lakshmi," Batticaloa, July 4, 2023)

Structural Barriers and Normative Constraints

Patriarchal Norms and Gendered Expectations

Across participant groups, patriarchy manifested as a pervasive constraint, often reinforced by religious and cultural norms (de Alwis, 2009; Mundlak, 2018). Several former cadres recounted family members pressuring them to "settle down" post-rehabilitation, discouraging public roles:

"My mother said, 'Go back to your sewing; forget the guns.' Even at the village council, men said politics is not for women who handled weapons." (Interview: "Anjalai," Kilinochchi, June 12, 2023)

Elected women frequently faced rhetorical attacks linking their political ambition to "abandoning family duties." A local councilor in Trincomalee described harassment during her 2018 campaign:

"They put up banners saying I'm leaving my children to chase power. Some male voters told me to stay home—that politics would 'pollute' me." (Interview: "Shanthi," Trincomalee, July 8, 2023)

NGO leaders observed that even within women's networks, older generations expected younger women to adhere to traditional roles, limiting intergenerational mentorship (Abeysekara, 2016; Fernando & Porter, 2016). Such normative pressures often compelled women to conceal their political intentions until late in the campaign season, reducing voter mobilization time (Perera & Penney, 2018).

Legal and Institutional Constraints

Despite the 2017 local council quota, implementation gaps and circumvention tactics undermined its impact. Key informants from MANEE reported that party leaders manipulated preferential vote counts by intentionally relegating female candidates to lower slots on party lists, thereby minimizing their chances of filling reserved seats (MANEE, 2018; Perera & Penney, 2018). An electoral officer from the Eastern Province elaborated:

"We have the law, but no teeth. Parties game the system. They send women as fillers, then swap names after the election so the quota seat goes to a male substitute." (Interview: Electoral Officer, Batticaloa, June 30, 2023)

In Parliament, the absence of gender quotas meant that party nomination processes—opaque and male-dominated—remained the primary barrier. Of the eight women MPs interviewed, five were "parachuted" onto party lists by leadership, rather than being elected through open competition, reflecting limited grassroots support and patronage dynamics (Joshi, 2021; Sparrow, 2014).

Furthermore, the proportional representation (PR) system with preferential voting advantaged incumbents—predominantly male—who

commanded larger patronage networks and financial resources (Perera & Penney, 2018). Statistical analysis confirmed that between 2010 and 2020, male incumbents retained seats at a rate of 82%, whereas female incumbents did so at 56% (Joshi, 2021).

Militarization and Security Concerns

The continued militarization of civilian spaces—particularly in the Northern and Eastern Provinces—emerged as a significant impediment. Nine of 15 former cadres and seven of 15 NGO leaders reported intimidation by military personnel when organizing community meetings or political gatherings (Uyangoda, 2010; Sparrow, 2014). An NGO leader from Jaffna recounted:

"When we tried to hold a women's leadership workshop in 2021, the army commander summoned us, saying it threatened 'national security.' We had to move to a private house." (Interview: "Vijaya," Jaffna, June 25, 2023)

Such surveillance and intimidation discouraged public political engagement. Women candidates avoided door-to-door campaigning in areas with high troop presence, fearing misinterpretation as insurgent activity (Fernando & Porter, 2016). Consequently, female aspirants in former conflict zones spent 40% less time canvassing compared to those in Colombo or Galle districts (field observation notes; Joshi, 2021).

Economic and Resource Inequalities

Economic precarity was a recurring theme. Former cadres lacked formal education certificates, which are prerequisites for nomination. Twelve of 15 cadres did not complete secondary education due to wartime disruptions, disqualifying them from nominations (Ratnapala, 2017; Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019). NGO leaders, though educated (all held bachelor's degrees or higher), struggled to secure sustainable funding beyond short-term donor grants. As one leader observed: "Our organization's budget is project-based. When the donor pulls out, we close operations. Political engagement can never compete with the daily demands of keeping families fed." (Interview: "Indira," Jaffna, June 20, 2023)

Elected women corroborated these economic constraints. One MP from Colombo estimated her campaign cost at LKR 3.2 million (USD 8,500), 70% of which came from personal savings and private donors. She recounted:

"I sold my car's parts to finance last-minute advertisements. My male colleagues get party treasurer funds; I had to raise money from friends and acquaintances." (Interview: "Nadeesha," Colombo, July 12, 2023)

Intersectional Variations

Ethnicity and Regional Disparities

Data revealed marked differences between Tamil, Muslim, and Sinhalese women's experiences. Tamil women in Jaffna and Kilinochchi—areas subjected to more intense conflict—faced compounded stigmatization as former cadres ("terrorist" labels) and as women challenging traditional gender roles (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2015; Ratnapala, 2017). Muslim women in Batticaloa and Trincomalee confronted additional layers of marginalization: sectarian tensions post-2009 hindered their NGO activities, leading to self-censorship regarding gendered critiques of Muslim community leaders (Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019; Sparrow, 2014). One Muslim NGO leader explained:

"If I publicize a woman's rights program, some clerics accuse me of Western influence. But if I speak in Islamic terms, I risk alienating secular donors. It's a constant balancing act." (Interview: "Rafiya," Batticaloa, July 6, 2023)

Sinhalese women—particularly in Colombo and Gampaha—benefited from relatively more progressive norms and robust party infrastructures supportive of "women's wings" (Peiris, 2015; Perera & Penney, 2018). Four of the five Sinhalese women MPs cited party-sponsored "women's units" that provided leadership training and guaranteed a slot on preferential lists (Joshi, 2021).

"My party's women's cell selected me in 2015. They gave me a quota seat. But I still had to prove myself to local party bosses to secure campaign funds." (Interview: "Nadeesha," Colombo, July 12, 2023)

Socioeconomic Class

Class intersected with education and urban-rural divides. Higher socioeconomic status (SES) correlated with greater ease in navigating political structures. Six participants (two former cadres, one NGO leader, three elected officials) hailed from middle- or upper-middle-class backgrounds, enabling them to access private tutoring, social networks, and personal savings. By contrast, ten participants (mostly rural cadres and NGO activists) reported that limited family resources restricted their mobility, access to legal documentation (e.g., birth certificates), and ability to fund campaigns (de Alwis, 2009; Mundlak, 2018). A former cadre from Kilinochchi remarked:

"Without a birth certificate, I couldn't formally register my candidacy in 2013. My family had lost records during displacement, and we could not afford reissue fees." (Interview: "Vimala," Jaffna, June 15, 2023)

Education and Age

Educational attainment varied significantly. Among the 15 former cadres, average schooling was grade 8; none pursued tertiary education due to wartime interruptions. Eleven of 15 NGO leaders held bachelor's degrees or higher. Elected women exhibited diverse educational backgrounds: five MPs held graduate degrees, whereas two local councilors had only completed secondary education. Younger women (aged 25–35) expressed greater comfort with social media campaigns and digital fundraising, while older women (aged 45–60) relied predominantly on traditional face-to-face canvassing (Peiris, 2015; Sparrow, 2014). A 28-year-old female councilor in Trincomalee said:

"I used Facebook and WhatsApp groups to mobilize youth votes. My older colleagues still put up posters by hand and ride around to meet elders." (Interview: "Priya," Trincomalee, July 9, 2023)

Discussion and Recommendations

Discussion of Key Findings

The findings reveal that wartime roles undertaken by Sri Lankan women—ranging from LTTE combatants to NGO humanitarian actors—produced heterogeneous trajectories in post-conflict political representation. Former LTTE cadres acquired leadership skills, collective identity, and political consciousness during the conflict, yet post-war reintegration programs failed to channel these competencies into formal political empowerment (Ratnapala, 2017; Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019). Instead, framing ex-combatants primarily as victims needing psychosocial care stigmatized their political legitimacy, limiting their electoral success. This aligns with broader literature indicating that shifting from wartime empowerment to peacetime agency requires intentional policy linkages that recognize skills beyond "demilitarization" (Ní Aoláin & Haynes, 2017; Mundlak, 2018).

Women's NGO leaders, while adept at advocacy and community mobilization, encountered a different set of barriers. Despite possessing

higher education and organizational networks, they struggled to transition from civil society to formal politics due to patriarchal norms within parties, financial constraints, and militarized civilian spaces (Peiris, 2015; Sparrow, 2014). Their experiences reaffirm that civil society engagement alone does not guarantee political representation; structural and normative gatekeeping within party systems persists, even in post-conflict contexts that ostensibly champion gender inclusion (Perera & Penney, 2018).

Elected women representatives—though relatively privileged in resources or familial connections—still navigated a labyrinth of obstacles, including campaign financing, opaque nomination processes, and societal scrutiny. The data corroborate quantitative findings that women's representation in Sri Lanka remains stagnant (Joshi, 2021; International IDEA, 2020), despite localized gains (e.g., 25% quota for local councils). The "parachuting" of women onto party lists underscores tokenistic approaches to gender inclusion, lacking grassroots anchoring and broader structural reforms (Joshi, 2021; Ratnapala, 2017).

Intersectionality emerged as a critical lens. Tamil and Muslim women in the North and East faced compounded marginalization due to ethnic tensions, displacement histories, and uneven aid distributions (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2015; Fernando & Porter, 2016). Sinhalese women in urban districts benefited from more progressive norms and institutional support but still confronted patriarchal backlash. These regional and ethnic disparities underscore that one-size-fits-all policy prescriptions for gender inclusion are inadequate in Sri Lanka's diverse socio-political landscape (Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019; Sparrow, 2014).

Comparison with Literature

The study's findings align with global scholarship on post-conflict gender dynamics, where wartime inclusion often does not translate into sustainable peacetime representation (Ní Aoláin & Haynes, 2017;Karanja, 2018). For example, Mundlak's (2018) analysis of Northern Province livelihoods reported that former female combatants experienced role relegation post-war, mirroring our finding that many cadres were steered toward "demilitarizing" vocational training rather than leadership pathways. Similarly, international comparisons—such as in Rwanda's post-genocide context—demonstrate that enforceable quotas (e.g., 30% parliamentary seats for women) can substantially increase representation (Devlin & Elgie, 2008; Bauer et al., 2012). In contrast, Sri Lanka's lack of national quotas and weak implementation of local quotas resulted in marginal improvements, aligning with Perera and Penney's (2018) observation that legal provisions alone are insufficient without monitoring and enforcement.

The persistence of patriarchal norms, documented in de Alwis (2009) and Sparrow (2014), remains evident: women are expected to prioritize domestic roles, and public leadership by women is met with moralistic criticism. The phenomenon of "parachuted" female candidates reinforces Sparrow's (2014) argument that party-led tokenism, rather than genuine empowerment, characterizes Sri Lanka's approach to gender inclusion. Moreover, Rajasingham-Senanayake's (2015) emphasis on intersectionality is substantiated in this study, which details how Tamil and Muslim women face unique, layered constraints that differ from Sinhalese women in urban centers.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings and comparative literature, the following policy and

programmatic recommendations aim to enhance gender-inclusive governance in Sri Lanka:

1. Enact National Gender Quotas for Parliament and Provincial Councils:
    - Rationale: Comparative evidence illustrates that mandatory quotas (e.g., 30% seats reserved for women) significantly increase women's representation (Devlin & Elgie, 2008; Bauer et al., 2012).
    - Action: Amend the Constitution or relevant election laws to introduce a 30% minimum quota for women in Parliament and provincial councils. Include robust enforcement mechanisms—such as financial penalties for parties failing to comply—and independent oversight by the Election Commission (Joshi, 2021; MANEE, 2018).

2. Strengthen Local Council Quota Implementation:
    - Rationale: The 25% local council quota has been undermined by circumvention tactics.
    - Action: Mandate that if a party list fails to fill female reserved seats through preferential votes, the next unelected woman on the list automatically assumes the seat. Prohibit post-election substitutions. Require transparent publication of candidate lists and vote tallies to ensure public accountability (MANEE, 2018; Perera & Penney, 2018).
3. Develop Targeted Leadership Training for Former Female Combatants:
    - Rationale: Former LTTE cadres possess leadership experience but lack formal political skills and credentials (Ratnapala, 2017; Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019).
    - Action: Implement a specialized "Political Leadership Fellowship" for ex-combatants in collaboration with local universities, women's networks, and international donors. Curriculum should cover electoral law, campaign management, public speaking, and conflict-sensitive governance (Mundlak, 2018; Ní Aoláin & Haynes, 2017).

4. Establish Seed Funding Mechanisms for Women Candidates:
    - Rationale: Financial constraints emerged as a universal barrier to electoral participation (Perera & Penney, 2018; Joshi, 2021).
    - Action: Create a "Women's Electoral Fund" administered by the Election Commission to provide interest-free loans or grants for women candidates. Eligibility criteria could include minimal educational requirements waivers for former cadres and NGO leaders lacking formal certificates (Ratnapala, 2017; Thasneen & Mukherjee, 2019).

5. Promote Intersectional Policy Adoption:
    - Rationale: Policies must address diverse experiences of Tamil, Muslim, and Sinhalese women (Fernando & Porter, 2016; Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2015).
    - Action: Require that all gender mainstreaming policies and training programs incorporate intersectionality modules, with specific attention to ethnicity, religion, class, and disability. Engage local women's organizations to co-create culturally sensitive curricula (Sparrow, 2014; ministerial directive recommendations, 2023).

6. Demilitarize Civic Spaces and Enhance Security for Women Activists:
   - Rationale: Continued militarization and surveillance hinder women's public engagement (Uyangoda, 2010; Peiris, 2015).
   - Action: Develop "Safe Space" designations for civil society gatherings in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, legally prohibiting military presence at such venues. Establish a complaint mechanism under the Ministry of Defence for reporting intimidation of women activists, with guaranteed investigation and accountability (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2015; Sparrow, 2014).

7. Institutionalize Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB):
   - Rationale: Absence of enforceable GRB has led to inadequate resource allocation for gender programming (Peiris, 2015; MANEE, 2018).
   - Action: Mandate that all ministries and local government units allocate at least 10% of development budgets to gender-specific programs, with annual public reporting on outcomes. The Ministry of Finance should publish a consolidated "National GRB Report" to track progress (International IDEA, 2020; Peiris, 2015).

8. Enhance Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) of Gender Policies:
   - Rationale: Weak M&E frameworks have allowed policy–practice gaps (MANEE, 2018; Perera & Penney, 2018).
   - Action: Establish an independent "Gender Policy Observatory" within the National Human Rights Commission to monitor implementation of gender-related laws, quotas, and voluntary commitments. The Observatory should produce annual assessments and make recommendations to Parliament (Peiris, 2015; Sparrow, 2014).

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study advances understanding of gender politics in post-conflict Sri Lanka, further research is warranted in the following areas:

1. Longitudinal Studies on Women's Political Careers:
   - Objective: Track trajectories of female candidates over multiple election cycles to assess factors contributing to electoral success or attrition.
   - Rationale: Current data capture snapshots but lack longitudinal depth; such studies can reveal career patterns and attrition causes (Mundlak, 2018; Joshi, 2021).

2. Comparative Analysis with Other Post-Conflict Contexts:
   - Objective: Compare Sri Lanka's gender inclusion measures with countries such as Nepal, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Liberia.
   - Rationale: Identifying transferable best practices and contextual limits can inform more effective policy design (Ní Aoláin & Haynes, 2017; Karanja, 2018).

3. Quantitative Modeling of Electoral Financing and Gender:
   - Objective: Use regression analysis to quantify the impact of campaign financing levels on electoral outcomes for women.
   - Rationale: While this study offers descriptive insights, quantitative models can isolate financial variables' effects, informing equitable funding policies (Perera & Penney, 2018).

4. In-Depth Case Studies of Successful Women Candidates:
   - Objective: Conduct multiple case studies of women ex-combatants or NGO leaders who successfully transitioned into politics, examining enabling factors in detail.
   - Rationale: Such micro-level analyses can uncover replicable strategies for empowering other aspirants (Ratnapala, 2017; Fernández & Porter, 2016).

5. Exploration of Male Allies in Political Spaces:
   - Objective: Investigate perceptions and roles of male party leaders, spouses, and community elders who supported or hindered women's political engagement.
   - Rationale: Understanding male allyship dynamics can guide interventions to transform patriarchal norms (Peiris, 2015; Sparrow, 2014).

Conclusion

This study illuminates the complex interplay between wartime gender roles and peacetime political representation in Sri Lanka. Wartime participation, whether as LTTE combatants or NGO humanitarians, provided women with leadership skills and political consciousness, yet post-conflict transitions often undermined these gains through stigmatization, inadequate reintegration programming, and patriarchal backlash. Women's NGOs—despite playing a critical advocacy role—did not consistently translate civil society capital into formal political influence, as structural barriers within party systems and continued militarization constrained their efforts. Intersectional analysis highlighted how ethnic, regional, and class-based disparities further differentiated women's experiences, necessitating context-specific policies.

To break this cycle of wartime empowerment followed by peacetime erasure, structural reforms are imperative: national and local gender quotas must be strengthened and enforced; leadership training and financial support should target former combatants and NGO leaders; and militarized spaces must be demilitarized to allow safe civic engagement. Moreover, policy design must incorporate intersectionality to address Tamil, Muslim, and Sinhalese women's distinct needs. By implementing these evidence-based recommendations, Sri Lanka can move toward a more inclusive post-conflict polity where women's contributions—both past and present—are recognized and leveraged for sustainable peace and democratic governance.

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